

Formative Years: 'the time of his ingathering'

Nicholas Ferrar as the spiritual director of Little Gidding was above all an educator and one whose idea of education spanned a wide spectrum ranging from the spiritual to the academic to the practical. Isaac Walton rightly characterised the household at Gidding as 'a little college'; it was certainly the 'school of religion' that George Herbert's Country Parson desired his household to be.¹ It was also a school of crafts and music, history and geography, household management and of course the standard curriculum of reading, writing, arithmetic and languages. The varied educational programmes he devised for his family inevitably incorporated and adapted methods and materials and experiences from his own education. There were four formative influences on which he drew. The first and most fundamental was the family in which he grew up. The second was his formal schooling up to and including his time at Cambridge. The third comprised his years of Continental travel and the fourth his experience in the business world of London. This opening chapter will consider each of these factors in turn, a sequence that will conclude with the crisis of 1624 in the aftermath of which the family moved to Little Gidding and embarked on their new life together.

The family of the senior Nicholas and his wife Mary Woodnoth Ferrar was but one of many mercantile households in London that maintained a godly establishment of the sort delineated in the numerous conduct books of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.² Theirs was not solely a nuclear family of parents and unmarried children but a household family of the conventional patriarchal type led by a husband and wife and including all who dwelt under their roof: servants, apprentices, and other long-term visitors, who might or might not be kin.³ Within their marriage Nicholas and Mary Ferrar built a close and conventional partnership with each fulfilling

their prescribed roles, he as the head and provider and she as the manager of the household and educator of children. She brought to her role not only piety and strength of character but upward mobility through her own gentry family. From that household base they extended their network and maintained contacts with 'friends', whether literally kin or not, through an extensive correspondence.⁴

The family's worldly success was of recent origin. The senior Nicholas Ferrar, head of the family until his death in 1620, had been born in Hertford about 1545, the son of John Ferrar, a linen draper. As a young man he had made his way to London, as did many of his contemporaries who hoped to make their fortunes in England's expanding overseas trade. There he was apprenticed for ten years from Michaelmas 1564 to John Harby, a member of the Skinners' Company and a Merchant Adventurer, and was sworn as a freeman of that Company on 13 December 1574.⁵ In a world where partnerships were the standard mode of doing business, personal connections mattered enormously and he proved skillful at building himself a successful network of collaborators. In the 1580s and 1590s he and Erasmus Harby, probably John Harby's nephew,⁶ and Thomas Middleton⁷ were partners in a sugar refinery in Mincing Lane, London and later moved into the Hamburg trade, establishing a depot at Stade for trading both in grocer's wares and cloth. In 1589 the three also entered upon the very profitable activity of 'reprisall' or privateering and continued it through the 1590s.⁸ He also availed himself of Middleton's financial skills.⁹ In 1599 the elder Ferrar had added to the Hamburg trade investment in the East India Company. He subsequently joined the Spanish Company in 1604 and the Virginia Company in 1609 along with its later offshoot the Bermuda Company.¹⁰ He remained close to the Middletons throughout these years and left to Thomas and his brother Hugh and to their sister-in-law Anna, probably Robert's widow, each a gold ring of £3 value.¹¹ In worldly terms, therefore, his was a classic story of mercantile success.

As befitted his wealth and rank, the elder Nicholas was said to have kept 'a good table' and governed his household well. His guest list testified to the breadth of his interests, for he entertained not only business colleagues like the Middletons but also such notable persons as Sir John Hawkins, Sir Francis Drake, and Sir Walter Raleigh.¹² Small wonder that in such surroundings his family acquired a taste for accounts of travel and exploration as well as of history. At the same time his zeal for religion led him to entertain ministers so frequently that the family was said to have been 'never without a clergyman' in the house to conduct morning and evening prayer. One such guest was Augustine Lindsell, a Fellow of

