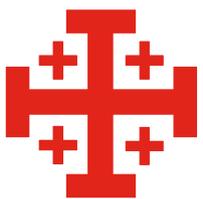


HOLY Land

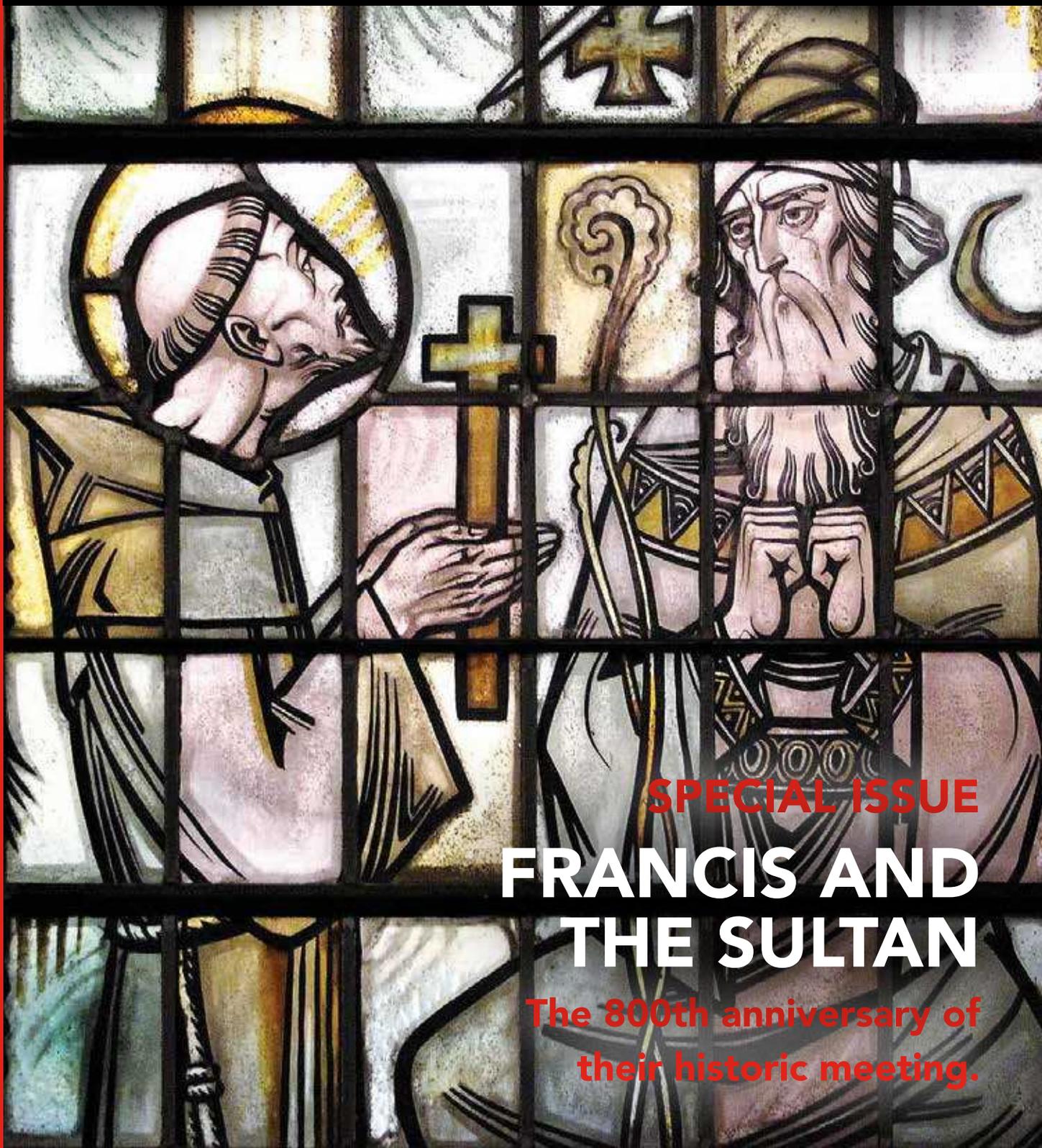


REVIEW

SUMMER 2019
New series – Volume 12

#3

The pilgrim's companion to the land where Jesus walked



SPECIAL ISSUE

FRANCIS AND THE SULTAN

The 800th anniversary of
their historic meeting.

**Providing authentic gifts made by
Christian artisans in the Holy Land.**



Olive wood, mother of pearl, embroidery, coffee and spices, Dead Sea bath products, and more!

From the Holy Land for the Holy Land
Learn more about our mission at MyFranciscan.org.

FROM THE EDITOR



STANDING ON BOTH SHORES

This year, 2019, I celebrate 50 years of Franciscan life. When I considered entering the order more than a half-century ago, I did not dream that I would someday travel regularly to the Holy Land—first as a pilgrim, later as a guide for pilgrims. Even less could I have imagined that I would go to the two places St. Francis himself visited in the Holy Land: the medieval city of Acre (known locally as Akko) in Israel, and Damietta, Egypt.



Crusader ruins, Acre, Israel

Thanks to my Holy Land confrere, Franciscan Father Quirico Calella, I spent a day in Akko. There, at the far end of Haifa Bay, where the waters of the Mediterranean wash up against ancient Crusader ruins, one can picture Francis coming ashore. He must have been full of emotion at setting foot on the land where Jesus walked. Acre at that time was the last outpost of the ill-fated Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. The port city would fall into Muslim hands in 1291. Francis probably would have been greeted by his brothers, including his friend Brother Elias, whom he had sent there on mission two years earlier.

Modern-day Damietta, the other place associated with this year's anniversary, is more difficult to connect with its medieval counterpart. The city was closer in Francis' time than it is today. Nevertheless, one can stand and look out to the Mediterranean, and try to connect with the tragic struggle between Christian and Muslim forces which took place, and the two men whose unlikely meeting transcended the clash of arms—at least briefly.

