THE NIGHT WHEN CLARE OF ASSISI
LEFT HER PATERNAL HOUSE
(28th March 1211)

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On Palm Sunday night in many monasteries of the Order of St. Clare the nuns celebrate an important event in the life of their spiritual mother. This year marks a special anniversary marking 800 years since this event, since according to renowned scholars of the life of Clare of Assisi, it was the night of 28th March 1211, which was the night concluding the feast of Palm Sunday, when Clare left her paternal house in the piazza of the cathedral church of San Rufino and proceeded towards the Portiuncula chapel to begin a new way of life under the direction of Francis and the first brothers.

The exact method used by Clare to accomplish this unique feat for a woman during the Middle Ages is still an object of mystery, and many questions are left unanswered. The biographical sources for the life of St. Clare, dating from the mid-13th century, offer some insights as to what might have occurred, but their descriptions are rather vague. That is why we have to make recourse to other more modern studies regarding the life of Clare of Assisi in order to have a more clear view of such an important event that marks a watershed in the life of the little plant (pianticella) of Francis of Assisi.

Our aim is that of studying the account of Clare’s flight from her paternal house given to us by the anonymous author of the *Legenda Sanctae Clarae Assisiensis*. The information given to us in this text has to be seen against the background of the Assisi environment in which Clare and Francis grew up. With the help of the famous Assisi historian Arnaldo Fortini, who is an authority in the study of the ancient mediaeval documents pertaining to the 13th century setting of the town of Assisi, we can try to understand what actually occurred during that night of Palm Sunday of 800 years ago.

The paternal house of St. Clare

Arnaldo Fortini dedicates a special chapter of his monumental *Vita Nova di San Francesco* to a study regarding the paternal house of St. Clare, the house of Favarone di Offreduccio di Bernardino and Madonna Ortolana, the parents of Clare of Assisi.

The town of Assisi during the first decade of the 13th century was still under the shock of the civil strife of 1198, when the *hombres populi* or *minores*, who were the emerging middle class of craftsmen and merchants, had attacked and ransacked the castles and town palaces of the *boni homines* or *maiores*, the feudal nobles who were constrained to flee and take refuge in the neighbouring Perugia. Perugia was much larger and stronger than Assisi. It was a papal stronghold. The Assisi nobles soon declared war against the new *comune* of Assisi in order to regain their territorial possessions. The result was the bloody battle at Collestrada and Ponte San Giovanni, in which the young
Francis took part in 1202, when he was imprisoned in Perugia. Clare was then a young girl of 11 years, and the memories of those days of violence were certainly fresh in her mind when she returned with her family to Assisi in 1203, as a result of the treaty of peace signed between the *maiores* and the *minores*, the so-called *charta pacis*. A direct result of this peace treaty was that the Assisi citizens were bound to restore the ancient possessions of the feudal lords back to the noble families to whom they belonged. These would have included the country estates and castles, but also the mansions and palaces in the town itself.

Assisi was characterised by a split between the aristocratic part where the nobles would live and the popular sections of the merchants and traders around Piazza del Comune. Fortini shows with convincing arguments that, whereas the paternal house of Francis of Assisi is to be looked for close to Piazza del Comune, and exactly at the beginning of Via Portica, just some metres below the mediaeval church of San Nicolò *ad pedem plateam*, the paternal house of Clare is to be located in the upper part of the town, in the area around the cathedral church of San Rufino.\(^1\) This was the aristocratic section of Assisi. The paternal house of St. Clare was found just some metres away from the old cathedral of San Rufino, overlooking the Piazza in front of the principal church of Assisi. We have a proof of this in the words of Sr. Pacifica di Guelfuccio, the first witness during the Process of the Canonisation of St. Clare. Pacifica states that, between the house of her family and the house of Favarone di Offreduccio, there was only the Piazza that separated the two noble houses.\(^2\)

