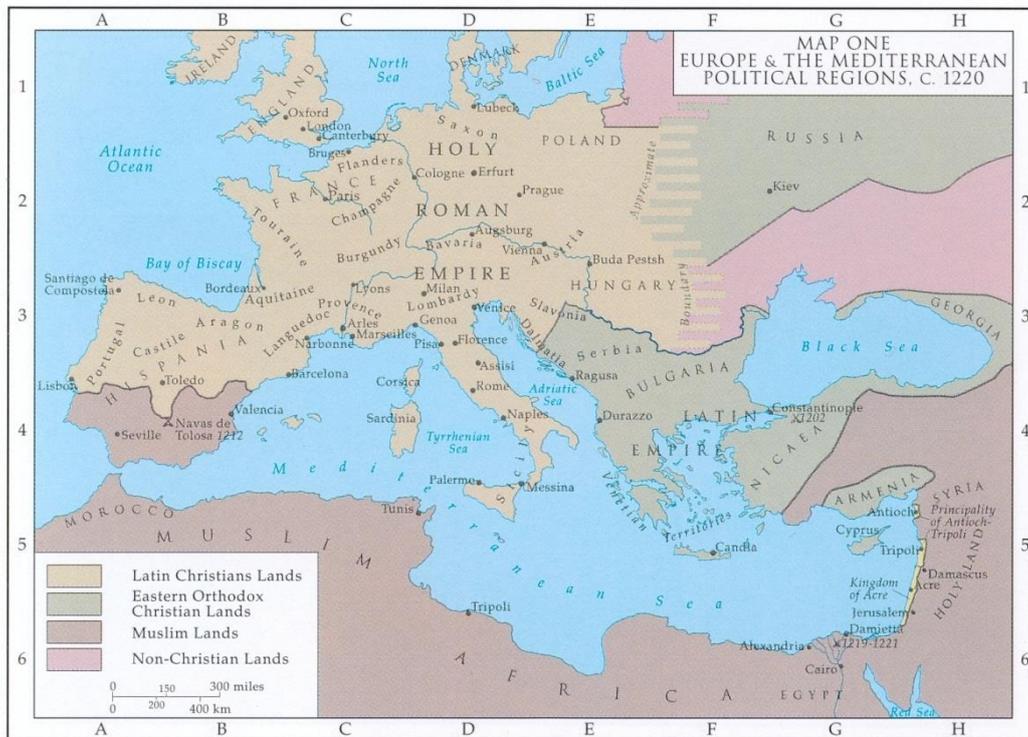


LESSON 1

THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE



Map one

(a larger colour copy can be found at the end of the readings section of this unit)

Map one illustrates the European political world in which Francis lived. The political geography of this world was fundamentally different from that of Europe today. That there are many recognizable names of places is deceptive; even though a region may have the same name in the thirteenth century as it does today, its overall political structure was completely different. Nation-states as we know them did not exist in the Middle Ages. Western Europe at this time was organized under a feudal social-political system. Land was controlled by local nobility in the name of a king, or regional ruler. The local nobility swore oaths of fealty to the king, who depended on the cooperation of his nobility to carry out his wishes. No boundaries between regions in Western Europe are shown on Map 1 because they would tend to communicate the notion of a stable, demarked and defended border as is found in Europe today.

In this lesson you will learn about

- the extent of the Empire
- the significance of the title given to the empire: “Holy Roman”
- the ideology of Christendom as understood under Charlemagne
- the two authorities, imperial and papal
- the understanding of “Church”
- the centrality of Christianity in everyday life

Assisi was part of the Holy Roman Empire, the term designated to the domain of the western European Emperor consisting of parts of Europe, including Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Bohemia, the Netherlands, and parts of France, and parts of Italy.

“Holy” refers to the fact that the Empire was believed to be a state of which Christ was the true ruler. At the time of their coronation, newly elected emperors were anointed by the reigning pope, the vicar of Christ.

“Roman” recalled the golden age of the Roman civilisation, converted to Christianity under Constantine. Latin, the language of the Roman Empire remained the language of the Church. It was accepted that the pope would crown each holy Roman emperor in Rome. The next section gives the history behind the title “Holy Roman Empire”.

CHARLEMAGNE’S UNDERSTANDING OF CHRISTENDOM

The ideology of Christendom developed in the early Holy Roman Empire. It took its origin from Augustine’s “City of God”. The City of God referred to the state of which Christ was the founder and leader. This came to be equated with the Holy Roman Empire under Charlemagne (Charles the Great).

Charlemagne was a powerful ruler in the Germanic world. He was crowned emperor in the year 800. His empire consisted of kinship units, rather than countries or states as we would understand them. Its population was thought of as “Christendom”. All other territories and peoples were outside the City of God and therefore were regarded as belonging to the worldly state subject to the power of the Devil. This belief led the conquerors to baptize and bring to Christ the population of regions they overran. “Conquest and Christianisation went together and the preachers of the gospel worked in the service of the Frankish rulers.”¹

By the time of Francis’ birth, the conversion of pagan Europe to Christianity was almost complete with the exception of remote regions to the North. Moslem rule continued in Sicily and most of Spain. Jews were scattered throughout the Christian countries.

READING

The following short reading will expand on this theme.

2:9 The Canons of the Fourth Lateran Council, 1215, Canons 67-70

The concept of Christendom and the term Holy Roman Empire were to remain in use during the Middle Ages, even though political unity ended in the ninth century as the Empire collapsed.

The western emperor was the greatest ruler in the west and came from one of the leading German families. The emperor was seen as the Lord’s anointed. He was responsible for the welfare of the church, like a father. The concept of authority was different to ours “The king was a hero-figure of a bearer of sanctity, and men looked to him not for a uniform administration but for interventions to promote justice and righteousness.”²

Within the Empire there were feudal states ruled by local lords who swore obedience to the Emperor but wielded power locally. The Emperor and local rulers directed the great monasteries and the bishoprics. Emperors claimed lordship over the city of Rome where he received his crown.

THE CHURCH

Unlike today, popes wielded political power as well as governing the Church. Within the church the concept of “Christendom” survived but the term “Church” really meant the clergy. “Laity and clergy together constituted Christendom as a sacral community. This concept embraced more than the

¹ Bredero *Christendom and Christianity in the Middle Ages* p17

² Morris, C. *The Papal Monarchy* p18

church; it also encompassed a political community.”³ Once someone embarked on an ecclesiastical life, whether religious or within the secular clergy, they became subject to **church** laws and courts.

There was a clear division between those directly under the governance of the Church and others within society. The distinction was sustained by the use of Latin as the language of the prayers and liturgies offered by the clergy (the laity were spectators at liturgies). Those entering a career in the church usually received a high level of education.

Lay people could be given the protection of the Church, for example by claiming sanctuary. In terms of the division between laity and clergy, Francis “belonged” to the church once Bishop Guido took responsibility for his protection when Francis’ father was intending to have Francis brought to justice for stealing from him:

“Until now I have called you father here on earth, but now I can say without reservation Our Father who art in heaven since I have placed all my hope in him. The bishop...then drew him into his arms, covering him with the mantle that he was wearing. Thus the servant of the Most High King was left naked that he might follow the naked, crucified Lord, whom he loved...”⁴

Both groups formed part of Christendom which “consisted of those countries, people and events that were – or were supposed to be – under the influence of Christ.”⁵ Excluded from this were non Christians.

READING

The following short reading will expand on this theme of Religion & Church in Medieval Society.

2:1 Bredero Adriaan H. *Christendom & Christianity in the Middle Ages*: (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1994). 1-18

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE

READING

The following short reading will introduce this theme.

2:2 Morris Colin, *The Papal Monarchy: The Western Church from 1050-1250*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 11 –21

There developed a common culture throughout the Latin world which was united by liturgy, shared traditions and Christian writings, and through the patronage given to religious establishments, such as monasteries and church buildings, by wealthy and powerful secular leaders and rulers.

Some idea of the extent of the areas of influence can be gleaned from the following:

“The respect of the Frankish church for Rome, reflected in the cult of St Peter and in liturgical borrowing offered a basis for claims to Roman primacy in a new age. Germany in particular had preserved much from the Carolingians dynasty of Charlemagne. The title of emperor, the royal direction of the monasteries and bishoprics, and a variety of other practices of government maintained that continuity, as did institutions such as the court chapel, or Hofkapelle, of the German kings.”⁶

“With few exceptions, western Europeans worshipped in Latin liturgies, revered Rome as the mother of churches and drew on a common stock of ceremony and symbolism. Among the learned at least, there was a clear awareness of the Latin world as a cultural unity which had grown apart from the Greek tradition...”⁷

³ Bredero *Christendom and Christianity in the Middle Ages* p18 (Reading No. 2:1 p12)

⁴ LMj 2,4

⁵ Bredero *Christendom and Christianity in the Middle Ages* p18 (Reading No. 2:1 p12)

⁶ Morris, C. *The papal Monarchy* p12

⁷ Morris, C. *The papal Monarchy* p14

Everyday life was rooted in Christianity:

It was assimilated into the lifestyle of the predominantly rural population, for example the liturgical calendar reflected the agricultural year – Lent fell when supplies were likely to be running low, Easter came when new signs of life were abounding. Holy days often came to replace days that were already celebrated locally in pre-Christian times.

In everyday life the intervention of the supernatural was expected. There were many accounts of miracles. Saints were believed to be powerful intercessors for God's forgiveness and healing. It was believed that miraculous power resided in their relics. For this reason relics were kept in precious containers, often in the crypt or near the high altar of churches. The widespread veneration of saints was also shown in the importance of pilgrimages and the adoption of patron saints, such as St. Rufinus as patron saint of Assisi. At the time of Francis' death the people of Assisi were determined that he should not only die in Assisi and but that his body should remain there afterwards as there was great concern that his body might be stolen.

The Christian faith, then, occupied a central place in all facets of life within the empire of the time. In summary:

- It was common to a wide geographical area.
- People looked back to the Roman Empire, which had become Christian at the time of Constantine, as a golden period of civilisation
- Christianity related to daily life.