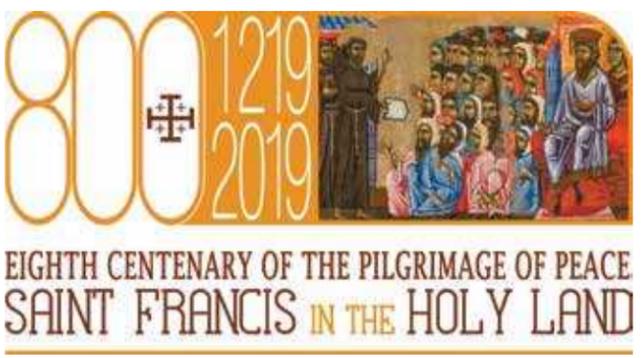


The Mediterranean Sea, Damietta, Egypt

I consider it a blessing to have stood on both shores—insofar as that is possible today. But more important is our contemporary mission as Franciscans: to incorporate the spirit of that meeting and the openness of two visionaries, Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil and Francis of Assisi, into today's world. It's my wish that this special issue of *The Holy Land Review* will involve you, our readers, in our Franciscan dream of peaceful presence and fruitful dialogue in a world which needs it so desperately.

Greg

Greg Friedman, OFM
Editor
greg.f@myfranciscan.com



03 FROM THE EDITOR

Standing on Both Shores
Greg Friedman, OFM

06 THE PILGRIMAGE OF PEACE

Introduction to the Special Issue

10 Like Francis, Visionaries of Peace

Francesco Patton, OFM
Custos of the Holy Land

12 Living as "God's Fool"

Giuseppe Buffon, OFM

18 Why did Francis Go Among the Muslims?

Gwenolé Jeusset, OFM

24 Islam at the Time Francis

Celeste Intartaglia

30 Engaging Muslims: The Fate of Francis' Radical Vision

Michael F. Cusato, OFM

38 Jan Hoerberichts: Scholar of the Man of Peace

- **A Tribute**
Louis Mascarenhas, OFM
- **Book Review—Francis and the Sultan: Men of Peace**
Jason Welle, OFM
- **An Interview with the Author**
Jan Hoerberichts

44 Franciscan Mission: A Pilgrimage of Encounter

Manuel Corullón, OFM

48 "The Sultan and the Saint"

Greg Friedman, OFM

54 Bringing the Gift of Peace: An Interview with Murray Bodo, OFM

Greg Friedman, OFM

58 A FINAL WORD

Larry Dunham, OFM
Commissary of the Holy Land

59 AMEN!



Images above, from left: Crusaders embark at Damietta, Egypt; Francis and the sultan (bas relief, St. Joseph Church, Cairo, Egypt); sculpture of St. Francis, in the Carceri, near Assisi, Italy; present-day friar at the Mediterrean Sea, Damietta, Egypt; Saint Francis preaches to the Muslims in the presence of the sultan, Florence, Basilica of Santa Croce, Cappella Bardi, attributed to Coppo di Marcovaldo, XIII century, used with the kind concession of the Fondo Edifici di Culto-Ministry of the Interior; photo by Antonio Quattrone.

Image in the center: Francis before the sultan (detail) Niccolò Circignani, detto il Pomarancio, 1583-85, Roma, Chiesa di San Giovanni Battista dei Fiorentini.

Cover image: Window in the church of the Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land, Washington, D.C., photo by Greg Friedman, OFM.

The Holy Land Review is a publication of the Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land
1400 Quincy St., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20017
202-526-6800, ext. 560
hlr@usfranciscan.org

The Holy Land Review is published four times a year.

Subscriptions
The Holy Land Review
1400 Quincy St. N.E.
Washington, DC 20017
hlr@usfranciscan.org
U.S. \$44.95 Year
Single copies \$10
Outside the U.S. \$55

Publisher
Larry C. Dunham, OFM

Editor
Greg Friedman, OFM

Editorial Assistant
Christopher Dwyer

Production Manager
Sherry Brownrigg

Designer
Amy Frazier

Subscription Fulfillment
Joanne Padilla

Translators
Michael Cusato, OFM
Agostino Bono

Advertising
Kennedy Brownrigg Group
(717) 521-3137
Pete@kennedybrownrigg.com

www.myfranciscan.org

Other Language Editions of The Holy Land Review

- in Jerusalem: Marie-Armelle Beaulieu marie-armelle@custodia.org
- in Milan: Giuseppe Caffulli - direttore@terrasanta.net
- in Madrid: Inmaculada Rodriguez Torné redaccion@tierrasanta.net

Copyright ©2019
Commissariat of the Holy Land
1400 Quincy St., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20017
202-526-6800
The Holy Land Review
www.myfranciscan.org
hlr@usfranciscan.org



The Pilgrimage of Peace

The incident was immortalized in art across Europe in the centuries after it happened. For Christians, the radical vision of fraternity and forgiveness which the saint from Assisi carried to Damietta was adapted to fit his developing spiritual reputation and the political reality of Order and the Church — especially in relationship to Islam.

For Muslims, while the sultan of Egypt was remembered as a leader who dedicate his life to the military, political, cultural and spiritual welfare of his people while maintaining ties with the West, the story of his meeting with the poor beggar who entered his camp faded from memory.

In our own time, scholars from both faiths have been challenged to rediscover the story, in the face of violence and religious divisions which still plague humanity.

As the Franciscans mark 800 years since the events in Damietta, *The Holy Land Review* offers our readers, in this special issue, a sampling of how scholarly investigation and spiritual reflection now present the encounter between Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil and St. Francis of Assisi. We invite our readers to revisit this historic event and discover how its meaning can reshape our human and Franciscan vision in a world which needs the wisdom and tolerance of those two dreamers.

