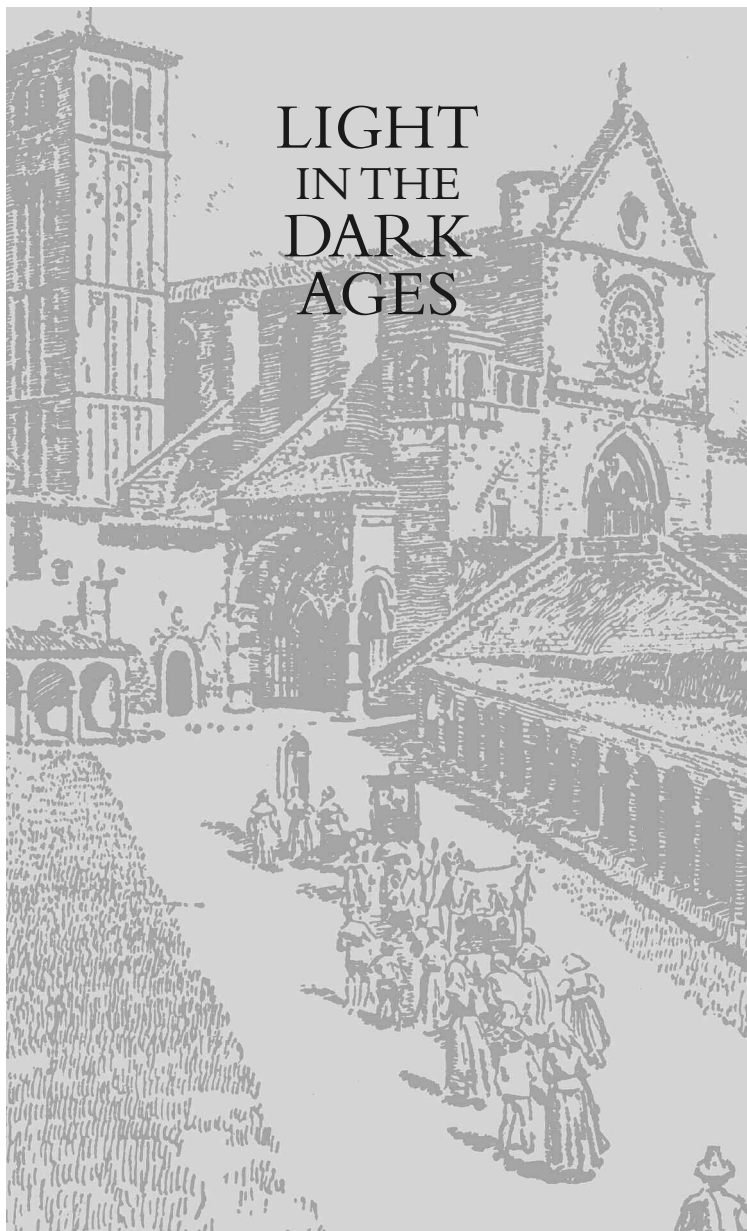


LIGHT
IN THE
DARK
AGES





B E G I N N I N G S

Wrapped in the colorful silks imported and sold by Peter Bernardone, most of the highborn girls in Assisi paid close attention to matters of courtship, honor, and family. Seasonal events in the cathedral church and the governor's estate occupied their minds, and their hearts were wooed by the songs of young would-be troubadours carousing in the streets below their bedroom windows after dark. Francis Bernardone was once one of those young men. But by all accounts, Clare Favorone was never one of those girls.

Francis and Clare were both children of Assisi, Italy, where being baptized into the Church was once the equivalent of citizenship. They came from what we would call upper-middle-class families. Clare was a young teenager when Francis began his slow process of conversion. She was about fifteen and he was twenty-seven when she first heard him preach about poverty and joy at the San Rufinus cathedral. Her family home bordered the great church, and she was accustomed to regularly attending services there. Hearing Francis preach probably stirred the beginnings of conversion. Feeling God's presence wouldn't have frightened her, for she was never easily frightened. Only two years later, Clare began her own rejection of vanity, self-interest, and wealth. She quietly renounced worldly affairs

Light in the Dark Ages

in March 1212 and became the first woman to join Francis and his friars. These were simple gestures, but they were nevertheless recognized by Clare's contemporaries as the first marks of an independent woman.