Clare Hall, Cambridge, who became young Nicholas Ferrar's tutor and subsequently his colleague and lifelong friend. Another was Francis White, whom the elder Nicholas brought to London as a lecturer and who went on to become one of Richard Neile's circle at Durham House and eventually Bishop of Ely.¹³ Ferrar also provided his parish church, St Benet Sherehog, with seating and repairs to the chancel.¹⁴

For his religious zeal the Virginia Company offered further scope, this time directly connected to his commercial interests. The settlements on the banks of the James presented opportunities not only to develop trade but also to propagate the gospel, and he responded by giving generously (£300) to provide education for the Indians, a concern shared by his sons John and Nicholas.¹⁵

Ferrar's wife, Mary Woodnoth Ferrar, brought to the family many gifts of person and character, not least the prestigious status of her family. The Woodnoths were old and established gentry, who had been lords of the manor of Shavington in Cheshire for many generations. Contemporaries remarked that Mary Ferrar had no taste for the mere gossip and frivolous chat in which many women indulged. She must nonetheless have been a skillful and interested hostess at her husband's 'good table', eager to learn from her guests and adventurous enough to want to see for herself a ship lying in the Thames ready to depart for the Indies.¹⁶ Herself a model of personal piety, she admirably fulfilled not only her role as dutiful wife but also the prescribed task of mother and mistress to provide Christian instruction to both children and servants. The Ferrars were a musical family and as members of the household gathered round their mistress, she led them in singing psalms together as they worked. She also heard her children read aloud from the Bible and also from Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* and other worthy volumes. She herself read scripture daily, attended church for prayers on Wednesdays and Fridays, and was said to have heard 12,000 sermons in her lifetime. Contemporaries also noted her feat of memorising the entire Psalter when she was sixty. Augustine Lindsell described her as a woman of few words but those eloquent and full of wisdom and sound judgment.¹⁷ While thus fulfilling her expected role within the conventional patriarchal framework, she nevertheless retained a sense of independence and strength of mind and character. The senior Ferrars, likened to Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, who are 'both righteous before God',¹⁸ thus made an impressive couple and worked together, as the conduct literature prescribed, to create not only a pious but also a lively and happy family. Indeed, the readiness of her children later to join her in building a special household at Little

Gidding must constitute its own testimony to the harmony of the London household in which they had grown up.

Six of the nine children born to Nicholas and Mary survived to adulthood.¹⁹ Susanna, the eldest and only daughter to reach adulthood, received in addition to a basic general education and religious instruction lessons in French and music, becoming a skilled performer on the lute.²⁰ Her parents had then fulfilled another parental duty by providing for her a good husband. By 1600 she had married John Collet, son of another prosperous London family, who inherited properties in Southwark and, no later than 1606, a lease on property at Bourn, near Cambridge.²¹ There they could create their own godly household for themselves and their numerous progeny as well as a 'home-from-home' for Susanna's brothers, especially William and Nicholas during the years they spent in Cambridge. Susanna certainly was her mother's daughter; as we shall see, her numerous letters show her to have been not only literate but articulate and she was unhesitating in offering forceful advice and criticism to her children. Her later interventions in the discussions of the family's 'Little Academy' show her ready to do so with equal vigour face-to-face.

The five Ferrar sons were also carefully instructed in the precepts and practices of piety. Their parents likewise undertook that other duty expounded in the conduct books, providing an education that would set them up in adult life. All the brothers attended the school of Rev. Robert Brooke, a family friend and former London preacher, at Enborne in Berkshire.²² Thereafter a choice of career for each of them was supposed to take into account not only the family's status and aspirations but also the abilities and preferences of the boys themselves, advice which their father conscientiously followed.²³ Erasmus and William trained as barristers, which called for a year or two at university (Oxford for Erasmus and Cambridge for William) followed by seven or eight years at one of the Inns of Court. Unhappily, neither of these young men lived long enough to contribute to the family's continued prosperity and social ascent, as such a training would have led their parents to hope for and expect. Erasmus died in 1609, too soon to have qualified; William, who was called to the Bar on 19 June 1618, perished in the course of the year following, probably while on his way to Virginia.²⁴