In a world where the clash of civilizations continues to dominate, and the use of force seems the only solution, the meeting in Damietta, Egypt, 800 years ago reminds us of the illusory nature of violence and the fragility of peace without dialogue and reconciliation.

- Francesco Patton, OFM, Custos of the Holy Land

Image credit: Saint Francis preaches to the Muslims in the presence of the sultan, Florence, Basilica of Santa Croce, Cappella Bardi, attributed to Coppo di Marcovaldo, XIII century, used with the kind concession of the Fondo Edifici di Culto-Ministry of the Interior; photo by Antonio Quattrone.

Cornelis Claez van Wieringen, Christian ships besiege the tower of Damietta, 1628, Haarlem, Frans Hals Museum; inset: Crusaders disembark at Damietta.



June 1219, Damietta, Egypt: Two embattled armies face one another across a no-man's land. On one side is the encampment of the Crusaders, who have besieged the city. On the other side are the forces led by Sultan Al-Malik al-Kāmil. Francis of Assisi has arrived at the Crusader camp, accompanied by this companion, Brother Illuminato. Francis' wish is to announce the Gospel to the sultan, but his desire is frustrated by the papal legate, Cardinal Pelagius, who declares "that on his account, he could never give permission nor command such a thing, because he would not want to give permission to someone to go where he would, without doubt, be killed" (*The Chronicles of Ernoul* 37, 1: ff 2231).

Francis assumes full responsibility for his choice. He is not asking to be sent but to be allowed to go. Accompanied by Illuminato, he crosses the front line, is intercepted by a patrol of the Sultan and brought into his presence.

Now they face each other: Al-Malik al-Kāmil, born in 1180, and Francis of Assisi, born between 1181 and 1182. The first is among the most powerful men of the era, a formidable military strategist but also someone who is most open-minded to culture and art. The other is simply a man who feels called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, to live the Gospel (as he once said) *sine glossa*, "without additions" and to announce it peacefully to every creature.

The two dialogue. They talk and listen. If in the Crusader camp the meeting was regarded as impossible, in the Saracen camp it was considered inconvenient.

And yet, the encounter between saint and sultan took place. What did they talk about?

Like Francis, Visionaries of Peace

By Francesco Patton, OFM,
Custos of the Holy Land



Above: Francis and the sultan (bas relief by Arnaldo Zocchi, 1909, St. Joseph Church, Cairo, Egypt (Photo by Greg Friedman, OFM); inset: a present-day Franciscan at the Mediterranean Sea in Damietta (Photo courtesy of the Custody of the Holy Land).

What really happened?

Significant testimonies of this meeting remain from Crusader sources of the era, in the letters of Giacomo di Vitry, in the hagiography of the Order and later in the arts, especially paintings. Unfortunately, no testimonies remain from contemporary Arabic and Islamic sources. It's as if this meeting had strongly impacted only the Christian consciousness of the time, without leaving a trace in the Muslim world.

Franciscan "hagiographic" accounts—whose purpose is to show Francis' zeal and piety—don't permit us to reconstruct the conversation with precision. But knowledge of Francis permits us to presume that he told the sultan of his faith in Jesus, and how Francis understood his Christian vocation to live his life in the simplicity and fullness of the Gospel,

as a pilgrim and stranger in this land.

Again, from our knowledge of Al-Malik al-Kamil, we may conclude that the sultan would have told Francis what it means to be a good Muslim, one who

obeys God, prays, fasts, performs charity and lives as a pilgrim. It remains a fact that during the Fifth Crusade, period of a terrible clash of civilizations, Francis and Sultan Al-Malik al-Kamil had the capacity to experience dialogue and a meeting of minds.

An historical reach

From the perspective of 800 years, this meeting has assumed a historical reach that goes beyond the era when it occurred. Throughout eight centuries of Franciscan presence in the Holy Land, for example, the spirit of this encounter has permitted the Friars Minor to take root in a majority Muslim context and to avoid (with some exceptions) an approach of conflict, polemics and controversy. Rather, the followers of the Poor Man of Assisi have drawn inspiration from Francis' instruction (in the early draft of his Rule for the fraternity) to give testimony through a quiet witness of faith as the foundation for living together. Such peaceful

testimony, marked by service and dedication to the point of giving one's life (as during the plague epidemics when the friars cared for others, heedless of their own safety).

Al-Malik al-Kamil himself, in 1228, a few years after his meeting with Francis, would find a willing collaborator in Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, who also preferred negotiation to war. The Sultan concluded with Frederick a truce more productive than war.

Meaning for today

It is above all today, however, that this encounter reemerges with all its symbolic and purposeful value. The meeting of a Christian mystic and a Muslim leader true to his faith proposes that we can go against the grain of a growing culture of intolerance and

confrontation. Where the use of force and the clash of civilizations continues to be the first choice of nations and even some believers, the encounter at Damietta reminds us how sterile the use of violence is, how illusory is victory obtained by force, how fragile is peace obtained by defeating the enemy.

The meeting of a Christian mystic and a Muslim leader true to his faith proposes that we can go against the grain of a growing culture of intolerance and confrontation.

Where an ideology of an incompatibility, complicated by a lack of communication among different cultures and religions, is the "default" stance today, the Damietta meeting demonstrates the opposite—that only encounter and dialogue bear fruit in the long run.

Francis' capacity to hope for the possibility of a meeting of the minds can brand him—even today—a dreamer, an idealist, naive. Still, facts and history support him.

In this anniversary year, the Order of Friars Minor and the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land seek to relate again the history of this encounter so that its spirit might permeate the lives of sincere believers in the Holy Land and beyond. We also hope to make better known in the Muslim world a little-known page of its own history.