The life of Francis is well-known, but Clare's less so. Her first biographer tells us that she secretly wore hair shirts—rough garments of asceticism and penance—from an early age, and while we may not take such a description as absolute fact, the point is that Clare was different.¹ She didn't pine for the latest fabrics and dyes that Peter Bernardone brought back with him from his trips to France. She wasn't looking anxiously for her future husband or counting the days until her wedding. From an early age, she seemed to others to be out of step with the expectations of a fortunate girl from a promising family.

Within four and one-half years of Clare's conversion, we have evidence from a letter written by Jacques of Vitry, who was elected the bishop of Acre in 1216 and traveled to Perugia upon the death of Pope Innocent III, that there were many vibrant communities of friars and sisters throughout Italy. Disappointed with the heresy and worldliness that he discovered during his travels in Italy, the Frenchman described the early Franciscans this way, as he discovered them for the first time:

Many well-to-do secular people of both sexes, having left all things for Christ, had fled the world. They were called "Lesser Brothers" and "Lesser Sisters" . . . They are in no way occupied with temporal things, but with fervent desire and ardent zeal they labor each day to draw from the vanities of the world souls that are perishing, and draw them to their way of life. Thanks be to God, they have already reaped great fruit and have converted many. Those who have heard them, say: "Come," so that one group brings another. . . . During the day

Beginnings

they go into the cities and villages giving themselves over to the active life in order to gain others; at night, however, they return to their hermitage or solitary places to devote themselves to contemplation.²

And so it was. The Franciscan movement began in simple ways, with bold but modest intentions, and grew rapidly. The Franciscans presumed to live like Jesus. Francis, Clare, and their early followers were part of a select group of Christians through the ages who have been passionately spiritual and ardently practical at the same time. In the long history of faith, spiritual vitality has flowed best when humans have rediscovered Jesus and tried to replicate his life in their own. Moral and practical decisions have been infused with spiritual vitality in those eras when the words of Jesus were followed most closely.

The Franciscans' worldview praised beauty and ethics both. They were of one spirit with the first Christian churches in Rome and Asia Minor, the Desert Fathers and Mothers of late antiquity, the first followers of St. Benedict at medieval Subiaco, reform-minded Carmelites under St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, and others who have imitated the life and emulated the teachings of Jesus. Through their partnership, Francis and Clare brought light into the darkness of the late Middle Ages.

In the words of Dante, Francis was the “Morning Star” or Sun that rises from the East to shine new light upon the dawn. His life was full of poetry—both lived and spoken. His greatest biographer, Paul Sabatier, goes so far as to describe the impact of Francis on his era this way: “[His life] closed the reign of Byzantine art and of the thought of which it was the image. It is the end of dogmatism and authority. Uncertainty became permissible in some small measure. It marks a date in the history of the human conscience.”³

Light in the Dark Ages

This book is a chronicle of the spirit that animated Francis and Clare. Through their joy-filled and sometimes foolish lives of poverty and charity, both Europe and the Christian faith changed. The darkness of the medieval worldview was enlightened in ways that would lead to reformations of religious thought, poetry, and song, a renaissance of realism in art, Scriptures in local languages, ways of practicing faith outside of church, and new understandings of God and the world. For at least a generation, Francis and Clare and the first Franciscans changed the heart of faith. And since their time, they have inspired millions of us who desire to capture something of their spirit.

At the same time, there is an undeniable sadness attached to this story. The movement that Francis began in 1209 and that Clare continued after his death and until her own passing in 1253 was fraught with conflict and dissension. The original ideals that inspired so many early followers began to fade away within two decades. We will explore all of these themes in the chapters below.