Richard, the only one of the adult sons who was to take no part in the life of Little Gidding, was trained like his older brother John as a merchant. Unfortunately he lacked John's steadiness and application and ended up spending much of his adult life running from his creditors and trying to cadge money from his family. His letters to his father from Hamburg in

1617-18, when he was twenty-one or twenty-two, were full of apologies for not writing more often and protestations of gratitude and determination to prove himself a dutiful child and good man. He received under his father's will a £100 legacy as well as forgiveness of his debts, the latter suggestive of the more serious trouble to come.²⁵ He was still entrusted with family business in 1626, but the following year saw Nicholas trying to arrange for him sanctuary at the Savoy from his creditors. His mother evidently supplied substantial subsidies at various times but by the time she made her will in 1628 she left nothing directly to Richard, stipulating only that his brothers John and Nicholas should do for him as he deserved.²⁶

These two sons will in turn assume leadership of the family and become the chief architects of its fortunes and misfortunes and its new direction.

The parental household also included those servants who assembled round their mistress and sang psalms together while they worked and the young men who came as apprentices to Nicholas.²⁷ Visitors would have included besides the Middletons, Bateman, Raleigh, White and Lindsell, Anthony Wotton and after 1619 those involved in running the Virginia Company: Sir Edwin Sandys, Sir John Danvers, indeed as many of the members as could attend company meetings held in the Ferrars' last London house in St Sithes Lane. There were also those unnamed clerics less notable than White and Lindsell, who took advantage of Ferrar hospitality. There were in addition kin in London: Cousin Arthur Woodnoth as an apprentice and then a qualified goldsmith, his older half-brother John, and the Steads, cousins with whom Susanna Collet kept in contact. The Collets themselves were probably regular visitors and indeed entrusted their eldest child, Mary, to her grandparents for the greater part of her upbringing.²⁸ Susanna Collet's letters also document her contacts with Collet cousins in Streatham and in Kent.²⁹ Nicholas and Mary Woodnoth Ferrar thus admirably combined in their household family secular success and spiritual nurture that made it a model for their children and a magnet for their friends and kin. The bonds thus created drew the family together in the face of the later crisis and laid the foundations on which their son would build his 'little college'.

Within that nurturing framework Nicholas, the fourth of the five sons, occupied a special place. Born on 22 February 1593 he had from a very early age shown himself both unusually pious and intellectually able. He was described as 'fair and of bright hair like his mother'.³⁰ He was also of delicate health,³¹ which reinforced his mother's protective instincts and strengthened the bond between them, a bond that would later prove so vital to Little Gidding. He was a model child from her point of view, the embodiment of qualities she admired: easy to teach because eager and

quick to learn, bookish but lively-minded and sensitive enough to others' reactions to capture his peers' attention with his story-telling, and almost preternaturally pious.

As a child Nicholas had declared his intention to become a priest, an ambition that doubtless pleased his parents and certainly accorded with his academic ability and early piety.³² Thomas Middleton, his father's good friend and business partner, took to calling him 'Archbishop of Canterbury' when he was perhaps five or six.³³ For a clerical career a university degree had become increasingly essential, and for this Nicholas received appropriate preparation. Because he advanced so quickly with his Latin and other studies, he was sent off to school at Enborne at the same time as his older brother William.³⁴ Again he was so successful that his teacher pronounced him ready for Cambridge at the early age of thirteen, a year before William went up. Unlike William and Erasmus, however, Nicholas stayed the full course and took a degree.³⁵

Clare Hall had recognised his academic ability by electing him a fellow as soon as he had taken his B.A in 1610. He was, however, the Physick Fellow, which suggests a primary interest not in theology but in medicine, perhaps a result of his own medical problems. He could have stayed in that congenial setting for the rest of his days had he been so inclined and had his health permitted. He had, however, always been subject to 'agues', which the damp of Cambridge worsened. These recurrent fevers finally forced him in 1613 to take what he evidently regarded as a temporary leave of the academic world and embark on a lengthy tour of the Continent as a last resort to restore his health. He had clearly thrived in an academic ambience, which gave him opportunity for both teaching and learning and a model of community he could later adapt to his own 'little college'.