Our task today is to propose again the possibility of hope through encounter and dialogue. May we dare to practice them in the circumstances of everyday life. It does not matter if we are regarded as idealists or naive. The chroniclers of eight centuries ago, reporting on the Fifth Crusade, suggest whose vision has the farthest reach—commanders of armed ranks or the naive and unarmed Francis. ✝

Living as 'God's Fool'

By Giuseppe Buffon, O.F.M.

The sources describing the encounter of Francis and al-Malik al-Kāmil disagree: Was Francis martyr, missionary, orator or apostle of the early Church? In reality, his aim at Damietta was something different: Francis was a different kind of peacemaker—one defined by the Beatitudes.

Without doubt, Francis of Assisi is the first medieval saint to have sought and established contact with the Muslim world, taking advantage of the Fifth Crusade which he joined as a pilgrim. Along with other Franciscan brothers, he first arrived in the Holy Land at St. John of Acre, a Crusader port and stronghold on the Mediterranean. Then, accompanied by Brother Illuminato of Rieti, he traveled by sea to Damietta on the Nile Delta.

In September 1219, Francis took advantage of a truce aimed at negotiations between the two armies and crossed the Crusader front line. He met Sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil and remained with the Muslim ruler for several weeks. The sultan himself had Francis escorted back to the Crusader encampment from which he eventually returned to Italy.

The early sources describe the encounter

Sources contemporary with the event are generally in agreement with that description of what happened at Damietta. There are testimonies from Franciscan authors, such as Thomas of Celano, the saint's first



Photo, opposite page: Crusader ruins, Acre, Israel; above, Francis arrives at Acre in 1219 (painting in St. Saviour's Friary, Jerusalem), photos by Greg Friedman, OFM.



Zacarías González Velázquez, San Francesco davanti al sultano d'Egitto al-Malik al-Kāmil, 1787, MUSEO NACIONAL DEL PRADO, Madrid, used by permission.

biographer, and Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, minister general of the Order (later *Saint* Bonaventure), who also seek to promote the exceptional universality of the Franciscan mission, projected beyond the confines of Christianity.

Additionally, the activity of Francis at Damietta finds confirmation from many non-Franciscan testimonies. These include:

- Bishop Jacques de Vitry of St. John of Acre, who was present at Damietta during the time of the encounter, describes it not only in his correspondence but also in his work, *Orientalis et Occidentalis Historia*;
- The late 12th-century Chronicle of Ernoul, who continued the Chronicle of William of Tyre;
- The court poet, Henry of Avranches, undeservedly ignored, who even served in the Roman Curia;
- Bernard the Treasurer, who summarized Ernoul;
- Finally, the anonymous author of the History of Eracles.

Hints of what happened are also found in the biography of Fakhr ad-Din Muhammad Ibn Ibrahim Fārīsi, spiritual adviser of Sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil. The

spiritual adviser's funeral epigraph was discovered in the Qarāfa Cemetery in Cairo by the Arabist Louis Massignon.

The fact of the meeting may leave no doubt. Less certain is the possibility of verifying *details* of the exchanges between saint and sultan. In fact, none of the accounts of the event are from eyewitnesses of the meeting. (The report of the anonymous compiler of the *Verba fratris Illuminati socii b. Francisci ad patres Orientis et in conspectu soldani Aegypti*, was revealed as a falsified.)

The interpretation of the encounter

Between the end of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th century, stories of the encounter were manipulated to pursue the twin goals of legitimizing the Crusade and also canonizing the first Franciscan martyrs, killed in Morocco in January 1220. They eventually were declared saints on August 7, 1481, by the Franciscan Pope Sixtus V, with the aim of uplifting the spirits of Western populations terrified by the conquest of Otranto by Mehmed II (1480).

Other sources and studies of the Damietta

encounter—even in our own time—have not been exempt from exploitation or manipulation. The very question of the relationship of Francis with the Crusade, already proposed by the false *Verba fratris Illuminati*, has been at the center of the debate, engaging historians up to the era of the Enlightenment, regarding “Francis and the land of non-Christians.” The medieval interpreters offer contrasting judgments on both Francis and al-Kāmil:

- For Jacques de Vitry, preacher of the Crusade, Francis showed great courage, audacity and missionary fervor, despite not achieving the aim of converting his partner in conversation.
- The image of a diplomatic Francis, favored by the amiability of the wise sultan, corresponds to Ernoul's interpretation, based on the experience of John of Brienne, king of Jerusalem, who was extremely favorable to the proposal of al-Kāmil to end the siege of Damietta in exchange for free access to Jerusalem—an event which could have extinguished the aim of the very Crusade.
- The Francis portrayed by the rector Avranches is, instead, a philosopher and a master of doctrine who leaves the clerics of the sultan speechless.
- In contrast, St. Bonaventure—suspicious of the Aristotelian rationalism of the Sorbonne which even inflicted his colleague Thomas Aquinas—even deprives Francis of speech. Bonaventure concedes to him only the mysterious gesture of the “ordeal” or trial by fire, in which the contemporary scholar Louis Massignon sees the recovery of the sign of the Prophet.
- The evocation of the ideal of the primitive Church, incarnated in the courage of the martyrs who faced pagan slaughter, resounds in the pages of Thomas of Celano. These pages are dedicated to the Saint founder, who manifested himself at Damietta only as a martyr of desire and at Verna as the emblem of a new Christian perfection.

These testimonies agree on only one point: the frustration of an ideal which each testimony projects onto the man from Assisi, considering him either a martyr, a missionary, an orator, or an apostle of the primitive Church. Francis, instead, proves to be outside any framework. His Christian experience is impossible to define by the “canons of perfection” (styles of religious life) then in vogue.



Cardinal Jacques di Vitry (medallion by unknown artist, 1518, photo by Sailko, Wikimedia Commons).



John of Brienne, by François-Édouard Picot (detail) XIX sec., Palace of Versailles



St Bonaventure (window in the Cathedral of St. Nicholas Bagnoregio Italy), photo by Greg Friedman, OFM.