Each chapter begins by telling one of the key stories of the early Franciscan experience and then explores issues and themes from their spirituality. The chapters are organized in roughly chronological order. For example, chapter 3 describes the stages of Francis's conversion and also introduces the concept of living in voluntary poverty. Chapter 4 opens with the story of how Francis first heard the voice of God and discusses the corruption of the thirteenth-century Church. Chapter 5 tells of the beginning of the Franciscan movement while exploring foolishness and joy—two key aspects of the personality of Franciscan spirituality—and the stormy relationship between Francis and Clare and their parents. Chapter 6 describes Clare's conversion and discusses what it means to imitate Christ. And so on. Each of the sixteen chapters raises questions

Beginnings

that explore the spirituality of Francis and Clare, the origins of their movement, and how beliefs and practices from eight hundred years ago relate to what we do today.

It will become obvious throughout *Light in the Dark Ages* that I admire the saints from Assisi and that I believe we should model ourselves after them. However, this book is not without criticism of their ideals and practices, particularly in chapters 5, 6, and 8. Whether you are reading this while sitting at home, on retreat, on pilgrimage, or as part of a group study, each chapter will point you in new directions. The stories and issues traced throughout the book form a basic outline of the early movement and in the process show their relevance, as well as their incongruities, with our lives today. That is, after all, the point of my writing and your reading these pages: we seek to not only understand who Francis and Clare were, but also how to live in the spirit of their ideals today.

In 1986, Pope John Paul II coined the term “the spirit of Assisi,” expressing what millions of people have felt since the deaths of Francis and Clare. Assisi certainly holds memories and stories of a time not to be forgotten, but more important, there is a vitality to the early Franciscan way of life that still draws people in our time. This doesn’t mean that we necessarily aim to become professed religious, joining one modern Franciscan order or another. But for millions of people today, those little flowers of faith are not saccharine monikers, but rather instances of what can happen to sweeten up any human life, as well as the community of those around it.

THE SOURCES FOR OUR STORY

I should say a few words about the sources used for understanding the lives of Francis and Clare. Controversy surrounds the ways

Light in the Dark Ages

in which their lives are interpreted, and these controversies wind all the way back to the first days after Francis's death. There were many early attempts to tell the story of his life, and sometimes the interpretations clash.

Most important among all of the early biographies are those written by Thomas of Celano and Bonaventure. Thomas was a contemporary of Francis who joined the Order in 1215, while Bonaventure was a second-generation Franciscan who never knew the founder. Thomas of Celano wrote the first two lives of Francis and the first biography of Clare. For that reason, Thomas is enormously important for understanding the relationship between them. In the case of both Francis and Clare, Thomas's biographies are the closest we have to understanding their lives and experiences.⁴ Throughout the present work, I will refer to Thomas's two biographies of Francis as *First Life* and *Second Life*, for clarity and simplicity's sake.

It was about twenty-five years after Thomas's *First Life* was published that Bonaventure—who was then the minister-general of the Franciscan Order—authored his revision. Most of Bonaventure's book came straight from the stories of Thomas of Celano, but he reinterpreted them for a new generation. Three years after writing, Bonaventure declared his to be the only *authorized* biography, and copies of Thomas's two earlier books were ordered destroyed. This is an early sign of how the Franciscans, not even one generation removed from their founder, sought to control the interpretation of his life. We will discuss this more in detail below.

Uncovering the real Francis beneath layers of legend has been the vocation of many great scholars of the last 120 years. Chief among them is Paul Sabatier, who wrote the first modern biography of Francis in 1894.⁵ At the time of Sabatier's writing, the *Fioretti*, or "Little Flowers," was well known. *The Little Flowers of St. Francis* is a collection

Beginnings

of tales that were told and retold by the generation of friars who lived after Francis's death. These tales were the spiritual treasure of those men and women who valued the original ideals of Francis most of all. They believed that Thomas of Celano's two biographies of Francis were more faithful to the true intent of their founder than was Bonaventure's. *The Little Flowers* contained fifty-three tales in its original, vernacular, Tuscan compilation—the language that Dante and Boccaccio would soon use for their own epic stories.