He spent four years travelling from the Netherlands to Hamburg, then south through Germany and across the Alps to Italy and finally to Spain. Like his earlier home life and schooling his time on the Continent was to prove a seminal experience when he came to organise the family's new life at Little Gidding though he could hardly have anticipated such an outcome when he set out. 'The time of his Travell . . . was ye tyme of his Ingathering, to fill his minde, to encrease his stocke wth Wisedome & Virtue'.³⁶

Ferrar was only one of many young Englishmen who embarked on a grand tour although most undertook it for the sake of their education rather than their health.³⁷ As the above direction to Ferrar's potential biographer indicates, the former purpose also figured largely in Ferrar's travels, the more so after the violent seasickness he experienced on the North Sea crossing had vanquished his Cambridge ague and restored him to health.³⁸



Portrait of Nicholas Ferrar, attributed to Cornelius Janssen, at Magdalene College, Cambridge.

A perhaps more significant difference between him and many other young travellers was that he journeyed without the company of an older man. He was, to be sure, not a youth of sixteen but a man of twenty and a Master of Arts and Fellow of his Cambridge college. Nevertheless, his tutor at Clare, Augustine Lindsell, had to reassure the parent Ferrars that their son was ‘so

firmly fixed in his religious principles that there was no fear of his being seduced by any thing that he should hear or see'.³⁹

Thanks to the court connections of Dr Robert Scot, the new Master of Clare Hall and the king's Sub-Almoner, Ferrar made the crossing in the entourage of the Princess Elizabeth and her new husband, Frederick, Elector Palatine of the Rhine, whom she had married on St. Valentine's Day, 1613.⁴⁰ Having exchanged his scholar's gown for the courtier's garb in which he was presented to the Princess, he departed from London on 10 April leaving a valedictory letter for his family tucked in a window for them to find after he had gone. The party sailed from Margate on the 25th, arriving at Flushing on the 29th. Two days later Ferrar wrote to his brother John that he had decided not to continue with the Princess's party to Heidelberg but to leave them at Utrecht, return to Leyden and then go on to Hamburg.⁴¹ So early a date for such an announcement suggests that Ferrar had concluded almost immediately on arrival, if not earlier en route, that he had no interest in securing a court post at Heidelberg, a possibility others had set enthusiastically before him as an incentive to continue with the princely entourage.

Once free to pursue his own itinerary and interests what did Ferrar choose to investigate that might later shape his plans for Little Gidding? His choices in the first stages of his journey suggested at least some preparatory acquaintance with the various books published to aid travellers. In the Netherlands, his first opportunity to apply such directions, Ferrar put a brief time to good use.⁴² Indeed, we have more detailed information about what he did there than we have proportionately for those places where he spent longer time. Those with him remarked on what an assiduous observer he was, always carrying his Dutch-English dictionary with him and keen to learn the language as well as to see the country and meet the people. His wide-ranging interests covered both spiritual and secular aspects of Dutch life.