Christianity, as experienced in western Europe, had adapted to the changing social situation in the Middle Ages including the expansion and growing importance of towns and cities. Among medieval developments reflecting the power of Christianity were:

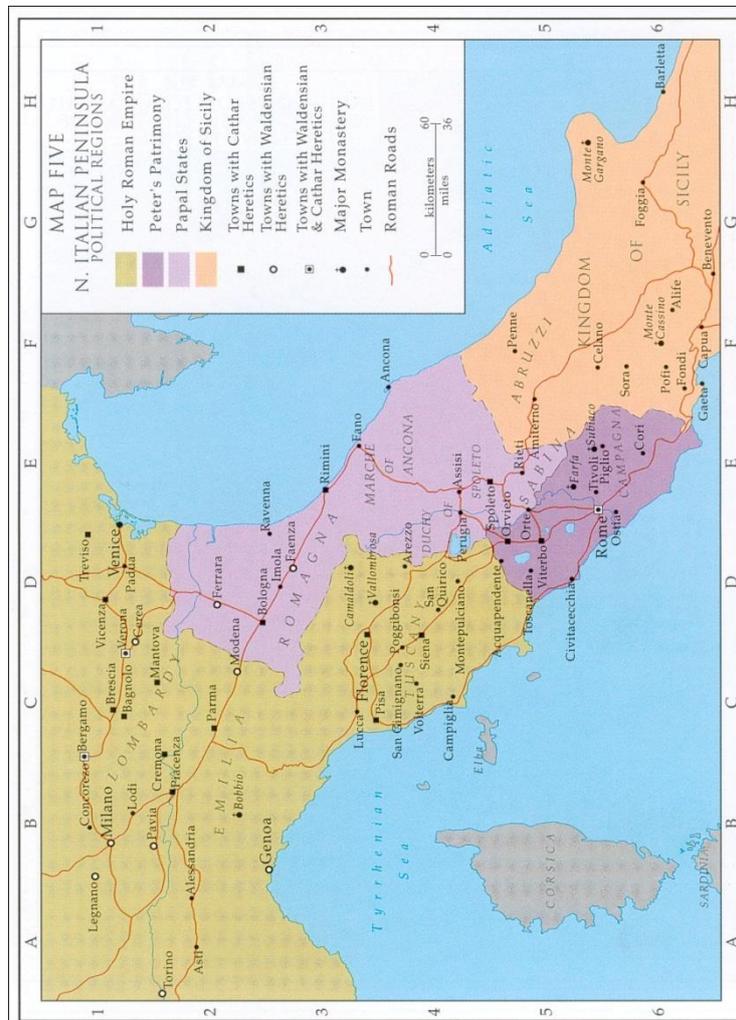
1. The Crusades - the Crusades were initiated by the Church. The powerful in society regarded the spreading of the Gospel as a duty, contributing money, supplies and military support when necessary.
2. The power struggle between papacy and empire. Significant for Francis and his contemporaries, central Italy was something of a battleground between the two powers throughout the Medieval period.

LESSON 2

ASSISI BETWEEN IMPERIAL AND PAPAL POWERS

This lesson gives a detailed account of the conflicts in which Assisi was directly involved during Francis' lifetime. In it you will learn about

- “Italy” at the time of Francis
- Assisi as a rising Commune gradually gaining independence from papal and imperial authority
- Why Assisi was part of an area of conflict
- The different conflicts which affected Assisi
- How Francis was involved in these conflicts prior to his conversion



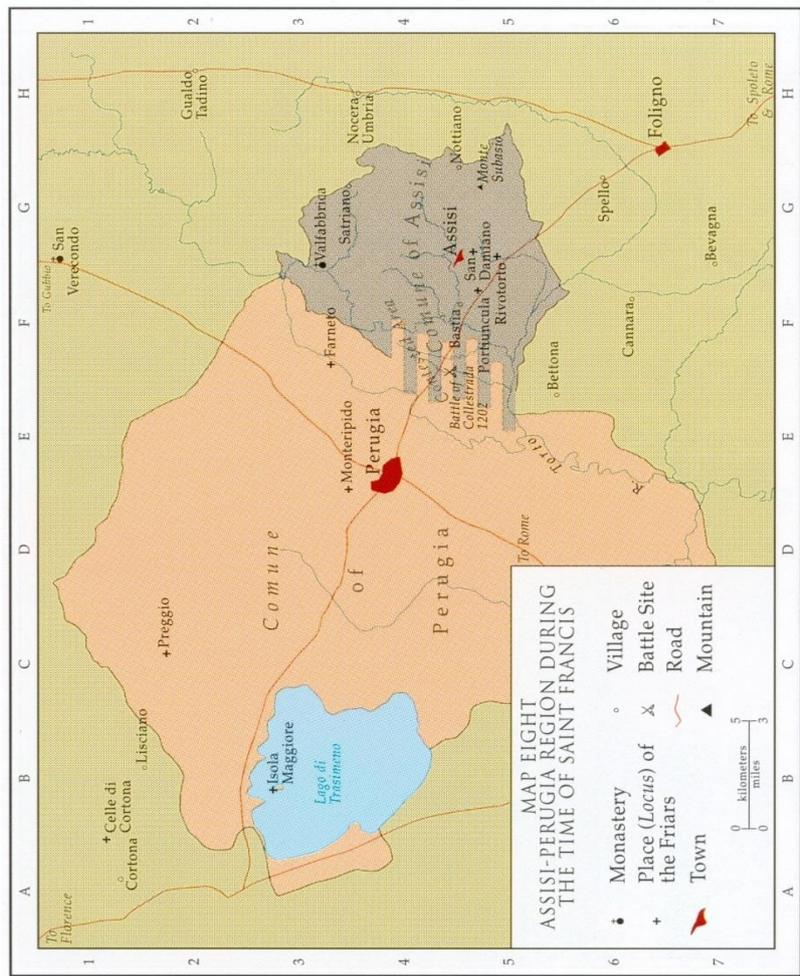
Map Five

(a larger colour copy can be found at the end of the readings section of this unit)

Map five describes the transportation, religious and social geography of the northern Italian Peninsula at the time of Francis. There is no reliable way to determine the population of cities during

the Middle Ages. Map 5 shows Venice, Milan, Genoa and Florence to be larger than other towns. Historians generally agree that Venice was the largest town, and estimate that it had a population of between 50,000 and 100,000. The other three large towns had slightly fewer residents, and overall, the population density in Lombardy and the Po Valley was twice that of the rest of the Italian Peninsula. Rome's population is estimated to have been 30,000. Assisi is estimated to have between 10,000 and 20,000 people at this time, with Perugia about twice as large.

The rise of the city-states and the movement toward urbanization coincided with the heretical movements that began to appear in Western Europe. A proper geography of medieval religious dissent has yet to be undertaken, and a thorough job may be impossible because of the scattered historical record. At the onset of the thirteenth century, there were several heretical movements in Lombardy and the Italian Peninsula, the most significant being the Waldensians, and the Cathars (they were called several other names, including Albigensians and Patarines). The Catholic hierarchy perceived these movements as grave threats because they challenged the official Church authority. Map 5 shows the cities with established communities of these two groups. Other heretical groups may have been present, and these two groups almost certainly had followers in many other cities, but there is a lack of historical evidence.



Map Eight

(a larger colour copy can be found at the end of the readings section of this unit)

Map eight illustrates the territories of Assisi and Perugia, its neighbour to the west. Perugia became a papal city and the empire claimed Assisi. Tensions between the two cities dated back centuries, with the Tiber River forming a historical boundary between peoples. Sometime during the eleventh century, Perugia had occupied a strip of land on the east bank near an area called Collestrada. Violence escalated after 1200, resulting in the Battle of Collestrada in 1202. Francis fought in this

battle, and when Assisi lost, he was imprisoned in Perugia (2C 4). It seems that Francis's father, Pietro Bernardone, owned some land near the site of the battle.

Italy did not become an independent united country until the 19th century. At the time of Francis, central and northern Italy were divided into territories which were under the control of the papacy or the empire. Within these territories there was also struggle for local power.

There have always been marked regional divergences within Italy, partly because of the geography of the peninsula, rugged and mountainous, and also as a result of the arrival of various invaders and settlers.

STRUGGLE FOR THE INDEPENDENCE OF ASSISI, ALREADY A SOURCE OF DISPUTE BETWEEN THE EMPIRE AND THE PAPACY

During the 12th century, Assisi was under the jurisdiction of the Empire. This was contested by the Papacy which claimed rights over central Italy. As can be seen in map 8, Assisi is in the area *Comune of Assisi*. Like many other Italian cities, Assisi was seeking independence and turned to whichever of the two rival powers was the more likely to assist achieve this goal.

The relations between Assisi and the Holy Roman Empire and with the Papal States can be set against the background of the history of Perugia and the duchy of Spoleto, particularly in the light of the struggle for power between Assisi and its rival Perugia. Map 5 shows how close these two cities are and also that they are close to the frontiers marking the boundaries of the Holy Roman Empire and the Papal States

During the eleventh century, the Collestrada area (Map 8) was occupied by the Perugians although in Assisian territory. The Assisians dreamed of regaining this land. This dispute was one of the causes for the Battle of Collestrada in 1202, in which Francis fought.

ASSISI CLAIMED BY THE EMPEROR

On 21st November 1160, the Emperor Frederick I (Barbarossa), issued a charter in Pavia, which is the earliest formal document regarding the history of Assisi. Fortini translates sections of it in his *Nova Vita di S. Francesco*. “In the name of the Holy and One Trinity, Frederick, with the favour of divine grace Emperor of the Romans and always Augustus. Be it noted by all the faithful of our Empire, both future and present, that the city of Assisi, with all its *comitato* especially and freely belongs to our imperial jurisdiction; whence we order that it also should not answer to any power except to the person of the king or to our trustworthy envoy, and to our successors; that it may thus remain free from every other authority, as it was from the time of Henry IV until today; and that it shall be at the head of all the *comitato*; neither shall it be lawful for anyone to build new castles or cities against the will of the *comitato*” (English translation by Helen Moak: Arnaldo Fortini, *Francis of Assisi*, Crossroad Publishing Company, New York 1980, 74).