Two other important texts had not yet been discovered by the end of the nineteenth century: *The Legend of Perugia* (written around 1312; first published in 1922) and *The Mirror of Perfection* (written around 1318; first published in 1898). These collections of tales have intrigued historians, offering further evidence that the official interpretations of Francis's life are not always the most accurate ones. The picture painted of Francis in these collections is different from the common portrait of him, emphasizing his earthiness, combativeness, foolishness, insistence, and occasionally his quixotic way of communicating with others.

The Mirror of Perfection was so named because it was said by its authors to be “the Mirror of Perfection of a brother Minor; to wit, of the Blessed Francis, wherein we may most sufficiently behold as in a glass the perfection of his calling and profession.”⁶ Sabatier himself first published *The Mirror* in 1898, controversially claiming in the book's subtitle that it was a firsthand documentation of the life of St. Francis written in 1228 by Francis's close friend and confidante, Brother Leo.⁷ If it had indeed been written so early, it would predate even Thomas of Celano's accounts. But in the twenty or so years after Sabatier made this claim, evidence surfaced that suggested a date of composition about ninety years later than Sabatier had hoped. This later evidence ultimately became

Light in the Dark Ages

irrefutable. As often happened throughout the Middle Ages, it was a copyist's error that led to Sabatier's mistake about the priority of *The Mirror*. Before the age of printing, texts were copied by hand, allowing mistakes of content to enter in. In this case, the mistake was in the dating of it. The copyist miscopied one of the Roman numerals, changing it from MCCCXVIII (1318) to MCCXXVIII (1228).

To this day, no one doubts that the essence of this great collection of stories comes from the friars who were closest to Francis: Angelo, Rufinus, and Leo. There is something undeniably fresh, immediate, unpolished, and argumentative about the tales in *The Mirror of Perfection*. Most of the stories are repeated from Thomas of Celano's *Second Life*, but the original wording (of Leo?) is sometimes altered. Together, *Second Life* and *The Mirror* represent the companions of Francis who believed that the leaders of the Order had turned their backs on the true Franciscan ideals. Absolute poverty and humility were being replaced by property and learning. Leo and his companions were called the Spirituals, or friars of the strict observance. As the scholar John Moorman says, "Sabatier was wrong in dating [*The Mirror*] so early; he was right in recognizing it as a source of the greatest importance since it emanated from the reminiscences of Brother Leo and his companions, and those who had known the saint most intimately."⁸ We will return again and again to these texts throughout this book.

Meanwhile, much of what we know of Clare, outside of Thomas of Celano's biography, we have from oral traditions handed down since the friars left her deathbed to continue their work. Some of these stories and legends were recently compiled by the Italian historian Piero Bargellini into his compassionate work *The Little Flowers of Saint Clare*. Bargellini was first and foremost a great

Beginnings

Florentine, serving as Councillor for Arts and Gardens, and was in the 1960s the mayor of Florence. But long before that, he was an artist and a writer who wrote influential books on St. Bernadino of Siena, various other aspects of Franciscan spirituality, and Dante.

Along the way to discovering what happened in those early years of the movement, we also will have assistance from various other experts and biographers, including the great nineteenth-century enthusiast for Francis and Clare, Frederick Ozanam. Ozanam (d. 1853) was beatified in 1997 by Pope John Paul II at the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. But long before that day, Ozanam wrote a beautiful book called *The Franciscan Poets of the Thirteenth Century*, first published in English translation in 1914. Portions of that work are interspersed throughout the chapters below.⁹ Ozanam showed how Francis and Clare breathed new life into the spirit of thirteenth-century Italy, and by extension of their followers, the rest of Europe. G. K. Chesterton once said, “St. Francis was very vivid in his poems and rather vague in his documents.” Ozanam explains the background and substance of that vividness.