When Arnaldo Fortini was writing the *Vita Nova di San Francesco*, he was in the midst of a scholarly discussion with another historian, the Conventual Franciscan Giuseppe Abate,\(^3\) regarding the exact spot where the paternal house of St. Clare would have stood. Visitors to Assisi nowadays are shown a plaque on the edifice adjacent to the Romanesque façade of the cathedral of San Rufino, which states that the building stands in the place where Clare’s paternal house once stood. However, according to Fortini, this is not possible, since when Clare was still a young girl the present cathedral façade was not yet finished. Indeed, Clare would have known the old cathedral of San Rufino, built by bishop Ugone (1036-1052) of which visitors can still see the crypt underneath the entrance to the present cathedral. This means that the old cathedral would have been smaller than the present church, and that if its apse now lies underneath the entrance to the cathedral, then it would have stood further out into the Piazza. In other words, when the prior and canons of San Rufino decided to rebuild the cathedral in 1134, they extended it further to the east and the façade ultimately ended up standing on the place

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2 *The Acts of the Process of Canonization of Clare of Assisi* [ProcCan] I,2, in *Clare of Assisi. Early Documents* [CAED], Revised Edition and Translation by R.J. Armstrong, New City Press, New York – London – Manila 2006, 144-145: “(Sister Pacifica de Guelfuccio of Assisi) said that Saint Clare began the Order that is now at San Damiano through the admonition of Saint Francis. She entered it as a virgin, and always remained such a virgin. When she was asked how she knew these things, she responded that when she was in the world she was her neighbour and distant relative and that only the piazza was between her house and that of the virgin Clare”.

where the crypt of the old cathedral once stood. Hence the Piazza was enlarged in such a way that the famous Romanesque bell tower built upon an ancient Roman cistern found itself adjacent to the façade of the new cathedral, whereas before it used to stand at the back of the old basilica of bishop Ugone.

These details are important. Abate insisted that the paternal house of St. Clare is the first building on the left-hand side of the façade of the cathedral, where the plaque stands. Fortini simply answers that this was impossible, since during the time of Clare’s childhood that house, known as the casa del campanile, would have touched the northern section of the church and not faced the Piazza, as is evident in the sources. Fortini is of the opinion that Clare’s paternal house would have stood in the place where nowadays stands the Palazzo Sermattei, since that section would always have faced the Piazza, even when the upper section of the Piazza was still occupied by the basilica of bishop Ugone.

The whole issue was raised by the discovery of an ancient document of 1148, in which Favarone di Offreducci, Clare’s father, binds himself and his descendants not to build any towers or raise the edifice where this family of knights lived, in such a way as to ruin the majestic façade and tower of the new cathedral of San Rufino, designed by Giovanni da Gubbio. Fortini interprets this document as another proof that the house of St. Clare could not possibly have stood adjacent to the old basilica, but that it was detached from it, since otherwise it could not have been possible to ask Favarone not to build towers or raise his mansion to a height that would impede the majestic beauty of the new cathedral of Assisi.

The account of the flight of Saint Clare from her house to the Portiuncula

We shall now take a look at what the mediaeval sources for the life of St. Clare have to tell us regarding the event that took place on the night of 28th March 1211, which is the date we shall choose as the one marking Clare’s flight from her paternal house to the Portiuncula chapel.4 The historical account is given to us by the anonymous author of the Legenda Sanctae Clarae Assisiensis, which was commissioned by Pope Alexander IV between 1255 and 1256, probably on the occasion of the canonization of St. Clare by the same Pope in the cathedral church at Anagni on 15th August 1255.

“The Solemnity of the Day of the Palms was at hand when the young girl went with a fervent heart to the man of God, asking [him] about her conversion and how it