This formal imperial decree rendered Assisi a privileged city – a free city under the protection of the emperor who would appoint an official to reside there. Assisi was within the Duchy of Spoleto, a Papal area. In 1167, the duchy of Spoleto was ruled by Christian of Mainz, the imperial legate and chancellor of the empire. He was commissioned to take Central Italy away from papal domination and place it firmly under the rule of the emperor. The conquest of Assisi and other communes by Christian of Mainz happened in 1174, and is referred to as the *captio capitalis* (the fatal and ferocious capture) on account of the terrible devastation suffered.

In 1177 Assisi had a direct imperial representative in the person of Conrad von Ürslingen, who took the title of count of Assisi and later on also became duke of Spoleto. In 1177-78 Emperor Frederick and his court were installed in La Rocca. The movement towards Assisi's independence continued. In 1183 the Italian communes were assimilated into the imperial fiefs. The townspeople, including the consuls who were elected to govern the cities, swore fealty to the emperor every ten years.

TENSIONS BETWEEN THE EMPIRE AND THE PAPACY

This period was one of tension in the relations between the emperor and the papacy. There were a series of short lived popes between 1180 - 1200. Frederick I (Barbarossa) secured for the empire also the Norman strongholds in southern Italy and Sicily as a result of the betrothal of his son, who would become Emperor Henry VI, to Constance, heir to Sicilian throne. The papacy was thus left with the problem of securing power in central Italy, against the encroachments of the imperial armies which were attacking cities like Lucca, Florence and Siena.

Frederick I (Barbarossa) died by drowning in the river Salef on 9th June 1190 while on a crusade. He was succeeded by his son Henry VI in 1190. In 1194/5? Constance, wife of Henry VI, visited Assisi, after the birth of her son Frederick. He was baptised in Assisi, and left under the care of Conrad von Urslingen. This would have been an important event in Francis' youth.

CIVIL STRIFE IN ASSISI AS A RESULT OF THE PAPACY GAINING CONTROL

Having been excommunicated for fighting against the Pope, in 1198 Conrad Urslingen submitted to Pope Celestine III to whom the allegiance of his subjects, including the people of Assisi, was transferred. (Later that year Pope Innocent III was elected to the papacy) The merchant class of Assisi, having been freed from the oppression of the emperor, rebelled and set about destroying the property of the nobility who fled to Perugia, including the family of St Clare.

WAR BETWEEN PERUGIA AND ASSISI

The nobility persuaded the Perugians to wage war against Assisi resulting in victory at the decisive Battle of Collestrada during which Francis became a prisoner. Assisi was granted a charter in 1205 which further encouraged those nobles still remaining in Perugia to return to Assisi where they intended to repossess their property and regain their feudal power. This occurred at the time of Francis' conversion so he was no longer involved in the power struggles.

FRANCIS DETACHED FROM POLITICAL MATTERS

In December 1209 – January 1210 or 4th November 1210, the emperor Otto IV (1198-1218) passed through the duchy of Spoleto: “At that time the emperor Otto passed through that area, travelling in great pomp and circumstance to receive the crown of an earthly empire. The most holy father and his followers were staying in that small hut next to the very parade route [at Rivortorto]. He did not go outside to look and did not allow the others to do so, except for one who, without wavering, proclaimed to the emperor that his glory would be short-lived” (1 Celano, 43).

The first meeting between Francis and Innocent III took place during this tense period of relations between pope and emperor who were fighting for control over the papal territories. In Assisi, the nobility and the merchant classes made a fresh pact in 1210.

READING

The following reading will expand on this theme.

2:3 Raffaele Pazzelli, *St Francis and the Third Order*, (Quincy: Franciscan Press, 1989), 67-79

LESSON 3 THE CRUSADES

In this lesson you will learn about

- the gradual development of Christian Militarism whereby knights came to be seen as warriors in the service of their faith
- the emergence of chivalry
- the military religious orders
- the Crusades
- the significance of these developments for Francis

The Crusades are a very important feature of the period. Francis wanted to become a knight and was on a journey to train for knighthood when he had a vision recalling him to Assisi. This lesson will provide a brief summary of the growing importance of Christian militarism and also explain why the idea of being a knight appealed to the young Francis.

THE RISE OF CHRISTIAN MILITARISM⁸

Early Christian tradition taught that there was a contradiction between being a follower of Christ and taking up arms to assault and kill others. Christian militarism nonetheless developed.

This tradition emerged as the defence of Christendom against unbelievers came to be blessed by the Church. Even in the ninth century Popes Leo IV and John VIII assured those who fought against the heathen that they could receive forgiveness and attain eternal life. From the mid eleventh century the Chansons de Geste celebrating victories over Islam were widely known.

Within Europe, arms had been blessed from the tenth century onwards. The Peace of God movement, through which bishops took responsibility for public order, grew as a result of the failure of the secular governments to keep the peace. Bishops increasingly had courts filled with knights.

Church reformers came to support the idea of a holy war and accepted the validity of using force to keep control in Central Italy. It was seen as necessary for leading reformers, who exercised power within Christendom, to be able to use military power to challenge rulers who were obstructing reforms. It was believed that force was justified to restore right order and so the nobility were encouraged to put their weapons at the disposal of the Roman Church which served God.

Leo IX led a military expedition against the Normans in 1053. Gregory VII encouraged the development of a militia which would enforce papal policy in the militia of St Peter. The faithful could serve as warriors. Prior to this, knights had been required to do penance after battles and it was believed that knights could only attain salvation by becoming monks, having abandoned their previous way of life. The clergy could not bear arms and participation in warfare was seen as an evil.

Chivalry emerged once knights had been accepted as servants of God. The attributes of the ideal knight were generally attractive qualities. Technical developments had made the cavalry the most efficient force in warfare. Horsemen, “chevaliers” were elite warriors.

READING

The following short reading will expand on this theme.

⁸ c.f. Reading No 2:4 - St Thomas Aquinas 2 (2) Q 40 Art 1 for a later medieval explanation of the Just War theory

2:5 Morris Colin, *The Papal Monarchy: The Western Church from 1050-1250*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 335-338

By the time of Francis' birth, knights were identified with the nobility. The knights were members of a privileged profession. Their equipment was extremely costly. Investiture with arms was accompanied by elaborate ritual. Although Francis was not of noble stock, his family was very wealthy and he would have associated with the noble families in Assisi.

It was expected that knights should cultivate good manners and courtesy, compose songs and "engage in elegant arts of love."⁹ This romantic image of true chivalry developed in poetic writings for the laity. Evidence of the transformation in the attitude of the church to warriors became clear with the recognition of knighthood as an Order which gave it a religious status. Strict ethical conduct was required from knights

READING

The following short reading will expand on this theme.

2:6 Morris Colin, *The Papal Monarchy: The Western Church from 1050-1250*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 279-281

TEMPLARS AND HOSPITALLERS

In 1118 a group of knights under Hugh of Payns was devoted to protection of pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem. They promised obedience to the Rule of St Augustine. The Rule was approved, after Hugh returned to the West to seek approval and recruit members, at the Council of Troyes in 1139. The knights had great freedom from episcopal authority. They became known as the Templars as their principal headquarters was in Jerusalem.

The Hospitallers began as a charitable organization running hostels for pilgrims but gradually they built castles and gained the military responsibility of protecting travellers. There was a Hospital of St John at Jerusalem to receive western pilgrims. By 1113 the Hospital had hostels throughout major ports of Southern Europe. Paschal II defined its status which was to render it effectively the first self governing international order.

The existence of these two very important and respected orders did not mean that all criticism of militarism ceased. The concept that a man could be both monk and knight was not universally accepted because of the perceived contradiction between Christian principles and the deeds of men of war.

⁹ Morris C *The Papal Monarchy* p336

THE CRUSADES

It is difficult for us today to understand the power of the desire to go on crusade. To do so fully would require an investigation of feudal society in the eleventh and twelfth centuries that are beyond the scope of this course. However, because the idea of the crusade was such a powerful one at the time of Francis, it is worthwhile looking at the Crusades.

Jonathon Riley Smith, the historian of the Crusades, defines a crusade as “a holy war fought against those perceived to be the external or internal foes of Christendom for the recovery of Christian property or in defence of the Church or Christian people.”¹⁰

READING

The following short reading will expand on this theme.

2:7 Jonathan Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: A short History* (London: Continuum Books,), 27-30

The Crusaders had several aims:

- To free what they saw as persecuted Christian peoples from the tyranny of subjection to “heathens.” Thus a crusade could take place on the Holy Land or in Spain, the southern half of which was controlled by Muslim princes and had a majority of Muslims in the population.
- This referred especially to the Holy Land and in particular to Jerusalem: to free “Christian” property from “heathen” domination. In the feudal idea of society Jesus Christ was the supreme Lord of Christendom and all land and privileges were held as a grant from him. In return, it was the duty of all knights to defend the land of their liege Lord Jesus. Since Jerusalem was the centre and focus of the Holy Land, the Crusades in the East were focussed on the recovery of Jerusalem which was the jewel in the crown of Christ’s patrimony. A similar rationale was used to justify the Crusades against Livonia (Latvia) where the area that the Crusaders attacked was designated “Our Lady’s Dowry” and was deemed to be Mary’s property and so the proper object of “liberation” by chivalrous knights.
- The Crusades to the Holy Land were also seen by many as armed pilgrimages where Christian knights went on pilgrimage to the Holy Places determined to force a passage for others to be able to follow them in safety,

The First Crusade, preached by Urban II at the Council of Clermont in 1095 had been a success beyond the crusaders’ expectations. Hundreds of thousands of knights and peasants from Christendom set out to avenge the dishonour they felt done to Christ by the Muslim occupation of Jerusalem in 638. In 1099 they captured Jerusalem and subsequently established Christian kingdoms in Syria, Lebanon and the Holy Land. This was interpreted, by crusaders and those who stayed at home alike, as a great blessing from God.