The spiritual realm offered unique opportunities. The degree of religious toleration in the United Provinces presented an interested visitor with a diversity not readily or perhaps even safely experienced in England. What John Ferrar recorded many years later of his brother's visits to Dutch churches included only those separatist sects of 'Brownists' and 'Anabaptists', more precisely Mennonites, groups that could not worship openly in England, and the even more remarkable Jewish synagogue. If Nicholas singled out from among the Protestants only separatist churches, one must wonder what drew him to them and of course what he learned from this contact. John's omissions in this account

of his brother's church visiting are as interesting and frustrating as what he included. He never mentioned the established Reformed churches then in the throes of increasing doctrinal tension between Arminians and Calvinists, tension that would increasingly afflict the Church of England.⁴³ He might also have discovered that the Reformed churches maintained a two-tiered membership in which only those who had made a public profession of their faith and commitment, a voluntary group within the larger congregation, could partake of communion.⁴⁴ Such a distinction, reminiscent not only of Brownists but of the churches established later in Massachusetts Bay colony, would certainly have qualified as 'puritan' if not downright 'separatist' at home. Gathered churches as well as self-selected groups within parish churches were, of course, voluntary societies and this opportunity to observe such groups at first hand may have contributed to the great importance Ferrar was later to attach to both oral and written commitment at Little Gidding. Nevertheless any such voluntarism never for him led to a demand for fundamental church reform let alone a justification for separatism, for he remained wholeheartedly loyal to the Church of England.

There were also significant numbers of Catholics in the Netherlands. Though they were unable to worship as openly as Protestants, their position was far more secure than that of their co-religionists in England.⁴⁵ They too would have displayed to Ferrar examples of voluntary societies at work, for among them were the *klopjes*, lay women 'who did not take vows but lived a celibate life in communities'. They and their less numerous male counterparts, the *Klopbroeders*, supplemented a shortage of priests by assisting at services, catechizing, and visiting parishioners.⁴⁶ If Ferrar had learned of such groups in Holland, he would have been the better prepared to encounter the numerous societies both clerical and lay that had sprung up in Catholic Italy to combine a collective devotional life with an active ministry among the urban populace.⁴⁷

Visiting churches was not the only form his religious investigations took. He was also said to have set about collecting examples of divine providences and miracles, evidence of God's active intervention in His creation, the sorts of stories he subsequently collected for his family to use.⁴⁸ His collection must have included his own subsequent deliverances because his brother John clearly remembered them and passed them on to later biographers.

He investigated matters secular as well: the layout of cities, the nature of government and laws, regional differences among the provinces and their people, defenses, different methods of ship construction, and trade

and commerce. An aspect of civic life that seems to have drawn his particular attention was poor relief, in particular a type of almshouse 'where young children of both sexes are brought up to learn handicrafts'.⁴⁹ These workshops provided for orphans a kind of group apprenticeship of the sort that a more prosperous family might arrange individually for its children. Ferrar also looked at other almshouses set up to employ the disabled and enable them to support themselves without begging.⁵⁰ Perhaps Ferrar's initial interest in almshouses was largely dutiful, part of what he thought he ought, as a well-informed traveller and concerned Christian, to take an interest in. On the other hand these particular projects involved not just alms but education of a practical sort appropriate to humbler folk, an interest which Ferrar would continue to pursue on his travels and later incorporate in distinctive ways at Little Gidding. He left no sign then or later, however, of interest in systematic plans for universal and practical education like those put forward by Comenius or Dury or William Petty and much discussed in the 1640s and 50s.⁵¹

There was no mention here or subsequently of any book- or print-buying despite the fact that Ferrar was supposed to have brought home not only many of the prints the family later used in making biblical harmonies but also numerous 'worldly' books such as *Orlando* that on his deathbed he commanded his brother to burn.⁵² Certainly the prints, however he acquired them, that remain at Magdalene College, Cambridge, together with the illustrated harmonies, point to Ferrar's strong interest in the visual arts. He of course would not have had to travel to the Netherlands to see such prints for the Dutch exported quantities of them to England. His strong later interest in such prints, however, might well have been stimulated during his travels.⁵³ Roman Catholic books would obviously have been easier to buy abroad than in England, and we know from Ferrar's later references and translations that he possessed a number of these at least some of which he probably purchased on his travels. Whether, however, he acquired then or later the particular works we know he had by Lessius, de Sales, Valdes, Cornaro or Carbone remains uncertain.⁵⁴

