Peter Nolasco liked to travel. He was born in 1182 in a village near Carcassone, but at a young age he left for Toulouse, while there he discovered the growing hold of the Cathars, which drove him to move to Barcelona. Never one to be static, his inherited money allowed him to organize several expeditions to North Africa in order to deliver Christian captives who had fallen into the hands of Muslims, and according to extant sources, Nolasco traveled there himself several times.\(^1\) In 1223, after he had returned safe and sound from Africa, he decided to found the Order of the Mercedarians (*De Mercede Redemptionis Captivorum*).

Interestingly, in light of his biography outlined above, the first important monastery of the Order was exclusively dedicated to paying the ransoms of devotees who were held captive by the ‘barbarians’. It was built in Seville, right after Ferdinand III’s conquest of the town in 1248. There Nolasco invested all his belongings, inheritance, and energy, placing his focus there. Sources suggest he would have liked to travel again, to visit the sacred cities of Rome and Jerusalem, but he did not have the time, money, or strength to do so. According to legend, the monastery, which was established on the ruins of a mosque, would not give him a minute’s rest. It was at this moment of his life that the two sacred cities of Rome and Jerusalem, so dearly longed for, appeared to him in a vision. The experience was so intensely vivid that the cities seemed to be right before his eyes, as if Seville had become a Second Rome and a Second Jerusalem.

Centuries later, the founder of the Mercedarian Order was sanctified, and following this, as was common practice with sacred figures in this period, the narrative and events of his life became a popular subject for imagery. It must be noted, however, that while the Church ordered his canonization on 30

\(^*\) Translated from the French by Marie Gyger.

September 1628, the most important episodes of Saint Peter Nolasco’s life had found rich and appropriate iconographic formulations long before this date. Rapidly disseminated through engravings, the visual evidence of Nolasco’s life supported and encouraged his ‘immemorial worship’ 2. A month before the official sanctification, on 29 August, Francisco de Zurbarán agreed to complete, within the record time of one year, a very large pictorial cycle of the saint’s life. The twenty-two paintings praising the founder and the glories of the Order were destined for the Boxwood Cloister of Sevilla’s Monastery of the Merced Calzada. Indeed, such an enterprise would have exceeded the resources of one man, and the contract between the monastery and the artist makes this clear. The contract states that Zurbaran, who had to create the paintings ‘with his own hands’, was to be given room and board at the monastery along with his whole team of co-workers.3

It is easy to overlook the effect that this cloister decoration would have produced on the viewers of that time. The cycle was scattered at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which makes its coherent reconstitution and original iconographic function hard to grasp.4 What is certain, however, is that of the twenty-two paintings, only the most important were actually done by Zurbarán’s own hands. St Peter Nolasco’s Vision of the Crucified St Peter, now in the Prado, was his first work and the only one to meet the exact requirements of the contract (Fig. 15.1). An inscription in perspective at bottom center attests to his authorship and date. The foreshortened words underline the ambiguity of the space where the two protagonists stand, a ‘nowhere’ that no-one could define with assurance. Right between St Peter and Peter Nolasco, the inscription


3 ‘no alzare la mano della hasta la aner acabado que sera a fin de agosto de 1629 dandome el conbento ami y a mis oficiales y demas gente que entendiere en ello todo el tiempo que dure la obra de comer e beber e casa e cama e todas las cosas nessesarias como liensos colores acyete y demas porque yo solo e de poner mis manos.’ I quote from the transcription of the contract, published in the recent monograph by Odile Delenda, Francisco de Zurbarán, 1698–1664: Catálogo razonado y crítico, 2 vols (Madrid: Fundación Arte Hispanico, 2009–10), ii: Los conjuntos y el obrador (2010), p. 76. This monograph represents the most recent and most responsible documentation for the next pages.