Jerusalem was held by crusaders until, in the aftermath of the disastrous battle of the Horns of Hattin in 1187, Saladin swept through the Holy Land and captured the city. He restored the Temple area to Muslim worship and a cry went up around Europe that Jerusalem had fallen and needed once more to be liberated. The Emperor Frederick I (Barbarossa) followed by King Philip of France and King Richard I (the Lionheart) took up the challenge but despite considerable successes, they were ultimately unsuccessful in re-occupying Jerusalem. This was the situation that Innocent III faced when he became Pope in 1198. The failure to recapture Jerusalem which had so recently fallen, helps explain the importance that Innocent III and most Christians attached to the renewal of the Crusades.

The crusade was one of the greatest preoccupations of Innocent III. The Gregorian ideas of reform included the reunion of the Greek and Latin Churches (which had excommunicated each other in 1054) and the recovery of the Holy Places. The Kingdom of Jerusalem, which was compelled to retreat to Acre after the fall of Jerusalem, was a vassal state of the Holy See. The Holy Roman

¹⁰ Riley-Smith *The Crusades* pxxviii

Empire was still without a unified head and the Kingdom of Sicily was also under the direct administration of the pope as regent of Frederick II. Thus, by 1200, Innocent III thought that the time was ripe for another crusade under his personal direction. The pope wrote to the emperor Alexius III of Constantinople, to foster union with the Greeks. The immediate goal of the crusade was Egypt, which formed part of the Ayubite empire. Unfortunately, this crusade sacked the city of Constantinople in April 1204. This contributed to the worsening of relations with the Greeks and failed to achieve the goal of the crusade, namely, the recovery of the Holy Places. The policy of imposing Latin culture on the Byzantine empire was a fatal mistake, of which Innocent III completely disapproved. He wrote: "How is the Greek Church, so afflicted and persecuted, to return to ecclesiastical union and a devotion to the Apostolic See when she sees in the Latins only an example of perdition and the works of darkness, so that with reason she already detests them more than dogs?"¹¹

Another tragic crusade under Innocent III's reign was the famous Children's Crusade of 1212. Many young people from Lower Lotharingia and the Rhineland embarked upon the long journey to the Holy Land penniless and unarmed. When the group reached Rome Innocent III sent them back, but the French groups reached Marseilles and boarded merchant ships. They either perished in a storm or were sold as slaves in Egypt and north Africa.

Innocent did however see the success of a crusade in Livonia and initially supported the crusade against the Albigensian Cathars in the south of France. In Spain also armies of knights were granted crusading indulgence to go and fight Muslim princes, resulting in the great victory at Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212. Pope Innocent III did not live to realise his dream of a crusade in the East which he preached during the Fourth Lateran Council. This was the Fifth Crusade which captured Damietta in Egypt in which Francis took an active part in 1219-1220.

The Crusades had the effect of opening Christendom up to the influences of Islamic science and culture which were at the time more sophisticated than their western equivalents. Arabic numerals were crucial to the development of mathematics in Europe and the philosophy of Aristotle (which had been preserved in Arabic philosophy) made possible the theology of St Thomas Aquinas. St Francis himself, as shall be seen in the next module, gained from the time he spent with the Sultan Al-Malik Al-Kamil during the Fifth Crusade.

The Crusades also revived interest in missionary activity in the Western church. Innocent and his predecessors combined the military goals of the crusaders with the missionary goal of bringing the peoples of Spain, North Africa and the Middle East back to Christianity, and taking the gospel to those of eastern Europe. This missionary fervour was reflected in the Rule of St Francis which is the first rule of a religious order to contain a chapter on missionary activity. It would lead to Franciscan missionary expeditions both to the Islamic world and beyond to China once the Mongol invasions made this possible. These prepared the way for the great missionary endeavour of converting the New World in which Franciscans played a considerable part.

Although they were immensely popular in 13th century Christendom, the Crusades had their critics: notably the Franciscan philosopher and scientist Roger Bacon (1214-1294) who questioned the bloodshed involved in the Crusades and argued that force was not a justified means of bringing people to Christianity. Such principled objections, military failures, the cost of sending expeditions and opposition to taxes raised to fund them eventually would lead to a decline in crusading fervour – but the movement itself lingered on and ended only on 1798 when Malta fell to Napoleon's troops and the last of the crusading Orders, the Knights Hospitaller, was destroyed as a military order.

THE EFFECT ON FRANCIS

It is not surprising that Francis, the extravagant son of a wealthy cloth merchant, had aspirations towards the nobility. Troubadours and minstrels would tell of genteel and refined courts, revealing the courtesy of knights toward their feudal lady, who might be a princess or a countess in a castle.

¹¹ Innocent III, quoted in Riley-Smith, *The Crusades*, p130; cf *Patrologia Latina*, vol 215, col 710.Pa

Knights would serve and die for her having become her vassal. These poetic stories had their origins in southern France, in Provence, at the beginning of the twelfth century. Francis knew Provençal and was renowned for singing in that language, doubtless he would sing their songs and draw inspiration from them.

Celano related the following:

“He said that he did not want to go to Apulia (Apulia was where Francis had intended to train as a knight) but promised to do great and noble deeds at home. People thought he wanted to get married, and they would ask him: ‘Do you want to get married, Francis?’ He replied: ‘I will take a bride more noble and more beautiful than you have ever seen, and she will surpass the rest in beauty and excel all others in wisdom.’¹²

Clearly his ideals remained chivalrous. Francis served his Lord, Jesus Christ with the spirit of chivalry admired by his contemporaries.

LESSON 4

TRAVEL AND COMMUNICATIONS

In this lesson you will learn about

- other developments which led to an increase in travel: urbanisation, trade and pilgrimages
- the development of communications
- the significance of these for the Franciscan movement

The Crusades were not the only reason for the expansion of travel in the 11th and 12th centuries. This lesson will look at the development of communications and their effect on the population.

Travel was important throughout Francis’ life. Travel was essential for merchants and Francis was expected to follow in his father’s footsteps. After his conversion, Francis was to serve his Lord as an itinerant, sending his brothers all over the world in pairs.

The Franciscan movement benefited from the improving travel routes. Franciscans, as preachers and educators, were communicators of ideas.

¹² 1C:7 in ED (The Saint) p188

PEOPLE WHO WOULD HAVE TRAVELLED

Travel was necessary for wealthy and powerful families who needed to visit all regions within their land to maintain allegiance and protect their interests. This may have required quite long journeys. Administrators, both secular and clerical, travelled extensively as did soldiers.

There were various reasons for an increase in the number of people travelling greater distances during this period. These affected Francis and the brothers:

Urbanization	Like many other places, Assisi was a growing city. The friars would travel and become established in towns and cities throughout Europe.
Trade	Francis' father was a merchant and travelled extensively, particularly to the great European trade markets.
Pilgrimage	Francis would have known members of the nobility who had gone on pilgrimage – St Clare's mother was a pilgrim. Francis himself was to travel to Rome to obtain approval for his Rule and would have used pilgrim routes.

URBANISATION

We have already seen that Assisi sought independence and became a commune.

In Italy, although urban culture was preserved from Roman times, the economy of most cities was agricultural and local until, as a result of population growth, there was migration into the cities. Cities then began to open up wider opportunities, for example thriving economies needed centres of exchange.

The rise in population during the 11th- 13th centuries is well recorded and had a considerable impact on European society.

There are several reasons for the demographic growth: The great invasions had ended and there were improvements in agricultural tools and in the provision of crops. Throughout western Europe there are records of land clearances – woods were cut down, marshlands reclaimed. As the population grew, there was a necessity for some family members to seek employment and land, away from their own kin. They might seek a new settlement. This meant finding the protection of a new lord who would require some feudal services in return. They could work for a great monastery or other ecclesiastical property or they could move into the cities where they would be likely to remain in poverty and be used as unskilled labour. They might settle within a fortified village, subject to the lord. There were some who would remain beggars, sometimes they would be encountered on pilgrim routes travelling from shrine to shrine.

The cities would offer greater opportunities for work as they expanded, offering services for the growing population, including the local rural community.

In Lombardy “the ruling classes of the cities, nobles, judges and knights of the bishops' households, increasingly exercised authority in the name of the community, displacing the bishop who had once acted on their behalf. By 1150 virtually every city in northern Italy was governed by consuls and organized as a commune.”¹³ Citizens wanted to obtain charters of privilege and exemption. They took a mutual oath of peace. This made them into communes. Patron saints were adopted for cities, increasing their sense of identity and guaranteeing protection. Celebrations and traditions then developed, building on existing local practices. Some communes would rise up against the local bishop or the local nobility, others would be more concerned with building cathedrals and enhancing local devotion to their patron saints.

Gradually towns became increasingly important culturally and politically. One common effect was the development of a money economy which provided the flexibility to undertake new

¹³ Morris C. The Papal Monarchy p41

developments, often the result of the international dissemination of ideas. It also led to Jews having to act as money-lenders which in turn fuelled anti- Semitism.

TRADE

Francis was born at a time when trade was expanding. Italian overland trade consisted of grain, oil, wine, other foodstuffs, textiles and locally crafted produce. International trade involved the transport of valuable items, such as luxury textiles, by sea. Trade to Constantinople, Syria and Egypt was controlled by the Italian ports. By the middle of the eleventh century, the fleets of Venice, Genoa and Pisa handled large-scale trade with Asia and Africa.

Within Europe, there were several major trade fair centres to which Italians, especially from Rome and more northerly regions including Assisi, travelled for trade with merchants who arrived from northern and western Europe.

The feudal lords envied the new emerging class of the merchants, and a struggle ensued between the *militēs* (warriors) and the *mercatores* (merchants). There was growing interest in trade across the Alps and new roads of communication were being opened. New ideas were flourishing and trade brought with it a new pattern of social and economic life of the Italian medieval towns. The desire for estates was diminishing and the wealthy wanted vast amounts of money. Contacts with other European regions, particularly France, became significant during this time.

Merchants gathered annually at the great fair of Champagne, an international market for the exchange of goods across the European continent.