After a fortnight or so in Holland he reached Hamburg by late May, having visited Bremen and Stade on the way.⁵⁵ Ferrar there had introductions to many friends and business associates of his father and brother, among them John's partner and brother-in-law, Thomas Sheppard, whose later bankruptcy was to have such profound consequences for the Ferrars.⁵⁶ As in Holland, he set about studying the language, the history, and the institutions, civil and religious, as well as the trade and commerce of the place. He also visited nearby Lubeck.⁵⁷ Here again are conspicuous

omissions in Ferrar's study of religious institutions that stand in contrast to the careful mention of Anabaptists and Jews in Amsterdam. In his brother's account Ferrar's time in Germany never included in Hamburg or anywhere else attendance at Lutheran churches, or indeed any other churches. As with the Dutch Reformed churches what significance to attach to this omission is difficult to judge; did it represent Ferrar's attitude to Lutheranism or his brother's selective memory?⁵⁸ A more prosaic unknown is the duration of Ferrar's stay in Hamburg. In his letter to John of 29 May he reported himself still awaiting company for the journey to Leipzig.⁵⁹ If he actually did all he was said to have done in Hamburg, he probably spent at least a week if not longer there.

In Leipzig he planned to stay for six weeks to two months, his first lengthy stop on the journey. A stay of that length allowed him to cultivate in greater depth both his academic and his practical interests in education. In the university he met members of the faculty and engaged tutors with whom to continue his study of German language, history and institutions. One of the skills he was also said to have acquired was 'artificial memory'.⁶⁰ Extending the interest in practical training he had shown in the Netherlands, he eagerly cultivated those craftsmen who practiced the wide variety of 'mechanical arts' for which Germany was noted. He persuaded masters of these crafts, painters, weavers, dyers, smiths, architects, and mariners to give him a brief introduction not only to the required skills but also to the technical language that would enable him to discuss work in progress and so acquire a fuller understanding. Sightseeing also figured in his programme in the form of visits to the courts of neighboring princes and dukes, Dresden being the most notable.

The details of his journey between Leipzig and Venice remain uncertain. If he stayed in Leipzig for the full two months he had earlier proposed, he would have left there in early August and crossed the Alps by mid-September, certainly a reasonable precaution to avoid early snowfalls and the general hazards of winter travel.⁶¹ He would therefore have had perhaps six weeks to cover a great deal of ground in Germany, especially if his first stop after Leipzig took him as far east as Prague, as Peckard claimed.⁶² He certainly spent time in Augsburg because he claimed to have written to his mother three times from there telling her of his intention to head south to Italy.⁶³ Augsburg was the traditional starting point for the journey south across the Brenner, which would suggest that he visited the other cities mentioned by Peckard and Jebb (Strasburg, Nuremberg, Ulm, and Speyer) on a circular route that ultimately brought him there.⁶⁴ Our sources unfortunately give no hint of Ferrar's response to these cities although

with his now-fluent German he could the more readily have pursued those investigations of aspects of their history, government, religion, commerce and education that had interested him in Hamburg and Leipzig.

After a rather strenuous period of travel south from Augsburg, which included the Alpine crossing and the isolation of quarantine, Ferrar reached Italy where he planned a lengthier stay. Venice and its neighbouring university city of Padua were popular and comparatively safe destinations for Protestant Englishmen in Counter-Reformation Italy although the plague in Germany had reduced the numbers of Englishmen and indeed students in general at the time Ferrar arrived.⁶⁵ He remained restless, however, and confessed to John early in 1614 that he again had a desire to travel, this time to Vienna. February and March would not have been ideal times for a transalpine journey but at least the danger of plague would have drastically diminished.⁶⁶ He evidently went somewhere and for an extended time because his next letter of 1 April reported that he had returned to Venice just three or four days previously and intended to go on to Padua the next day.⁶⁷ Unfortunately, as so often with this Continental sojourn, no evidence survives to fill out the story and reveal where he travelled and what he saw.