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4 The chronology of St. Clare is based on three dates, namely the date of her death, on 11th August 1253; the date of her flight from her paternal house on the night of Palm Sunday, 42 years before her death (ProcCan I,3 [witness of Pacifica di Guelfuccio]); and the date of her birth, 18 years before her entry in religion. Basing ourselves on the ProcCan and the Legend of St. Clare [LegCl], we can place the date of Clare’s flight from her home on 28th March 1211. This would mean that Clare was born in 1193 (Z. Lazzeri, Il Processo di santa Chiara, 434-435; F. Casolini, Vita di santa Chiara vergine d’Assisi fi Fra Tommaso da Celano, Santa Maria degli Angeli 1962, 34; C.A. Lainati, Santa Chiara f’Assisi, Assisi 1969; Temi spirituali dagli scritti del Secondo Ordine Francescano, Assisi 1970); according to other scholars Clare’s flight from her paternal house is to be placed on the night of 18th March 1212, which was Palm Sunday in that year (D. Cresi, Cronologia di santa Chiara, SF XXV [1953] 260-267; L. Hardick, Zur Chronologie im Leben der hl. Klara, in FS XXXV [1953] 174-210; A. Terzi, Cronologia della vita di san Francesco d’Assisi, Roma 1963, 56-62). This would place Clare’s birth in 1194.
should be carried out. The father Francis told her that on the day of the feast, she should go, dressed and adorned, together with the crowd of people, to [receive] a palm, and, on the following night, leaving the camp she should turn her worldly joy into mourning the Lord’s passion (Heb 13:13; Jas 4:9).

Therefore, when Sunday came, the young girl, thoroughly radiant with festive splendor among the crowd of women, entered the Church with the others. Then something occurred that was a fitting omen: as the others were going [to receive] the palms, while Clare remained immobile in her place out of shyness, the Bishop, coming down the steps, came to her and placed a palm in her hands. On that night, preparing to obey the command of the saint, she embarked upon her long desired flight with a virtuous companion. Since she was not content to leave by way of the usual door, marveling at her strength, she broke open with her own hands that other door that is customarily blocked by wood and stone.

And so she ran to Saint Mary of the Portiuncula, leaving behind her home, city, and relatives. There the brothers, who were observing sacred vigils before the little altar of God, received the virgin Clare with torches. There, immediately after rejecting the filth of Babylon, she gave the world “a bill of divorce” (Dt 24:1). There, her hair shorn by the hands of the brothers, she put aside every kind of her fine dress.

Was it not fitting that an Order of flowering virginity be awakened in the evening or in any other place than in this place of her, the first and most worthy of all, who alone is Mother and Virgin! This is the place in which a new army of the poor, under the leadership of Francis, took its joyful beginnings, so that it might be clearly seen that it was the Mother of mercies who brought to birth both Orders in her dwelling place.

After she received the insignia of holy penance before the altar of the blessed Virgin and, as if before the throne of this Virgin, the humble servant was married to Christ, Saint Francis immediately led her to the church of San Paolo to remain there until the Most High would provide another place.”

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Igitur domo, civitate et consanguineis derelictis, ad sanctam Mariam de Portiuncula festinavit: ubi frater, qui in arula Dei sacras excubias observabat, virginem Claram cum luminariis recerperunt. Mox ibi rejectis sordibus Babylonis, mundo *libellum repudii* (cfr. Mat 5,31; Deut 24,1) tradidit: ibi manu fratum crines deponens, ornatus varios dereliquit. Nec decuit alibi florigere virginitatis Ordinem ad vesperam temporum excitari, quam in eius aula, quae prima omium atque dignissima, sola extitit mater et virgo. Hic locus est ille, in quo nova militia pauperum, duce Francisco, felicia suum habuit primordia, ut liquido videtur utramque religionem Mater misericordiae in suo diversorio parturire. Cum autem coram altari beatae Mariae sanctae poenitentiae suscepisset insignia, et quasi ante torum huius Virginis, humilis ancilla Christi
The vocation of Clare to follow in the footsteps of Francis along the way of the Gospel was prepared by a series of meetings that took place between her and Francis at the Portiuncula. We know this detail from the witness given by Lady Bona di Guelfuccio, who was Clare’s nurse in her paternal home, and who accompanied her on these occasions. In her witness included in the Acts of the Process of Canonization, Bona, who was the sister of Pacifica di Guelfuccio, states:

“Lady Clare was always considered by everyone a most pure virgin and had such fervor of spirit she could serve God and please Him. Because of this, the witness (Bona di Guelfuccio) many times accompanied her to speak to Saint Francis. She went secretly as not to be seen by her parents. Asked what Saint Francis said to her, she replied he always preached to her about converting to Jesus Christ. Brother Philip (Longo) did the same. She listened willingly to him and consented to all the good things said to her. Asked how long ago these things had been spoken, she responded more than forty-two years, because it was forty-two years since she had entered religion. […] Asked how Lady Clare was converted, she replied Saint Francis had cut off her hair in the church of Saint Mary of the Portiuncula, as she had heard, because she, the witness, was not present since she had already gone to Rome to observe Lent.”