“Saint Francis’s father, Pietro di Bernardone, an exceedingly rich cloth merchant, will be one of these, drawn to the fair in Champagne to buy *panni franceschi* (the finest French and Flemish fabrics), and other textiles woven in Flanders, Holland, England, Brabant. He will become, according to the term used in the statutes of the time, a *franciarolo*, a merchant specializing in the sale of *panni franceschi*. It is probable that he, following the usual custom of joining other merchants to make the trips under the command of an appointed leader, went with the Tuscan caravans, particularly those from Florence.

“Assisi was especially well situated for this commercial traffic, being on a road that would today be called a main artery of communication. It linked Rome and France, and therefore was called Strada (or Via) Francesca (or Francigena). There is a reference to it in an eleventh-century document of the cathedral. This road went along the foot of the hill and so was also called “the road at the base of the mountain”. Where the Ospedale delle Pareti once stood, it joined another road coming down from Assisi, one that, passing by the monastery of San Nicolò dell’Orto, went directly to Porziuncola” (Fortini, 39-40).

PILGRIMAGES

During the 12th century the pilgrim became an identifiable category in society. He would be protected because of his status as a pilgrim. There grew up an industry around providing staffs, wallets and emblems. Possession of each different emblem should have signified that a pilgrim had visited that particular shrine. This was open to abuse, as the emblems could be acquired from other pilgrims. This is one reason why this industry caused concern in the Church.

The Church allowed certain privileges to pilgrims – they could trade with excommunicates in case of need; anyone stealing from pilgrims was liable to excommunication; clergy could enter taverns without wearing clerical garb. Indulgences were awarded to pilgrims such as the Portiuncula indulgence.

The large numbers of pilgrims required hospitality and so hostels catering for various needs – accommodation, medical attention, supply of provisions for the journey – grew up specifically to serve pilgrims.

Pilgrims journeyed in order to visit shrines – at each shrine a particular saint was venerated. They also went on pilgrimage to seek healing or because it became a convention, visiting places significant in the lives of great saint or where miraculous events had occurred. Accounts of miracles would

spread among pilgrims who might then change their destination in favour of the shrine at which miracles were believed to have recently occurred.

At the shrine access to relics – either to touch or see – was provided and permitted. Water would be drunk from sacred springs or mixed with dust or wax from the shrine. There would be music and stories recounting the life of the saint or based on miraculous occurrences. Pilgrimages would therefore incorporate great social occasions. As we know from *The Canterbury Tales*, the pilgrimage experience might not always seem “religious” or “pious.”

COMMUNICATIONS

The increase in travel and the improvements made to the major routes enabled ideas to be disseminated more easily. Since Christendom formed a unit, ideas spread throughout the nation states. Important news had always been announced in public places. Church law and civil law could be more effectively conveyed over wide areas.

As a result of pilgrimages there grew up an exchange of ideas, about details such as church decoration and through pilgrim songs and stories.

The Church hierarchy made visits throughout Christendom for various reasons, for example the consecration of churches and other institutions.

Preaching could have a powerful effect on the listeners and improving communications made it easier for itinerant preachers to travel more widely.

Latin was a common language for the educated. However, as a result of the widespread Norman influence, French became more widely used by the aristocracy in England and southern Italy.

Education developed during the 11th and 12th centuries. The Church had retained its dominant influence because clerics needed education in their various offices and for carrying out priestly duties. As city schools developed it became the practice for excellent teachers of advanced education, individual monks and later friars, to have a following of students in these schools. The teachers would travel to different centres and their students would follow them. As a consequence, monastery schools gradually lost their importance as already literate recruits did not require education. Ultimately, it was the coming of the friars and the growth of universities that brought an end to the tradition of monastic education. Education was also no longer restricted to clerics.

The Franciscans provided some excellent university professors such as Bonaventure, Alexander of Hales, John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. Francis had to address the issue of education for the brothers as we shall see later. One of his concerns was that education should not distract the brothers from their devotion to spiritual matters.

“I am pleased that you teach sacred theology to the brothers, providing that, as is contained in the Rule, you do not ‘extinguish the Spirit of prayer and devotion’ during study of this kind.” (A Letter to Brother Anthony of Padua ED Vol I p107)

The debate about education for the brothers continued among the friars during the development of the Order after Francis’ death.

LESSON 5

THE PEOPLE OF ASSISI

In addition to the groups of people we have already met there were other distinct social groups of which this lesson will introduce:

- Feudal Lords
- Villeins and Serfs
- Maiores and Minores
- Lepers
- The Poor
- The Monasteries and Benedictine Monks
- The Lord Bishop

THE FEUDAL LORDS

The citizens of the town lived within the enclosed walls of the urban centre. In this independent town, the nobles would also have their houses. This inner region was known as the *terra*, and in Francis' time it would become the *comune*. The lands belonging to a town, however, would also include the outlying regions, which were known as the *contado*, or countryside. This area was important for the livelihood of a town, because it would be cultivated in order to provide food for the town's inhabitants. The outer fringes of the *comune* would be known as the *districtus*, in which one would find the *castelli*, or small fortified villages and castles of the nobles. There were many *castelli* surrounding Assisi, and especially on Mount Subasio. They were normally built in well-fortified outposts, and were an expression of the tension which was common during the time in which the military strength of the feudal lords was being tested. The feudal lords were liable to attack from the wealthy citizens who were reluctant to pay tolls and taxes on their trading journeys. They would also be subject to attack as a result of the struggle between the imperial and papal powers as they would be required to assist one or other force in their struggles one against the other.

Feudal lords provided protection for their subjects, the villeins and the serfs.

THE VILLEINS

This group of people consisted of labourers who might work on the land or could be craftsmen or merchants. They could become free and own their own property. This group became increasingly powerful with the growth of urbanisation and the increase and improvements in trade and communications. They were subject to taxation and forced labour.

THE SERFS

Many people became bondsmen on the land they cultivated. The farmers, who were terrified of the frequent incursions and attacks on the *contado*, sought the protection of the nobles with their military might, but this relationship in the end brought about their bondage. These peasants or serfs could be sold or used as pledges at the whims of their feudal owners.

The duties of the dependent farmer comprised cultivating the land, ploughing the fields with oxen, harvesting grain, running the mill and transporting materials over rocky terrain. To add to their burdens, the peasants also had to give periodic gifts or tributes to the feudal lord. The principal ones

were made at Christmas and on the feast of the Assumption. It is as a result of this custom that the annual gift of fish was handed over to the lord abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Mount Subasio by Francis as a sign of his submission in accepting the use of the Portiuncula chapel for his friars.

THE MAIORES AND MINORES

Already in 1054 we have records of a war fought by Assisi, an imperial city, against Perugia, a papal city. Fortini states that “in the history of the wars of Italian communes there was no hatred so tenacious as this one. It began at the dawn of communal life and was extinguished only with the diminution of city autonomy at the time of the harsh papal restoration” (Fortini, 56).

The government of the town of Assisi belonged to the *boni homines*, a group which included nobility, knights and lords. This group also included the vassals who had moved into the towns from their country castles, notaries, judges and rich merchants. By the time of St. Francis’ birth a new coalition was forming, made up of the lower classes of the merchants and artisans, who would be known as *homines populi*. In Assisi, and other towns, there were frequent struggles for power between the *maiores* – the more powerful and wealthy - and the *minores* – less important members of society. The wealthy rising families, who could be classed as *maiores*, sought more power, money and patrimony and would fight for these. The original *boni homines* wanted more money and movable possessions which they obtained by trading with the more recently wealthy groups.

As you have already learned, divisions were also caused as a result of those who wanted a free city and those wanting to stay loyal to the emperor. It is clear that the changing economic and social climate led to great turbulence while at the same time distinct causes may be clear for any particular struggle, such as the war with Perugia or the attack on the Rocca.

THE LEPERS

Lepers were very significant in Francis’ conversion and throughout his later life. The brothers were expected to serve lepers, as Francis himself did.

Leprosy gave rise to even greater concern with urbanisation because the disease spread more quickly. Abbeys and rich benefactors provided leper-houses but it became necessary to situate these outside the city walls. Sometimes rich people who became leprous established leper-houses.

There was a special liturgical rite when lepers were sent away because lepers were regarded as dead to their own communities. In 1179 the Third Lateran Council decreed that lepers should have a church and cemetery of their own but lepers remained outcasts. Members of the nobility, like St Clare, did serve lepers but they were feared and avoided by most.

The hospital for lepers in the commune of Assisi stood near the castle of Arce. It was dedicated to St. Lazarus, “*San Lazzaro d’Arce*”. Later on this hospital was renamed *Santa Maria Maddalena*. The chapel of the hospital still stands, on the road leading from the railway station of Assisi between the Portiuncula and Rivotorto. There were also other leper hospitals which Fortini lists, namely *Selva Grossa*, *Fontanelle*, *San Salvatore delle Pareti*, *Acquaviva*, *San Savino*, *Ponte del Chiagio*, *Ponte dei Galli*, and *Querciano*.

There were strict rules regarding the way of life of the lepers. They were to be confined in the hospital and not wander about the town. They had to wear a tunic made of a poor and coarse cloth, serving as a uniform to warn passers-by to keep at a safe distance from the precincts of the leper hospital. The leper had to carry a wooden clapper to announce his or her whereabouts to strangers.

The statutes of the commune were very harsh regarding the lepers. Fortini quotes them:

“The podestà must, a month after taking office, make a scrupulous search for lepers in the city and in the region. And if any leper, man or woman, be living in the city or in the *contado*, he is to be hunted out from these places, and from the *castelli* and from the *ville*. And the syndics of the cities and the castellans of the castles shall take care to bring charges against the lepers” (Fortini, 210-211).

In his Testament Francis referred to the importance of overcoming his intense horror at the thought of lepers in his own conversion at the time when he embraced a leper. He writes

“The Lord himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body.”¹⁴

THE POOR

Francis also showed compassion and concern for the poor: he exchanged his knight's clothes for those of a poor knight; he took the place of a beggar in Rome, wearing the poor man's tunic; he regretted failing to give alms on one occasion and thereafter, for the love of God, always tried to give something to those who begged. He had a reputation for generosity throughout his life.