Back in Padua, particularly if he felt that he had now 'done' Germany, he could proceed to apply himself 'intensely to the study of physic'.⁶⁸ Padua was, after all, the pre-eminent university in Europe for the study of medicine and Ferrar held the physic fellowship at Clare. As in Leipzig, Ferrar hired tutors, cultivated members of the medical faculty as well as others in the university, and generally impressed the scholarly community with his learning and acumen though there is no evidence that he ever formally matriculated. As in Leipzig he found himself so inundated with visitors, especially fellow Englishmen eager to speak their native tongue, that he had to take refuge in villages outside the city from time to time to find some peace and quiet.⁶⁹ He did, however, make one very close friend, a young Englishman named Garton. Garton had killed a man in a duel in England and had taken refuge in Venice, where his remorse had brought him to the verge of suicide. From this despair Ferrar was able with sympathetic counsel to rescue him, a successful early effort at the kind of spiritual direction he was later to practice with family and friends at Little Gidding.⁷⁰ Garton, in turn, was able to reciprocate with help when Ferrar later fell desperately ill in Marseilles. Though Garton never appeared in Ferrar's life once he had finally left Italy, he must have spoken of him or John would not have known of these episodes. Perhaps remembrance of that relationship made some contribution to Ferrar's thoughts, expounded later at Gidding to his cousin Arthur Woodnoth,

on a 'web of friendship' and the openness and trust that should exist between friends.⁷¹

Probably before Garton had appeared on the scene Ferrar near died from an illness in Padua in October 1614. Fortunately for us, the only letter of his from Italy that has survived recounts this story and thus serves as a check on the versions his biographers subsequently offered.⁷² The problem, 'my Last dubell sycknes . . . my old infermetie of Augeu', had confined him to his chamber for twenty-six days and he had been bled four different times for a total of two and a half pounds of blood. He was by then well enough to joke about it, telling John he could be sure after that treatment that 'it was not wylld Bludd that maid me com abrode otherwise I should have now a greater desyer to Returne home'.

John Ferrar's memory, however, offered a version significantly different from his brother's letter. According to John there was no blood-letting. Instead Nicholas valiantly resisted the advice of his learned but of course Catholic Paduan doctors, who maintained that blood-letting offered his only hope of recovery.⁷³ Only one old physician sided with Nicholas, but his intervention sufficed to delay the proceedings long enough so that the fever broke of its own accord and the treatment became unnecessary. Afterward all the Paduan physicians conceded that had the bleeding taken place it would surely have proved fatal. Whether consciously or not his earliest biographers, his brother and Barnabas Oley, used this version to demonstrate not only that Ferrar's medical knowledge was superior to that of his Catholic doctors but that his resistance to their ministrations made him a champion of Protestantism. His later biographer, Francis Turner, was equally keen for his own political as well as religious purposes in the 1670s to show Ferrar as staunchly anti-Catholic.⁷⁴

Ferrar spent the remainder of 1614 and the following year in Italy, perfecting his Italian and visiting many of its notable cities. His surreptitious April journey to Rome gave his biographers another opportunity to dramatise his Protestantism. He had to make the journey in secret, they averred, to avoid capture by those archetypal Catholic villains, the Jesuits, who were said to be lying in wait for him. A further hazard came in the form of a brush with a Swiss Guard when he failed to kneel as a papal Holy Week procession passed. No other difficulties arose, however, to interfere with his sightseeing and his experience of Holy Week and Easter in the venerable city. Not all encounters with Catholics were dangerous; he visited without incident the shrine at Loreto and proceeded to Malta, where one of the Knights befriended him and even presented him with a small version of the cross that was the order's insignia.⁷⁵