More books have been written about Francis of Assisi than about any other figure in history except Jesus himself. But rarely in those books do readers have an opportunity to assess what Francis actually did that was so extraordinary. The present work will help you to do that. Walk with me through those early years of the movement begun by Brother Francis. See how Sister Clare became his partner, the rudder to his sail, yin to his yang, the other half of the foundation to a spiritual renaissance that transformed Western faith, society, and religion in ways that were threatened, even lost, within their own lifetimes. Explore with me the sometimes simple, sometimes larger, ways that we can live in that original Franciscan spirit today.

Light in the Dark Ages



The Resurrection

We need Francis and Clare today, as much as we ever have. “Our generation already is overpast / Yet love of Christ will win man’s love at last.” Robert Bridges wrote that simple couplet in memory of his friend Gerard Manley Hopkins nearly a century ago. He was writing about the mistakes of their generation, one that knew the First World War and its accompanying misery and pessimism that was unlike anything their parents had faced. Francis and Clare also lived in a time that felt lost in its myriad conflicts among countries, religions, and classes. Our own day, dawning a new century and millennium, feels similarly overpast.

We need Francis and Clare today. Our souls and bodies need their wisdom and their sensuous approach to life and spirituality, and we need them to remind us of what it means to take steps toward living like Jesus.

Through our desire to see and touch the risen Christ once again, we are privileged to encounter certain individuals among us who are farther along in their paths toward wholeness, in whom we see much, much more clearly the image of God in Christ. . . . So our penchant for telling stories of those people

Beginnings

in whom Christ was born, lived, and died again, this perennial hagiographic impulse of Christianity, so to speak, is inevitably part and parcel of our faith in a risen, incarnate God.¹⁰

The spirit of the earliest Franciscans is contagious; may we all become infected!



ABOUT THEIR RELATIONSHIP

There are more famous couples from the Middle Ages, but none who had a more profound effect on their time and place than Francis and Clare of Assisi.

In the century before our saints were born, all of Europe knew who Abelard and Heloise were. Heloise was Abelard's student, and Abelard was the most famous theologian of his day. He also liked to claim that he was the only undefeated philosopher in the world. He never lost a debate, and his charisma was undeniable. Abelard and Heloise became lovers, creating a scandal throughout Paris. Heloise gave birth secretly to a son, but soon, the two lovers were forcibly separated by her family. Abelard was violently castrated and exiled, while Heloise entered a convent. But the love letters they exchanged rank among the most poignant in all of literature. Together, they confused the spiritual and secular, a mix of genuine love and serious lust, and the sort of secrecy that marks challenges to power for the wrong reasons.

There are also legends of an earlier famous couple, Benedict of Nursia, the father of Western monasticism and author of his influential *Rule*, and his sister Scholastica. According to Pope Gregory the Great's famous biography of Benedict, Scholastica

About Their Relationship

represented the female version of all that Benedict strove to be. The most popular story told about the pair is one that seems to recur in the first biographies of Francis and Clare: it is the story of a meal they shared.

According to the legend, Benedict and Scholastica, monk and nun, visited with each other only once a year—and even then they were not alone. Benedict’s disciples would accompany them. They would share a meal in a picnic area not far from the monastery gate. But as happens in the stories of saints, Gregory the Great’s text explains that spiritual matters took precedent over bodily needs: “They spent the whole day praising God in holy conversation. Night was already falling when they finally took their meal together.”¹¹ This is a recurring theme in the lives of holy men and women: food becomes an afterthought. And, of course, Jesus himself taught that spiritual teachings are more important than daily bread. Gregory continues:

The evening grew later and later as they sat at the table in holy conversation. Scholastica then made a request: “I beg you, Benedict, not to leave me tonight so that we may talk until morning about the joys of heavenly life.” Benedict responded, “What are you talking about? Under no circumstances can I stay outside my cell.”