It was regarded as the responsibility of the Church to assist the poor. Monasteries had a particular role in providing alms, food, shelter and care. Priests and laity were expected to give assistance as an act of charity. During this period hostels, often known as hospitals, grew up designed to serve the poor, the sick, pilgrims and other travellers. They would have refectories, washing facilities, dormitories and infirmaries. Abbeys came to have almoners who would have a particular responsibility for those seeking assistance but monasteries could not provide so easily for the poor in towns. Many individuals became well known for their works of charity to the poor. The poor were not held responsible nor were they blamed for their poverty.

In earlier times the poor would have been the responsibility of the family and the wider local community. The increase in the number of travellers and in those having to leave their homes to secure employment led to an increase in the poor requiring charity from different sources.

READING

The following short reading will expand on this theme.

2:8 Morris Colin, *The Papal Monarchy: The Western Church from 1050-1250*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 320-327

THE MONASTERIES AND BENEDICTINE MONKS

The monasteries during the Middle Ages were organised according to the feudal pattern, with the abbot as the supreme spiritual and also military ruler of the lands subject to the monastery. The Benedictine abbeys were true castles, just like those of the feudal lords. Examples can still be seen in Italy to this very day, such as in the case of the monastery of Farfa. The monks were dedicated to the study of old manuscripts, to prayer and silence, but they were also instrumental in the draining of swamps and agriculture.

In Assisi we find references to male and female Benedictine monasteries which existed before and during the time of St. Francis. Such was the monastery of San Pietro, mentioned for the first time in a cathedral document in 1029.

There were three monasteries of women, the most famous of which was that of San Paolo delle Abbadesse, at Bastia Umbra. This was the monastery at which Clare stayed when she left her parents' house to go to Francis at the Portiuncula chapel. The monastery chapel lies in the Bastia cemetery. Another famous monastery was that of Sant'Angelo di Panzo, along the side of Mount Subasio. This monastery accommodated Clare and her sister Agnes, some weeks before Francis transferred them to San Damiano.

The most famous among the male Benedictine monasteries of the Assisi *contado* was that of Saint Benedict on Mount Subasio. It was very rich and possessed large estates. The Portiuncula chapel outside Assisi was part of its possessions. The monastery was heavily fortified and stood in a prominent position, half-way up Mount Subasio, among thick woods. Unfortunately it was almost totally destroyed in 1399 by order of the commune.

¹⁴ Test 2-3 ED P124

THE LORD BISHOP

The *vescovado*, or bishop's residence, stands on the spot where there was the temple of Janus during Roman times. This area of the town was known as the hill of Janus, from which derives the name Moiano.

The bishop's church is that of the Assumption, known as Santa Maria Maggiore. This was Assisi's first cathedral church. On the feastday of the Assumption the *coloni*, or peasants went to the bishop to pay their yearly rent for the land.

The bishop was lord over a vast extent of territory. The principal church of the town, normally under the bishop's direct jurisdiction, was known as the *pieve*, the baptismal church of a given area, with all the other churches subordinate to it

Fortini states that during the time of St. Francis, bishop Guido of Assisi was the owner of half of the property in the commune. A bull of Innocent III in 1198 lists all the churches, monasteries, lands and *castelli*, that fell under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Assisi. The bull reconfirmed the exclusive jurisdiction of the bishop on everyone and everything subject to him. Fortini concludes that

“this is the diploma that will establish the legal competence of the bishop to judge Francis on the day of his mystic wedding. By then the bishop of Assisi will have reached the highest point of his power and wealth; he seems to have been the strongest and richest feudal lord of all the area. Avid for material goods and thirsty for power, this bishop will not hesitate to fight incessantly for his power or for his riches against the magistrates of the commune who do not wish to bend to his will and against the monasteries that rebel against his authority. And yet this same bishop, without hesitation, will put his own mantle on the man who strips naked in front of him to make Poverty the rule of his own life” (Fortini, 27-28).

THE CATHEDRAL CHURCH AND PATRON SAINT OF ASSISI

The patron saint of Assisi is San Rufino (see below). In the 8th century the first church or small basilica was built in his honour.

The church slowly gained in popularity, and the bishop of Assisi had to appoint a prior to San Rufino in 1029. Originally the prior was subordinate to the bishop, but his authority gradually increased until he became autonomous. The same thing was happening between the old cathedral of the Assumption and the new church of San Rufino, which was gaining prestige over Santa Maria Maggiore.

This same period witnesses the rise of the class of the *boni homines*, or the great men of the city, normally feudal lords who possessed imposing houses in Assisi, and who had moved in from the country *castelli*. At the beginning the *boni homines* were judges and notaries who allied themselves to the bishop, but as time went on they increasingly sided with the prior of San Rufino. The old cathedral began to decline in prestige, because it had no relics, whereas the people flocked to San Rufino's church, where the holy martyr was buried.

One of the bishops who governed the church of Assisi was Hugo (1036-1052). He was aflame with zeal to enhance the devotion to Saint Rufino. His signature is proof of this: Bishop Hugo, Vicar of San Rufino. The story goes that, after Saint Rufino had been buried in the church dedicated to him, the people of Assisi remembered the old empty sarcophagus in which he had been initially laid, and went to retrieve it from the river banks. When the procession entered the city, bishop Hugo announced his intention to carry the sarcophagus to the old cathedral church of the Assumption. The canons of San Rufino incited the people to rebel against the bishop's orders. When a skirmish was about to break out Saint Rufino intervened and the men from the bishop's party who came to carry the sarcophagus could not move it, whereas the people of the town easily carried the sarcophagus to the church of San Rufino.

Hugo decided to build a new cathedral to house the relics of Saint Rufino, and established 11th August as the annual feastday of the martyr saint, together with 3rd August, which marked the anniversary of the dedication of the first church. Thus Hugo became the defender of the cult of Saint

Rufino and the one who built the basilica which stood on the piazza which lies in front of the new cathedral of San Rufino.

LESSON 6

THE TOWN OF ASSISI AT THE TIME OF FRANCIS

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of the town of Assisi provides the background for understanding the events which marked the 12th and 13th centuries, the time during which Francis of Assisi lived.

The first historical references to Assisi are those linked with the so-called Umbrian period, when Assisi was a city-state ruled by the *marones*, or Umbrian magistrates. This was the time of the Etruscans, who also ruled the nearby city-state of Perugia. In 295BC Assisi and Perugia were taken by Rome. In 89BC Assisi was confederated to Rome, as a result of the Julian Civil Law and became a Roman municipality.

The Christian evangelisation of Assisi took place during the 3rd century, according to tradition, through the efforts of Saint Rufino, who was its first bishop and who was martyred in the Chiagio River in 238.

After the fall of Rome in 476 Assisi fell under Byzantine rule. It then formed part of the kingdom of the Ostrogoths, under the emperor Justinian. In 545 the Goths occupied Assisi under the command of Totila. In 568 the city again fell under the Lombards and became part of the Duchy of Spoleto.

In 774 Charlemagne occupied and destroyed Assisi. On Christmas Day of 800 Charlemagne was crowned emperor by pope Leo III. During this period the Papal States came into existence. These territories in central Italy were given to the pope by the Franks, who had occupied them from the Lombards.

In this period the Benedictine monastic Order was spreading its influence across the Italian peninsula. The Assisi territory also witnessed the rise of Benedictine monasticism, especially with the foundation of the monastery of Saint Benedict on Subasio. During the same time the bishop Hugo started the building of a new church dedicated to Saint Rufino.

From the 11th and 14th centuries there was a period of economic and cultural growth of Assisi. As we saw in Lesson 2, the town fell under imperial rule through the diploma (charter) of the Emperor Frederick I (Barbarossa) in 1160. The town, however, revolted against imperial rule and in 1174 it was occupied by Christian, the excommunicated archbishop of Mainz and imperial chancellor. The emperor then gave the investiture of Assisi to Conrad von Ürslingen, who began residing in the Rocca which dominates the town. This was the turn of events when Francis of Assisi was born in 1182.

As there follows a very detailed study of Assisi at the time of Francis, it would be useful to begin your study by looking at the two maps, one of which is a detail of the town centre. The places will be described using the names as they appear on the maps.

THE WALLS

See Maps 10 & 11 at the end of the readings section.

Assisi has been a fortified city at least from Roman times. A document of 1134 describes the place where the new cathedral of Saint Rufino was being built as standing upon the old city wall. It has been ascertained that, under the Roman walls of the 3rd century, there are remains of older walls of the Umbrian period.

The perimeter of the city, however, was somewhat different from today. Assisi was smaller than it looks nowadays, particularly having had an extension towards the west as a result of the building of the basilica of San Francesco. The medieval walls started at the Rocca Maggiore on top of the hill and went steeply down towards San Giacomo di Murorupto. At the Porta di Murorupto Inferiore the wall took a sharp bend to the east and continued through the Vicolo di Sant'Andrea. The perimeter

wall then passed through the Porta Antica, Porta Sant'Antimo and Porta del Sementone, and proceeded to the *Vescovado* (you will come across this term in some of your reading – it refers to the Bishop's Palace - Bishop Guido's Palace on the map). At this point the wall marked the lowest contours of the city. From there it turned north and climbed towards Porta Moiano and Porta San Giorgio. It went further uphill to Porta San Rufino and Porta del Parlascio. From this point it turned west to follow the contours of the hill until it arrived once again at the Rocca Maggiore (see map).

The perimeter wall of the town which we see today was first built between the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th century, but was destroyed in 1332 by the Perugini. In 1354 Assisi was restored to papal jurisdiction under Cardinal Alborno, who rebuilt the Rocca. By 1367 the walls also were rebuilt as we see them today.

PIAZZA DEL COMUNE (THE OLD ROMAN FORUM OR MARKET)

The heart of Assisi during Roman times was the place where the *Tempio di Minerva* (Temple of Minerva) stood. It was known by the name of *forum* or the market. At this point, as in all Roman towns, the various streets of the town met, particularly the *cardo maximus*, or main thoroughfare, and the *decumanus*, or intersecting road.