“The Lord revealed to me that I was to be a new kind of fool in this world.”



Window in the chapel of St. Francis Retreat House, Easton, Pennsylvania, photo by Greg Friedman, OFM

‘A new kind of fool’

In fact, Francis himself revealed the irrationality of his ideal of living: “The Lord revealed to me that I was to be a new kind of fool in this world” (*The Mirror of Perfection*). The radical nature of Francis’ notion of Christian life and its purpose defies all efforts at classification and shatters every foundation of logic.

To ask if Francis was in favor or not of the Crusades shows a lack of respect for his approach. Francis would see anything which is “anti”—even for a good end—as tantamount to a surrender to the logic of power. A project like the Crusades is totally foreign to the complete renunciation of domination which Francis professed.

The message the saint proposes is neither the result of negotiations, accords or compromises: It is a completely free exchange. Francis illustrated such freedom in the story of sending his brothers to sing the Canticle of the Creatures before the mayor and bishop of Assisi, locked in conflict—in the hope of their mutual reconciliation (see images, opposite page). In this, Francis took inspiration from the Beatitudes in Matthew’s Gospel, which promises happiness to those who, forgiving without recrimination, refuse to defend themselves from violence. He doesn’t impose himself as a mediator in the dispute between the two Assisi authorities, nor does he intend to judge according to the reasoning of one or the other by applying a legal judgment.

The same outlook is seen in the in his “Admonitions” on those who love peace, drawn from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and based on the love of Christ himself.

A similar consideration appears in Francis’ “Letter to a Minister,” where love for one’s enemies must express itself in “wishing they should be better Christians,” an attitude found exemplified in Francis’ explanation of “perfect joy,” which, paradoxically, seeks to propose again, but in negative terms, the encounter at Damietta.

Neither can Francis define himself as an opponent of the Crusades or of war, because “opposing” doesn’t enter into his radical evangelical vision. Nor does he disparage the world, but takes it on as a burden, and within the contradictions of history, proposes a radically different, alternative way to live. This way is new, impractical and absolutely “other”—in content and in method—to the point of one’s being misunderstood and, thus “a new kind of fool.”



PARDON AND PEACE FREELY GIVEN

Francis’ method of reconciliation and forgiveness is illustrated in a famous story. When a dispute broke out between the bishop and mayor of Assisi, Francis sent his brothers to sing to them new verses he had composed for his “Canticle of the Creatures,” about granting pardon and living in peace. (*Bas-relief images from the bishop’s palace, Assisi; photos by Greg Friedman, OFM*)



The evangelical proposal of Francis, thanks to the event at Damietta, has transcended its original religious or geographic context. It is rather about humanity itself.

When Francis decided to take his gospel message of peace beyond the cities of Europe to the violent battlefield of Damietta, he truly embarked on a radical stance. The evidence for this attitude is found in his norms for “those who go among the Saracens,” inserted in chapter 16 of his early, “unapproved” Rule (1221). There, Francis expresses a truly original notion—the complete subordination to the other, foregoing, if necessary, even preaching the Word. Rather, these brothers are simply to live in submission to other: “The brothers, then, who go [among the Saracens and other unbelievers] can behave themselves spiritually in them in

two ways. One way is to avoid quarrels or disputes, and be subject to every human being for love of God, so bearing witness to the fact that they are Christian.”

Can this passage of the early rule be considered the result and outcome of the Damietta experience? I believe it constitutes the most authoritative interpretation of the encounter with al-Malik al-Kāmil.

Testimonies are not lacking—even if rare—regarding the demand for a kind of preaching detached of any use of force; in other words, the necessity of excluding any mixture of Crusade and mission. Such testimonies come from Isaac of Stella, Walter Map and Rudolph Niger, who support the assertion that “his preaching of faith be the only true Christian approach” (Kedar). But the true originality of Francis’ initiative goes further. He demonstrates, and later advises, a

mission understood as just being present, subordinate to every human being in the sense expressed by the Rule.

Living as “pauper and a guest,” based on Christ’s example, constitutes for Francis the normal situation of the Friars Minor, whether at the pontifical court or among unwelcoming confreres (as in the story of “perfect joy”) or even in the presence of the wise al-Malik al-Kāmil. ✚



Giuseppe Buffon, OFM is Professor of History of the Modern and Contemporary Church at the Pontifical University Antonianum, Rome



"Francis and the Sultan," watercolor by Lawrence Zink, used by permission of the Zink Family and St. Anthony Messenger magazine.

Why did Francis go Among the Muslims?

By Gwénoùlé Jeusset

The reality of the encounter of Francis and the Sultan, has been re-shaped over time, its history altered, and its dramatic meaning ignored. A Franciscan scholar re-examines the event.

Within 15 years after the event, there were eight sources which mention the encounter between Saint Francis and the Sultan Al-Malik al-Kāmil; none emerged over the next 15 years but by the year 1272 another eight texts appeared. Others will surface during the 14th century, reshaping the story even more in the light of the spirit of the Crusades. What happened to the way this historic event was interpreted as time passed? Let's begin by examining the possible motivations which the various sources imputed to Francis, in order to understand—as best we can—what was happening in Francis in Damietta in 1219 and how it has passed into historical memory up until today.

Possible Motivations

We can reduce to five the real (or imagined) motivations of why

Francis would have taken ship to the Holy Land. The thirst for martyrdom? The desire to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre? A desire to convert the Muslims? The wish to share with the Muslims that they were brothers? Add to these a possible mission he would have fulfilled on site: to be an emissary for concluding a treaty of peace. Let's run through each of these lines of thought and tease out what can be kept (or not) with respect to the sources, the writings and the spirit of Saint Francis.