The heavens were calm and not a single cloud appeared in the sky. When this holy woman heard her brother’s refusal, she folded her hands and rested them on the table. She leaned down, put her head on her hands, and prayed to God. When she raised her head, such powerful lightning erupted, and thunder and a flood of rain, that the venerable Benedict and the brothers with him could not set foot outside the door of

Light in the Dark Ages

where they were sitting. The holy woman had poured out a flood of tears, drawing rain to skies that had been calm.

When Benedict saw that he could not get back to the monastery because of the storm, he was irritated and complained, “God have mercy. Sister, why have you done this?” And she replied to the holy man: “I asked you, and you would not listen. So I asked my Lord, and he has listened.”¹²

And so they discussed heaven for the rest of the evening. Scholastica died just three days later.

The medieval imagination was full of these stories by the time that Francis and Clare came along. But unlike Abelard and Heloise, Francis and Clare did not have a physical or sexual relationship. And unlike Benedict and Scholastica, they were not brother and sister. The friendship of Francis and Clare falls somewhere in between. Their story is, in fact, quite complicated.

He was twelve years her elder, and she would have known very little of him before his conversion. As an adolescent, Clare observed Francis’s unusual behavior, as he publicly rebelled against his father and the expectations that were placed upon him at home. Then, as a teenager, Clare began to admire him. She heard him preach, and watched as he began his public ministry. She, too, began to doubt the future her family was planning, and she felt the proddings of the Spirit within her. In the bold tradition of women saints who spurned the domestic life,¹³ Clare took the radical step of deciding to join Francis and his merry band of men who were transforming the Umbrian hill-towns with their singing and dancing, marriage to *poverty*, and an alternative spiritual path to cloister and hearth. She fled her home one night and joined the Franciscans down in the valley at their modest compound of huts circling the ancient chapel of St. Mary of the Angels.

About Their Relationship

Francis and Clare then became an unusual couple. The sources all indicate that they had a natural affection for one another. They were not married and they never had an affair, but their love for each other was felt palpably by those around them. G. K. Chesterton calls it a “pure and spiritual romance,” an apt description, although they spent very little time together. Clare was an important confidant to Francis, and a link between his childhood, with all of its extravagant worldliness, and the mature, life-changing decisions that began to mark his early twenties. Their affection for and trust of each other fueled the early Franciscan movement and gave birth to a joy, beauty, and spirit that had long been absent from faith.

However, it has always seemed to make for a better story to have Francis and Clare *in love* with each other. Some of the early sources give hints that support such a view. Thomas of Celano, the first biographer of each of them, called theirs a “divine attraction”—these two saints wanting to be together. And when Thomas describes Clare’s childhood reputation as a spiritual giant, he also implies that Francis was intent on meeting her. Thomas compares Clare’s holiness to plunder, and Francis to a conquering knight. He writes that Francis “was dedicated to snatching his plunder away from the world.”

In the canonization proceedings for Clare that happened just after her death, one of Clare’s sisters testified that it was Francis who made the first visit to see Clare, while she was still a teenager living in her father’s house. Given Francis’s apostolic life at that time, and the way in which marriages were usually prearranged by parents, this seems highly unlikely. The events were more than forty years in the past when Clare’s sister was remembering them. Could it be that she remembered things in this way because the values of the day stated

Light in the Dark Ages

that a woman could not make such contact with a man outside her family? There may have been some intent to preserve the family reputation.

According to *The Acts of the Process of Canonization of St. Clare*, written by Thomas of Celano in 1253, Francis and Clare did indeed meet several times before her conversion, and on one occasion the text reads that Clare snuck away clandestinely to hear him preach. But there is no hint of dating or flirting in these passages. Francis was twelve years older than Clare. When he was going through his first dramatic moments of conversion she was barely twelve. She was fourteen when Francis renounced his father and all his wealth in the public square before the bishop and all of Assisi. And when Clare later came to join Francis's movement in the dead of night, her heart and stomach would have been full of terror—not the excitement one feels before a first kiss! They were friends, and they shared a kinship that was more important than romance.