In the medieval period, the old *forum* was synonymous with the town's marketplace, so much so that the central piazza of Assisi was known simply as the market. Here all the commercial activity of the town converged. The piazza was dominated, as it still is today, by the façade of the temple of Minerva. From medieval records we know that various houses stood near the piazza near the church of San Nicolò. The market place was the centre of activity of the town and also the area where the merchants had their houses.

The temple of Minerva is one of the best conserved Roman structures in Italy, and as a temple ranks only second to the Roman Pantheon. During the time of St. Francis the superior part of the façade, which is made up of six Corinthian columns, was built up. The temple was the property of the Benedictine monks of Mount Subasio, and was called San Donato.

The western section of the piazza was occupied by the church of San Nicolò, patron saint of the merchants. The church was probably already built in 1093, that is some years after the Bari merchants had stolen the relics of St. Nicholas from Myra in Turkey, and transported them to Bari, where a famous basilica was built in 1087. In Assisi the church was simply known as "San Nicolò della piazza". In 1217 San Nicolò was one of the churches which depended upon the cathedral of San Rufino, together with some houses in front of it, which were demolished by the Commune (town council) in order to enlarge the Piazza del Comune. From a document in the archives of the Sacro Convento, dated 1227, we know that San Nicolò was a parish church. On the façade of the church, since the 14th century, stands the image of the "Madonna del popolo", a fresco of the school of Simone Martini. Under the church one can still admire the crypt, which is the only remaining part of the original church which St. Francis knew.

Near San Nicolò one still finds the church of San Paolo. It was consecrated in 1071 and formed a Benedictine priory dependent upon the abbey of Saint Benedict on Mount Subasio. The church also had a monastery annexed to it. San Paolo was radically transformed and reconsecrated by Innocent IV in 1253. The *contrada* of the church was known by the name "dell'Abbadia" (of the abbey). The church still exists. Between this church and San Nicolò, Fortini locates the paternal house of St. Francis.

Another church which stood in the piazza, near the temple of Minerva, was dedicated to Sant'Agata. In 1228 the Commune enlarged the *platea nova*. Eminent citizens had their palaces overlooking the piazza, and these had been destroyed in the popular uprising against the *maiores* in 1202. After the transformation of the *platea nova*, the most common name is that of *platea Communis*, or Piazza del Comune.

Other important buildings in the Piazza del Comune include the Torre del Popolo, which was built in 1274-1305. The old palazzo comunale was founded in 1212 and in 1270 it became the headquarters of the "capitano del popolo". It had formerly housed the magistrate of the Comune, or

the Podestà. On the opposite side of the Piazza del Comune the new residence of the Podestà was built, the Palace of the Podestà. On this same side of the Piazza one also finds the Palazzo dei Priori, part of which already existed during the time of St. Francis. The confines of the Piazza del Comune were marked by chains. A reference to these chains is still evident in the street which leads from the Piazza del Comune to San Giorgio (today Santa Chiara), and which was named “*Via del Ceppo della Catena*”.

THE CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA MAGGIORE

The *contrada* of Santa Maria Maggiore is important in the history of Assisi, and rich in Franciscan memories. Many Roman remains are witness to the fact that this area of the town was inhabited from the earliest period of Assisi history. The church of Santa Maria Maggiore is reputed to stand upon an old Roman temple dedicated to Juno.

Santa Maria Maggiore was the old cathedral church of Assisi, dedicated to the Assumption, together with the Vescovado, which is still the seat of the bishop of Assisi.

This area of the city was the property of the bishop, with proper privileges given by Innocent III in 1198. (See Lesson 2) The confines of the *contrada* are marked between the actual Via di San Gregorio, Via Bernardo da Quintavalle, Piazzetta Garibaldi, Via Antonio Cristofani, Piazza del Vescovado, Via di Porta Moiano, Via di S. Antonio. (not on map)

It was in the area of Santa Maria Maggiore, in the Vescovado, that Francis renounced his father's possessions in front of bishop Guido of Assisi.

SAN PIETRO (NOT ON MAP)

The Benedictine church of San Pietro, during the time of St. Francis, stood outside the walls of Assisi along the street which descends from the Vescovado. The built-up area surrounding it was called “borgo di San Pietro”. In some documents the church is called “San Pietro sotto Assisi”. The Romanesque church still stands together with its crypt, in which is buried St. Victorinus, Bishop and Martyr.

One of the old gates of Assisi is Porta Moiano, some distance up from San Pietro and Porta del Sementone. It was famous for the springs of Moiano, which had therapeutic qualities.

THE CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF SAN RUFINO

The numerous documents in the archives of the cathedral of Assisi permit us to reconstruct a precise idea of the cathedral of San Rufino and its environs during the lifetime of St. Francis.

When Francis was born the old cathedral had still not been demolished, and the new cathedral was being built. In front of the old cathedral there was a piazza, called *platea sancti Rufini*. The earliest records referring to bishop San Rufino date from the 11th century. This bishop was drowned in the Chiagio river, after having refused to sacrifice to the pagan gods. The remains of the bishop were placed into a sarcophagus and carried to Assisi, where in the 8th century a small church was built in his honour. The church soon became famous, even becoming a rival to the cathedral church of Santa Maria Maggiore. San Rufino had its own prior, nominated by the bishop.

The remaining sections of the cathedral church as Francis knew it are the façade and campanile. The old Romanesque campanile, or bell tower, is built upon a Roman cistern, which can still be seen through a small door and stairway leading down to it from the left aisle of the cathedral church. These old roman remains indicate that the cathedral church was built on a site which was sacred in the Roman period.

It was bishop Hugo who built the first cathedral after the sarcophagus with the body of Saint Rufinus was carried triumphantly by the Assisi citizens. Hugo governed the church of Assisi from 1036 to 1052, and although he tried to continue enhancing the prestige of the old cathedral of Santa Maria Maggiore, the people of Assisi preferred the new cathedral, and after bitter quarrels with their bishop, succeeded in transporting the relics of San Rufinus to the new church. The old Ugonian church, which Francis must have still been able to see, is now gone, except for the lower section of the campanile and a part of the crypt. In the cathedral church of Assisi one can still admire the old baptismal font in which Francis and Clare were baptised.

The old Ugonian cathedral, which had three aisles, was being rebuilt during the time of St. Francis. He must have witnessed the building of the façade in 1210. This façade merits particular attention. It is divided into three levels. The first level is that of the doorways, the second is that of the rose-windows, the third level is the triangular tympanum with a large pointed arch. The sculptures on the main door are thought to have belonged to the old Ugonian cathedral church. There is God the Father with a crown and triple nimbus, sitting on a throne between the moon and the sun depicted as a star. On his right hand stands the Virgin Mary, also crowned, who is holding Jesus Christ close to her breast, as well as the book of creation. On her left stands Saint Rufino who holds the book of the Gospels. Underneath Saint Rufino there is a head, which might indicate the body of Saint Cesidio, martyr, son of Saint Rufino.¹⁵ Near the throne of the Virgin we also find two other heads, indicating the two deacons Marcello and Esuperanzio, martyred in Assisi in the 4th century. The central rose window is surrounded by the symbols of the four evangelists, the eagle, the winged angel, the ox and the lion. On the top of the tympanum there is the coat of arms of the Comune of Assisi: the figure of the lion. Unfortunately, the cathedral of San Rufino has been remodelled on the inside by Galeazzo Alessi in 1571-1585, in a baroque style which has totally obliterated the medieval architecture of the interior. This was the most damaged building in the recent earthquake. Renovation work has been carried out throughout Assisi as a result of this event.

The area surrounding the cathedral church of Saint Rufino was inhabited by the nobles who considered themselves to be the *ajutores et defensores* (helpers and defenders) of the same cathedral. Among them we find the family of Saint Clare, whose house overlooked the Piazza San Rufino (cfr. Notes on the family house of Saint Clare).

In the vicinity of the cathedral church there is the church of Santa Maria delle Rose, known also as the Chapel of Saint Mary Minor to distinguish it from Santa Maria Maggiore, the old cathedral. In

¹⁵ The earliest Church Council mentioning celibacy is the Council of Elvira. It was not necessarily unusual for a bishop to have a son.

1198 this church was controlled by the bishop of Assisi, whereas in 1217 it passed under the jurisdiction of the cathedral church of Saint Rufinus.

THE ROMAN AMPHITHEATRE

The Parlascio neighbourhood of Assisi is the place of the ancient Roman amphitheatre. The name derives from the old custom among the Lombards to hold civil and military meetings in the amphitheatre outside the city walls. The term Parlascio derives from the Italian verb “parlare”, to speak. Assisi is no exception to the rule. It also had its Parlascio outside the walls, where the remains of the old Roman amphitheatre can still be seen in a hollow under the crest of the hill upon which Assisi is built. Nowadays the old amphitheatre is occupied by houses, but there is still an oval garden surrounded by a wall, which marks the exact spot of the central stage of the old amphitheatre. The name *Perlasium* is found in an old document of the 11th century. In 1093 we find a reference to the name Perlici. The area is still known as the “fossa di Perlici”, or hollow of Perlici, together with an open space known as “prato di Perlici”.

This section of the town was outside the walls, and thus was more vulnerable to attack especially from higher ground. For this reason there were strong towers defending the Perlici neighbourhood. From the Prato the houses were built on a steep slope going up towards the crest of the hill, up to the church of Sant’Antonio. In 1198 this church was under the jurisdiction of the bishop, whereas it passed over to the cathedral of San Rufino in 1217. This section of the town, lying outside the defensive walls, known as the *contrada di Sant’Antonio*, was gradually enclosed within new walls even during the life of St. Francis himself. This wall opened where today there is the *Porta Cappuccini*, and which at the time was known as *Porta sancti Antonii*.

Further to the west one finds the *Archicciolo*, which in medieval times had one of the gates of the town, opened in 1199 by the consul Tancredi, “*Porta qui itur in Marchiam*” that is, indicating the direction to the Marches of Ancona. In this section of the town one finds the old church of San Lorenzo, which like other churches in the area depended upon the jurisdiction of the bishop of Assisi in 1198, but then passed on to the cathedral church of San Rufino in 1217.