The testimony of Bona raises a few important questions. If Bona was in Rome on Palm Sunday of 1211, so with whom could Clare have possibly gone down to the Portiuncula in the middle of the night? The LegCl states that Clare went to the Portiuncula cum honesta societate. The English translation, “with a virtuous companion” expresses what the Latin means in very fluid terms. Societate implies accompaniment, but does not in any way indicate whether the companion is one or many. We have to take a closer look at the account in order to try to understand what might have occurred.

Obeying Francis’ command, on Palm Sunday in the morning Clare went to the cathedral church of San Rufino together with the other noble ladies of Assisi, in order to participate in the solemn blessing of the palm branches. According to the liturgical rite in use in the Middle Ages, the faithful would first assist at the blessing of the palms or olive branches. Then they would proceed to the railings around the altar to receive the branches from the bishop. Clare was invited to go dressed splendidly for the solemn occasion, just as she would normally do on such moments. Being of noble birth there would have certainly been a place reserved for her family in the cathedral church. Indeed, Clare would only have to walk a short distance from her house in the piazza to enter the cathedral and find her place among the other noble ladies. But while the other ladies literally ran in order to receive the palms from the bishop’s hands (caeteris ad ramos currentibus), Clare remained immobile in her place “because of shyness” (Clara prae verecundia suo in loco manet immota). So Bishop Guido went down the steps and came towards her, placing the palm in her hands (pontifex per gradus descendens, usque ad eam accederet, et palmam suis in manibus poneret).

nupsisset, statim eam ad ecclesiam sancti Pauli sanctus Franciscus deduxit, donec aliud provideret Altissimus, in eodem loco mansuram.”

⁶ ProcCan 17.2-3.5 (CAED 192-193).
The description is very vivid. The layout of the cathedral church would have still been that of Bishop Ugone, with a presbytery raised up high above the crypt. The faithful would fill the aisle below the presbytery while the clergy would officiate the liturgy on the high altar well above the other faithful. Probably the noble ladies would hurry up to climb the stairs and arrive at the railings, and after receiving the palm they would go down again to their places. Since Clare remained down in the aisle and did not move from her place, for some unknown reason, the bishop himself went out of the presbytery, down the stairs and into the aisle, in order to place the palm in Clare’s hand. Such an action could be interpreted as a chivalrous act of courtesy, which would be a common thing to do in the Middle Ages in front of a noble lady. However, Bishop Guido was not a young man trying hard to win Clare’s hand, and his position as bishop of Assisi made his social standing as high and noble as that of all the other knightly families that lived around the cathedral of San Rufino. So why did he go down to Clare? Indeed, how come he noticed that, among the noble ladies, Clare alone had not come up to receive the palm?

The only plausible explanation to this question is that Bishop Guido used this occasion as a sign of approval for what Clare was going to accomplish the following night. Francis would never have accepted Clare to the Portiuncula without first consulting with Bishop Guido. The plan had certainly been thought out days before right down to the most intricate details, and it was so well organized that it worked out with clockwork precision. Neither could it be true that Clare did not move because of “shyness”. She could not possibly have felt shy in the company of so many other noble girls and ladies she knew, and with whom she probably went to Mass every Sunday. Clare was simply acting out her role and waiting for the bishop’s approval. The following night she would leave her paternal house and go down to the Portiuncula.