1. The thirst for martyrdom?

In Chapter 22 of Francis "Early Rule" (a draft which preceded the Rule of Life approved by the pope in 1223), there is a reference to persecutions. Since Francis speaks about martyrdom, we can reasonably conclude that he was thinking about all the things that might happen in Christian lands

or elsewhere. The opening verses are clear, especially if they had been written before his departure for the Holy Land: "Let all our brothers think carefully about what the Lord has said: 'Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you.' Our Lord Jesus Christ, whose footprints we must follow, called the one who betrayed him 'a friend' and he offered himself up, of his own free will, to those who were going to crucify him. Therefore, they are our friends who unjustly inflict on us tribulations and anxieties, sufferings and torture, martyrdom and death. We must love them dearly for the blows which they rain down upon us will bring us eternal life" (*Earlier Rule of the Franciscan Fraternity*, 22, verse 1).

This is not the thirst for martyrdom; but, if something like it *should* happen, then it is imperative to see such enemies as our friends.



The arrival of St. Francis in Acre (bas relief by Nazareno Panzeri, OFM, for St. John Church, Akko)



The meeting of St. Francis with Sultan Al-Malik al-Kāmil, depicting the "ordeal by fire" (bas relief by Nazareno Panzeri, OFM, for St. John Church, Akko)

2. The desire to go to the Tomb of the Lord?

The first testimony about this comes from Angelo Clareno in 1320! Would Francis early biographers Thomas of Celano and Saint Bonaventure, among others, have restrained themselves from recounting such a pilgrimage? Highly unlikely! Angelo Clareno, moreover, needed to invent the *firman* (permission for the visit) by al-Kāmil's brother, Sultan al-Mu'azzam of Syria. In reality, that ruler dreamed instead that his older brother would drown the Christian army in the channels of the Nile at Damietta rather than protect the personal devotion of an unbeliever to visit the Tomb in the midst of a holy war.

3. The concern to convert the Muslims to the Christian faith?

Francis would obviously have been very happy to see the Muslims become his brothers-in-religion; but he did not style himself to be a debater capable of entering into such polemics. No source before the year 1260 speaks of the so-called ordeal by fire, a medieval exercise to prove the one had "God on his side." Such a trial is depicted in the Giotto frescoes in the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi, where the saint is challenged by the Sultan's courtiers to walk through fire. Franciscan Father Eloi Leclercq could not imagine the Poverello proposing such an ordeal—a practice, moreover, already condemned several times by the councils; and Franciscan Father Frederic Manns states: "The episode of the ordeal added by Bonaventure is an interpretative addition."



The "Protomartyrs of the Order," friars killed in Morocco in January 1220, (painting in the Chiesa Nuova, Assisi, Italy)

4. Emissary of the crusaders as spokesmen for peace during the ceasefire?

It is Ernoul, a late 12th-century counselor of Balian of Ibelian, a Crusade baron, who was present in the Holy Land during the time of the encounter and mentions by name in his account Sultan Al-Malik al-Kāmil. Ernoul praises the Sultan's tolerance in contrast to the intransigence of the lords of his own European camp as well as the religious leaders of both camps. Was Ernoul near the battle lines? Did he know Francis well enough to imagine him entering into the realm of politics? Ernoul seems to have heard Francis state that he had come on behalf of the Most High. The role of peacemaker is both less than what Ernoul affirmed and much more than what he claimed.

5. To encounter others as brothers?

Relying on a line from Thomas of Celano (1 Cel 172), Saint Bonaventure emphasizes that the duty of fraternity was really one of the reasons for the journey to the East: "The ardor of love without limit which carried him towards God had also, as a result, increased his affectionate tenderness towards all those who participated within him in nature and grace. The wholly natural feelings of his heart were already enough to make him fraternal towards every creature; one should not be astonished that his love of Christ then transformed him even more into being the brother of those who bore the image of the Creator and were redeemed by his blood" (LegMaj 9, 4).

To say to Muslims that they are brothers, in announcing to them

the good news of the Incarnation, Bonaventure described the reason which corresponds both to the spirit of Francis and to what he left behind for us in the 16th chapter of the Early Rule: "The brothers who go away in this manner can conceive of their spiritual role in two ways: one way is to not engage in arguments or disputes, to be subject to every human creature for the sake of God and to simply acknowledge that they are Christians; or, if they see that it is the will of God, to announce the Word of God..." (Earlier Rule, 16).

Again, if we speculate that these words were redacted or rewritten after Francis experience in Egypt and that of the "protomartyrs of the Order," the friars killed in Morocco in January 1220, it forces us to confront the fact that they gained



Francis and Cardinal Pelagius in the Crusader Camp (bas relief by Arnaldo Zocchi, 1909, St. Joseph Church, Cairo, Egypt (Photo by Greg Friedman, OFM))

martyrdom by insulting the faith of others, whereas Francis failed in his attempt by relying on the message of the Gospel?

This analysis of five possible motivations now leads us to look a little more closely at what happened in Damietta and what remained of importance for him after this episode.

What occurred in Damietta?

When he left Italy, Francis had not planned on meeting the Sultan. Nor was he expecting to be welcomed by people filled with God—those whom Cardinal Hugolino, friend and adviser to Francis, later to become Pope Gregory IX, called “a race of slaves,” “sons of the devil,” “henchmen of the Antichrist,” or “foul Saracens.”

It really seems that the experience in Damietta produced in Francis a deepening of his Christian faith. He looks upon these strange brothers not through the lens of the prejudices of his day but through the eyes of a loving God. His inherited culture having been unsettled, Francis probably became disoriented. On the one hand, he discovered that these believers were people who prayed, and that, on the other hand, they were opaque to the Christian mysteries.

This altered perspective led him to a broader notion of evangelization. If martyrdom and the proclamation to people desirous of receiving it are a seed for Christians, a third way of evangelical life is fraternal presence among men and women who cannot become Christian: “My ways are not your ways”; “You are the light of the world... let your light shine before all so that they

may see your good works and give glory to your Father” (See Matthew, chapters 5, 14 and 16).