THE ROCCA

The first documents regarding the Rocca of Assisi are those which speak about the siege and devastation of 1198 on the part of the *homines populi* against the *boni homines*. As we saw in Lesson 2, in this civil strife between merchants and nobles Francis probably took an active part. In 1174 the Rocca had been occupied by Christian of Mainz, and passed under imperial jurisdiction. Frederick I (Barbarossa) stayed at the Rocca in 1177. Before the destruction of 1198 the Rocca was the seat of Conrad von Ürslingen, who was entrusted by the emperor Henry VI with the care of the young Frederick II. The Rocca remained in ruins until 1365 when it was rebuilt by Cardinal Egidio Albornoz after the return of the papacy from Avignon. Various sections of this fortress, however, show vestiges of the old Rocca, so that Fortini concludes that Albornoz did not rebuild it completely, but rather restored whole sections of it which were dismantled by the Assisi citizens in 1198.

SAN GIORGIO

We now return down to the cathedral church of San Rufino. From the *Porta San Rufino* the walls descended towards *Porta San Giorgio*, and then on to *Porta Moiano*. The church of San Giorgio, during the life of St. Francis, was found outside the walls of Assisi. It stood in the place where the Basilica of Saint Clare now stands, into which it has been incorporated. The *Legenda Liturgica Antiqua* of the Order of Friars Preachers states: “*Venerabile autem corpus eius in oratorio beati Georgii iuxta muros Assisii cum ingenti veneratione sepultum est*” (His venerable body was buried with great veneration in the oratory of Saint George near the walls of Assisi) [Analecta Franciscana X,534]. In front of the church there was a piazza, known as the *platea Sancti Georgii*.

The first document which speaks about the church of San Giorgio is found in the cathedral archives of Assisi and is dated 1111. In the bull of Innocent III of 1198 the *capella Sancti Georgii* depended upon the jurisdiction of the bishop of Assisi. In 1217 it passed under the jurisdiction of the

canons of San Rufino. The church was also linked with the hospital of San Rufino from the year 1167 onwards, sometimes known also as *hospitali Sancti Georgii*. In front of the piazza there was a *trivium*, or the place where three roads met, one going up to San Rufino, one going down to Porta Moiano and the third one coming from Piazza del Comune and proceeding outside the walls in the direction of Spello. The hospital of San Giorgio was governed by a *prior hospitalis*, or *rector hospitalis sancti Georgii*, who was also in charge of the church. San Giorgio was a parish church, which in 1253 was amalgamated in the parish of San Rufino. San Giorgio was also the seat of a school which Francis frequented as a young boy.

On 4th October 1226 the body of St. Francis was buried in San Giorgio, and it was there that Gregory IX canonised Francis on 16th July 1228. The solemn translation of the relics of the saint to the new basilica on the *Colle Inferiore* took place on 25th May 1230, and left from San Giorgio, the first resting place of the saint's body. On 12th August 1253 the body of St. Clare was likewise buried in San Giorgio.

After the death of St. Clare there was lack of agreement between the canons of San Rufino and the bishop on one side, and the Poor Ladies of San Damiano on the other. The latter wanted to acquire the church and hospital of San Giorgio in order to transfer their monastery and build a fitting basilica in honour of St. Clare. On 1st October 1253 the cardinal Giovanni di San Lorenzo decreed, in the church of San Paolo, that the sisters should acquire San Giorgio as the place for their future monastery, but that they had to cede San Damiano to the bishop. This agreement had no effect, because in 1257 a new decree, this time by cardinal Compatri, compensated the cathedral chapter who lost San Giorgio with the church of San Giacomo *de murorupto*. This decree was ratified by Alexander IV on 10th May 1259, and the Poor Ladies transferred their monastery, plus the venerated icon of the Crucifix of San Damiano, to the church and hospital of San Giorgio. The remains of the church of San Giorgio can still be seen incorporated into the basilica of Saint Clare and is now the chapel where the San Damiano Crucifix is kept. In the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament. The body of St. Clare was transferred to the basilica built in her honour.

SAN GIACOMO DE MURORUPTO

The name "murorupto" is found for the first time in a cathedral document of 1147. The name indicates a wall opened during an attack on the city. This section of the town stretches from the polygonal tower of the Rocca to the Porta San Giacomo. The name of the priest who took care of the church when Francis was alive is Egidio. This priest had to reconstruct twice the walls of his garden, which lay close to the city wall, because they were destroyed during a raid on the city. In 1256 the abbess of the monastery of Santa Chiara, Benedetta, acquired as a donation from the abbot of Farfa, Giacomo, the church of San Giacomo (*ecclesiam nostram Sancti Iacopi de murorupto*), which she ceded to the chapter of San Rufino as an exchange for the church of San Giorgio. The document of Alexander IV of 10th May 1259 shows the importance of this church, which had a campanile, a golden cross on the altar, liturgical vestments and books, bells, dwelling places for the priest in charge of the church and a large garden. The old romanesque church was reopened in 1927 and has one aisle and an apse. During the life of St. Francis this *contrada* of the town was densely populated. Near San Giacomo there were two other churches, Santa Margherita, documented in 1246, Sant'Andrea, which existed already in 1231 under the jurisdiction of San Giacomo, and from 1316 under that of the abbey of San Pietro.

Another church which existed during St. Francis' lifetime and which still exists in a picturesque angle of Assisi is that of Santo Stefano. The first cathedral document which speaks about this church is dated 1166, and names it as a parish.

ASSISI AT THE TIME OF FRANCIS – A BRIEF REFERENCE TO FRANCISCAN SOURCES TO WHICH ONE MODULE IS DEVOTED IN UNIT TWO

P.V. Riley Jr. wrote:

"Assisi is well-known in the West as the birthplace of one such religious innovator, Giovanni di Bernardone, known to history as Francis of Assisi ... Though Assisi was in some ways akin to another hill-

city, Rome, it never won the glory of recognition that Rome or the great communes of Northern Italy achieved on the field of battle, in politics and economics. Were it not for the remarkable life of one of its citizens, St. Francis, Assisi might have forever remained forgotten, in the shadows of Florence, Siena, Milan, Venice and so many other Italian cities” (“Francis’ Assisi: its political and social history, 1175-1225”, in *Franciscan Studies* 34 (1974) 393, 418).

The early Franciscan biographers speak about “the city of Assisi, which is located in the confines of the Spoleto valley” (1C 1). “Francis was raised in the city of Assisi, which is located in the boundaries of the valley of Spoleto” (L3C 2). The generic location of the town “in finibus vallis Spoletanae” or “de provincia Tusciae” (*Legenda monacensis*, in *Analecta Franciscana* X, Quaracchi 1926-1941, 695), is the only early indication we have regarding the geographical boundaries of the Umbrian town. It is within this geographical milieu of central Italy, which formed part of the “patrimonium sancti Petri”, or the papal states, that we have to understand the origins and development of the Franciscan family of the 13th century.

A very interesting note is found in the Anonymous of Perugia. To the question: “To which Order do you belong?”, the first friars answered: “We are penitents and were born in Assisi” (AP 19, cf. L3C 37).

The habitat in which St. Francis and his friars lived is therefore that of the town of Assisi, with its social and urban framework, with its churches, piazze, houses, monasteries, leper hospitals, with its *contado*, or surrounding countryside. This is how Henry d’Avranches describes Assisi in his *Versified Life of St. Francis*:¹⁶

“Francis’ native soil bathes in his light like the sun, / Shining in new refulgence as she glories in her great scion, / Veteran Assisi, in the upper reaches of the Spoleto vale, / Clings to a rocky peak’s sloping flanks, / With serried ranks of olive-trees / All covered from head to toe” (VL I,25-30). It is impossible to translate the poetic description of Dante in his *Divine Comedy*, *Paradiso*, Canto XI, 43-45: *Intra Tupino e l’acqua che discende / del colle eletto dal beato Ubaldo, / fertile costa d’alto monte pende*”.

The Assisi Compilation speaks about the great love which Francis had towards his home town, which he blesses before he dies:

“While he was staying in that palace [bishop Guido’s residence in Assisi], blessed Francis, realizing that he was getting sicker by the day, had himself carried on a litter to the church of Saint Mary of the Porziuncola, since he could not ride horseback because of his severe illness. When those who were carrying him passed by the hospital along the road, he asked them to place the litter on the ground. Since he could hardly see because of the serious and prolonged eye-disease, he had the litter turned so that he would face the city of Assisi. Raising himself up slightly on the litter, he blessed the city of Assisi. ‘Lord,’ he said, ‘just as I believe that at an earlier time this city was the abode of wicked and evil men, with a bad reputation throughout all this region; so now I realize that, because of Your abundant mercy and in Your own time, You have shown an abundance of mercies to it. Now it has become the abode of those who acknowledge You, give glory to Your name, offer the fragrance of good life, doctrine, and good reputation to the whole Christian people. I ask you, therefore, Lord Jesus Christ, Father of mercies, not to consider our ingratitude. May it always be mindful of the abundant mercies which You have shown to it, that it always be an abode for those who acknowledge You, and glorify Your name blessed and glorious throughout the ages. Amen’” (AC 5).

The Franciscan sources present Assisi as a medieval town full of movement and interaction between various strata of society. This is especially evident in the references to the years of Francis as a young man, and to the business of Pietro di Bernardone.

CONCLUSION TO MODULE

As you go further in your studies, you will find that information about the history of Assisi will help you to gain a greater insight into the lives and writings of Francis and Clare.

¹⁶ This work was commissioned by Pope Gregory IX who asked Henri d’Avranches to put Celano’s life into a versified form (see ED pp 423-427 for further details)

You will have learned that Francis lived at a time of turbulence and of change in which he was directly involved and consequently influenced by. Although Francis and his followers used hermitages when they prayed and fasted over set periods of time, Francis did not live in isolation away from the context of his world. His conversion led him to follow a very different lifestyle from that of his family. Having abandoned the values of his social class, he and his followers became one of the influences on his world. Clare did not seek isolation from events that were happening although the Second Order follow the contemplative life. Clare communicated with people outside the Order and worked hard to secure the right to follow the particular path she discerned for the Sisters.

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