In the dead of the night between Palm Sunday and Monday of Holy Week, that is on 28th-29th March 1211 Clare secretly left her paternal house and went down to the Portiuncula. The biographer says that Clare did not go out of the usual door (ostio consueto), that is the main door of the Favarone palace. She could not possibly have done so. There would certainly have been guards at the main door of such a noble house of a knight. It was unthinkable that anyone, let alone a young lady, would venture out in the Assisi streets at night. The curfew bell would have sounded long before, warning all to stay indoors until dawn. So it was a risky business for Clare and her “virtuous company”. But it seems that this “virtuous company” did not go out of the house with her, since the account states that “she broke open with her own hands that other door that is customarily blocked by wood and stone” (Cumque ostio consueto exire non placuit, aliud ostium, quod lignorum et lapidum pondera obstruebant, miranda sibi fortitudine, propriis manibus reseravit). This side-door or back-door would have certainly been blocked by masonry and wooden planks, since it was not normally guarded. Clare used superhuman

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The Assisi historian Arnaldo Fortini describes this second door of the paternal house of St. Clare. Arnaldo Fortini, Francis of Assisi, English translation of the Nova Vita di S. Francesco, by Helen Moak, Crossroad Publishing Co., New York 1980, 329: “Despite the fact that their ancestors had assumed an obligation not to raise towers or bartizans that would rise above the nearby cathedral, their palazzo was strengthened like a fortress and provided with two doors, one for the days of truce, the other for the days of battle.” In her footnote the translator mentions the popular belief that Clare slipped out of her house through the “door of the dead”. This door is a typical architectural feature in mediaeval houses in Assisi. It is believed that it was always closed with masonry and would be opened for funerals, since it would have been easier to carry the bier through an open space in the ground floor and out into the street. Maybe the
strength to break open the door, as another witness, Sister Cristina di Messer Bernardo di Suppo, states in the *Acts of the Process of Canonization*.8

Another important detail is that regarding the person, or persons, who accompanied Clare on her flight to the Portiuncula. We have already ruled out Bona di Guelfuccio, who was in Rome. Fortini is of the opinion that Clare was accompanied by Pacifica di Guelfuccio, who met her in Via del Parlascio, which would correspond to the present Via Porta Perlici, leading to the Roman amphitheatre.9 Clare, however, did not go up the street, since it leads in the opposite direction up to Mount Subasio. She rather went down towards the lower part of the town, along the narrow alleyways and stairways going down to Via Moiano, in the section of the town where the old cathedral of Santa Maria Maggiore stands. This street passes just behind the apse of the church and goes down straight to Porta Moiano, and from there the way continues down into the Valle Umbra towards the Portiuncula. It is also hard to imagine how Clare could possibly have gone out of the city gate at night, which would be guarded and shut for security reasons. Maybe the *honesta societate* that accompanied Clare were the friars who, somehow, managed to make her slip out of the town unseen and continue in their company towards the Portiuncula. The fact that the Vescovado, or bishop’s palace, is to be found in this part of the town, alongside Santa Maria Maggiore, could also explain the possibility that the friars, with the bishop’s consent, could have convinced the guards of the gate leading up to the bishop’s quarter, to let out Clare in the middle of the night.

### From the Portiuncula to San Paolo delle Abbadesse to Sant’Angelo di Panzo

Clare hurried on to the Portiuncula chapel, where Francis and the brothers were eagerly waiting to receive her with lighted torches. In front of the altar of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Angels Francis and the brothers cut her tresses and after abandoning

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8 *ProcCan* 13,1 (CAED 185): “Sister Cristiana, daughter of Sir Bernardo da Suppo of Assisi, a nun of the monastery of San Damiano, said under oath the same as Sister Beatrice about her manner of living. She added that the virgin of God, Clare, left the worldly house of her father in a wonderful way. Because she did not want to leave through the usual exit, fearing her way would be blocked, she went out by the house’s other exit that had been barricaded with heavy wooden beams and an iron bar so it could not be opened even by a large number of men. She alone, with the help of Jesus Christ, removed them and opened the door. On the following morning, when many people saw that door opened, they were somewhat astonished at how a young girl could have done it.”