Fifty years ago, Nikos Kazantzakis, the Greek novelist, made popular the notion that Francis and Clare shared a relationship that was sexually charged. In *Saint Francis*,¹⁴ Kazantzakis had the book's narrator, Brother Leo, say to his spiritual father:

I am the only one . . . who knows about your carnal love for Count Favorini Scifi's daughter Clara. All the others, because they are afraid of their own shadows, think you loved only her soul. But it was her body that you loved earliest of all; it was from there that you set out, got your start. Then, after struggle, struggle against the devil's snares, you were able with God's help to reach her soul. You loved that soul, but without ever denying her body, and without ever touching it either.¹⁵

About Their Relationship

According to Kazantzakis, Clare was one of the girls whom Francis had wooed like a troubadour before his conversion, singing at her windows from the street below. When Clare later came to the Portiuncula in the middle of the night in order to become the first woman Franciscan, she urged Francis to believe that she wanted to love only God. “Last night I heard you calling me by name. It was you, Father Francis. You were standing beneath my window once more and calling me. ‘Come! Come! Come!’ you said. So, I came.”¹⁶ Francis then tried to flee. He was scared of his own latent lust, despite the fact that, by this time in the novel, Francis had almost completely lost his eyesight. But the other friars compelled Francis to stay and listen to the pleading of Clare. And so he did, and he began to interrogate her. Can you really go about town barefoot? Can you, a woman from a wealthy home, stomach feeling hungry? Will you, the daughter of a count, be willing to beg for your bread? And Clare answered affirmatively to every question. “I can, I can,” she said, but Francis retorted, “You cannot!”

Kazantzakis had Francis participating in the ancient subjugation of women, believing women to be less than men in intellect, spirit, and honesty. He had Francis say, “I don’t trust you women. Eve’s serpent has been licking your ears and lips for too many centuries. Do not lead me into temptation. Other ladies will gather around you, and you’ll all climb up to the convent roof to ogle the brothers. . . . No, get up and return home. We don’t want women!”¹⁷

What a shame! We could psychoanalyze this novelist and come up with explanations for why he made his saints so confused (remember the schizophrenic Jesus of *The Last Temptation of Christ?*), but suffice it to say that it probably did not happen that way.¹⁸ It is true that saints often disappoint us, but it is also true

Light in the Dark Ages

that we disappoint the saints, particularly when we assume sexual relationships for them where there were none. Why do we seem to want our holy men and women to have sexual experiences? Perhaps sex becomes the simplest path to understanding them as like ourselves. Nowhere is this more evident than in the current, but also medieval, fascination surrounding Jesus and Mary Magdalene. More than a millennium and a half before Dan Brown ever conceived *The Da Vinci Code*, Origen's theological opponent, Celsus, suggested that the Magdalene and Christ were lovers. There are even debates as to whether or not Martin Luther may have said something similar. A decade ago, a liberal American Episcopal bishop, John Shelby Spong, wrote that Mary Magdalene may have been married to Jesus and subsequently bore his children. But just as there is only a fraction of evidence to suggest such things—compared to the evidence to support the more conventional views—so, too, there is little reason to believe that Francis and Clare shared any romance other than one that was jointly with God.

After Kazantzakis, Italian director Franco Zeffirelli created his film *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (1972), in which Francis and Clare are portrayed as young romantics who turn an interest in each other into a mutual interest in the spiritual life. In the first scene of the film, featuring Alec Guinness as Pope Innocent III, the twenty-year-old Francis playfully chases the young teenager Clare as she makes her way to a lonely grotto bringing food to some outcast lepers. Francis is horrified when he sees the lepers and he runs off. The next time they are together on screen, they gaze at each other as Francis marches off to war. Their third scene is in a field of poppies on a sunny afternoon; they have a sweet conversation as Francis's parents eavesdrop and discuss a possible marriage. Later in the film, when Clare comes in the middle of the night to join Francis's