The spirit of fraternity breaks through all boundaries. Christ is the brother of every human creature and every human being is a brother or sister of Christ: All belong to him. For Francis, the encounter with people, whoever they are, is an issue of fraternity. At the core of the spirit of the crusade, he is nudged-- without knowing it—to live what will be one day called “the Spirit of Assisi.”

A loss of memory across centuries

The Church was not able to understand such a radical method of evangelization for a very long time. The spirit of the Crusade would endure well after the end of those holy wars. True, the Friars Minor continued to depart for Islamic lands but most of the time only to serve the Holy Places and

the Christians who lived there or journeyed there as pilgrims. Surely, the friars lived peacefully in their midst as did Conrad Miliani, who curiously was recalled home to Italy by Jerome of Ascoli (Franciscan minister general, later Pope Nicholas IV). He had Conrad return from Tripoli precisely because of his spirit of conciliation!

Just as with others who were not seeking martyrdom but rather to live peacefully with all, the friars lived out Dante’s description of Francis: “They went out, thirsting for martyrdom, to preach Christ and his apostles, in the presence of the arrogant sultan. But finding this people too tough to convert and not wanting to keep standing around idly, they came back to Italy to harvest other fruits” (*Paradiso*, XI, 101-105). as if Francis had never left us his 16th chapter!

But the Early Rule no longer mattered since it had never been approved. When the encounter is mentioned in the later sources, it will be embroidered with what seemed likely, given a return to the usual mentality of the culture. People would forget that the first chroniclers—Islamophobes that they were—all were in agreement on the *courtoisie* of the sultan. They would forget the gentleness of the Poverello in order to make of him a champion of the ordeal and a champion of the Crusades in the retelling anecdotes allegedly related by Brother Illuminato.

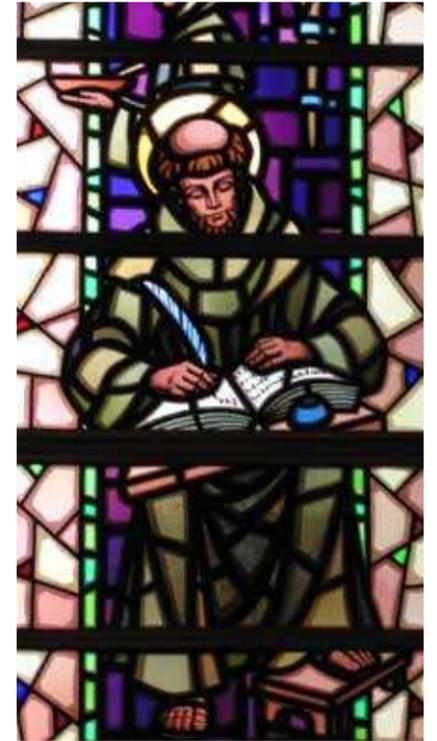
A non-martyred Francis of Assisi who did not succeed in converting anyone is not an exemplar. Thus, in the *Actus*, written around 1320, the legend will have it that Sultan Al-Malik al-Kāmil will be convinced by Francis

to be baptized on his deathbed by Friars Minor suddenly appearing over the horizon. In 1375, the famous phrase will be attributed to Francis regarding the friars killed in Marrakesh: “I now have five true Friars Minor!”

Without ever denying the encounter, it will be spoken about by deforming the history and, more often than not, will fall silent about this moment lacking in high drama. Up until the 20th century, when, with Charles de Foucauld, the meaning of a silent presence will finally be understood. Only then will the hidden treasure of our heritage be rediscovered.

But even if the spirit of Assisi still has far to go in the Franciscan Family, the friars are at long last reflecting upon this encounter. Opinions can differ but that, too, signifies a kind of resurrection: One no longer believes in a journey detoured to Jerusalem but in an inheritance. The whole order has been engaged by its leadership to celebrate the eighth centenary. Unless I am mistaken, this is the very first time.

Let’s hope that we will avoid celebrating only Saint Francis and that we will do everything to make his journey our own. We need encounters between Muslims and Franciscans. While emphasizing the journey of Francis, it is also necessary to celebrate the response of this sultan who welcomed him. By fidelity to our Father Francis, we live in a time that mirrors the one in which he himself lived, except that the Church no longer has the spirit of the Crusades but the spirit of Assisi. We are the witnesses of it and we must become those who put it into action. ✚



Francis’ Early Rule was not approved; the spirit of its 16th chapter remains as a guide for today’s friars in their evangelizing mission (window, St. Francis Retreat House, Easton, Pennsylvania).



Franciscan Father Gwenolé Jousset has devoted much of his ministry to fostering dialogue with Islam. He worked for 15 years in the Ivory Coast, and later helped start the International Commission on Relations with Islam of the Franciscan Order (from 1982 to 1993). In 1993, he was named to the Committee on Relations with Muslims of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (Vatican). He is the author of a number of books and articles, including St. Francis and Islam (2009).

Islam at the Time of Francis

By Celeste Intartaglia, Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies, Rome



The Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem (photo by Greg Friedman, OFM)

What was Islam like at the time of Saint Francis? A fragmented society saw the rising star of the Ayyubid dynasty, which included Saladin and his nephew al-Malik al-Kāmil—who met the Poor Man of Assisi.

Centuries after its appearance in the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century CE, Islam as a religion, a culture and a political system extended from the Atlantic coast of Africa to the Indian Peninsula and beyond. The caliphate was born after the death of the prophet Muhammad in 632, as a unitary institution dedicated to watch over his legacy regarding revelation and the earthly behavior of believers committed to the search for divine happiness. But with time, Islam found itself subject to divisions and unified in name only.