9 **FORTINI, Francis of Assisi**, Eng. Translation MOAK, 340. *Pacifica* di Guelfuccio was certainly close to Clare and was Bona’s sister. However Pacifica herself, who later became a nun at the monastery of San Damiano, does not state that she was the “virtuous companion” who accompanied Clare down to the Portiuncula. We have no way of knowing who accompanied Clare in the streets of Assisi during the night, although it is highly probable that she would have found the friars waiting for her outside the city gates, since it is hard to conceive how two women could possibly have made it all by themselves in the dead of the night along the alleyways of the countryside leading down from Assisi to the Valle Umbra where the Portiuncula chapel stands.
her splendid clothes, she wore the sackcloth of penance. The author of the *Legenda* states that it was in this chapel that the Mother of mercies gave birth to the two Orders of the friars Minor and of what were to become known as the Poor Ladies (*ut liquido videtur utramque religionem Mater misericordiae in suo diversorio parturire*).

As soon as Clare had consecrated her life to Christ, Francis and the brothers immediately sent her to a female monastery some 4 kilometres away from the Portiuncula in Isola Romana, or what is nowadays called Bastia Umbra. This was the Benedictine monastery of San Paolo delle Abbadesse. It was a very rich monastery for noble ladies, and fell under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Assisi.\(^\text{10}\) This also explains why Francis sent Clare to this place, most probably with the consent of Bishop Guido. Moreover, the monastery was protected by various papal privileges, and that placed Clare in a secure place in her resolve to follow Christ against the will of the members of her family who soon came to take her away. We know that the monastery was protected by an interdict against all those who violated the cloister, and that is why Clare’s relatives could do nothing to convince her to go back to her paternal house, especially after Clare clutched the altar linens and showed them her shorn hair, a symbol of religious consecration.

After some time Francis thought it wise to place Clare in a place closer to Assisi, and maybe more easy for the brothers to visit. In the Benedictine monastery Clare might not have found herself at ease, since the life of those noble nuns might have reminded her of her past life in her parental house. So, according to the *Legenda*, “after a few days, she went to the church of San Angelo in Panzo”\(^\text{11}\).

According to the witness of Sister Beatrice, the sister of St. Clare: “Then Saint Francis gave her the tonsure before the altar in the church of the Virgin Mary, called the Portiuncula, and then sent her to the church of San Paolo de Abbadesse. When her relatives wanted to drag her out, Lady Clare grapped the altar cloths and uncovered her head, showing them she was tonsured. In no way did she acquiesce, neither letting them take her from that place, nor remaining with them. Then Saint Francis, Brother Philip, and Brother Bernard took her to the church of Sant’Angelo di Panzo, where she stayed for a little time, and then to the church of San Damiano where the Lord gave her more sisters for her direction.”\(^\text{12}\)

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\(^\text{10}\) FORTINI, Francis of Assisi, Eng. Translation MOAK, 341-343: “The monastery of San Paolo delle Ancelle di Dio, more commonly called ‘delle Abbadesse’, was famous through all the region for its wealth, its influence, its noble status. In the oldest official records it is also called San Paolo del Chiagio or San Paolo del Fonte Tiberino, because it stood along the last stretch of the Chiagio river [...] A bull of Innocent III dated May 5, 1201, directed ‘to beloved daughters in Christ Sibilia, abbess of the monastery of San Paolo of Fonte Tiberino, and her sisters’, confirms that the monastery followed the Rule of Saint Benedict [...] The bull also proclaims special papal privileges granted to the nuns. No one could impose tithes or exactions on them. The diocesan bishop was forbidden to put their chapel under interdict. In time of excommunication they had the right to celebrate the divine offices with doors closed, without songs or sound of bells [...] There were severe prohibitions against anyone’s molesting them [...] Those who did so and persevered in their offences would, after a third warning, incur interdict and divine anathema [...] The church was small and quiet, as may be seen from what remains of it in the chapel of the Bastia cemetery, where the apse still oversees the field of humble crosses and the dead.”

\(^\text{11}\) LegCl 10 (CAED 287).

\(^\text{12}\) ProcCan 12,4-5 (CAED 183-184). According to the authors, in footnote a on page 184: “Sant’Angelo di Panzo was a dwelling of women *incarcere* (confined to one place) or *penitenti* (penitents) that would have been closer to the Beguine expression of women religious rather than the Benedictine or Cistercian expressions.” Cfr. ARNALDO FORTINI, New information about Saint Clare of Assisi, in Greyfriars Review 7 (1993) 27-69.