Doctrinally, Islam had a solid, unified foundation. The juridical and theological discussions which built Islam gave rise to religious scholarship that extended into commentaries—on the Qur’an, the prophetic tradition, and legal cases—as well as to “profane” scholarship—including grammar, rhetoric and poetry. These were enriched by other categories such as studies of science, geography, and history.

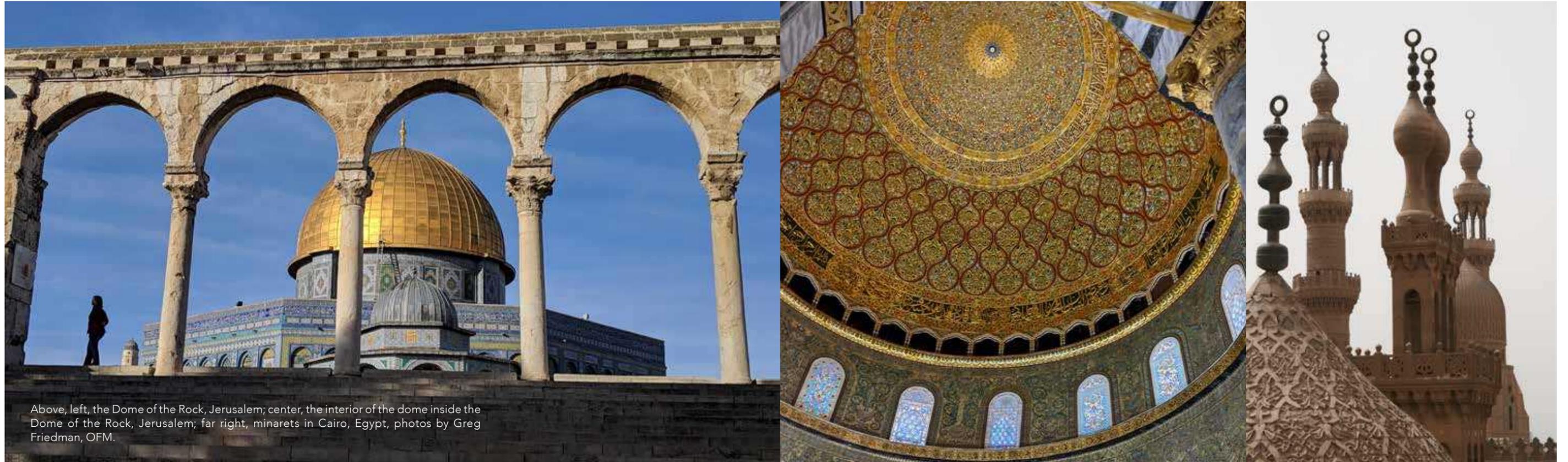
Islam’s cultural unity was maintained through the *madrasa*, a true and proper academic institution spread throughout the Islamic world and in which the scholars (*ulama*) taught according to broad curricula, not overlooking any branch of knowledge. The primary intention was to form persons equipped with knowledge and competence to interpret sacred texts

and apply the precepts contained in the texts or derived from them. These then formed the basis for formulating laws that government officials would apply. Another mode of expressing religious sentiment also developed alongside the mainstream theological and juridical disciplines, namely a spiritual realization of the encounter with the Divine, the path chosen and followed by the Sufis.

Early fragmentation in the Muslim world

Under the Abbasid dynasty, which ruled from 750-1258, the early unity of the Muslim community fragmented and central authority gradually eroded. This resulted in the birth of various state entities of different loyalties in their approach to the caliphate and spotlighted a series of powerful groups fighting to build their own domains. In the eastern regions of the Muslim world, where the caliphate was still strong, the Seljuqs, a group of Turkish origin, became dominant on the political scene. At the end of the eleventh century they assigned themselves the new title of “sultan,” a word that in itself means “power” and later was identified with the person who held it. The Seljuqs became the administrators of caliphal power, creating their own potentates in Iran and Anatolia.

Malik Shah, among the best known and energetic of these sultans, and his vizier of strict



Above, left, the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem; center, the interior of the dome inside the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem; far right, minarets in Cairo, Egypt, photos by Greg Friedman, OFM.

Sunni observance, Nizam al-Mulk (who died in 1092), are credited with developing a theoretical model of good administration which transferred the delegation of political-religious order from the person of the caliph to experts learned in the law. Added to this was the creation of a network of schools in the major cities of the Abbasid empire, where the era's best teachers were recruited.

In the westernmost regions of the Islamic world, unitary power had already crumbled long ago: another caliph had reigned in Cordoba and dynasties of Berber origin—the Almoravids (1056-1147) and the Almohads (1130-1269)—had reigned over the Outer Maghreb (today's Morocco). Thanks to their commercial activities as intermediaries between the

Mediterranean and Sub-Saharan Africa, the flourishing economic conditions produced a brilliant intellectual life. After an initial phase of intellectual and religious intolerance, tied to the Maliki school of Islamic law, the Almohads came to support theological research and philosophic works. The two greatest philosophers of the era, Ibn Tufayl (who died in 1185) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd, who died in 1184), studied and taught in their capital of Marrakesh. In the same period, Sufism grew and thrived in working-class areas of the Maghreb. Abu Madyan (who died in 1197) and Ibn Mashish (who died in 1228) were protected by the Almohads. Ibn Arabā (who died in 1240), a native of Murcia, stopped at Fez (1195-98) before leaving for Mecca and Damascus.

The Fatimid Dynasty

In the central regions of the Islamic world—Egypt and the Syrian regions (also known as “the Levant”) —the 12th and 13th centuries represented a time of cultural flourishing initiated much earlier by the Fatimid dynasty. The Fatimids established themselves in Egypt at the end of the tenth century where they founded Cairo and al-Azhar, even though maintaining an esoteric Shiite knowledge. At the beginning they were tolerant when facing members of other religions.

Their domain extended to modern Syria and opposed Sunni caliphal power, in the 11th century even defying the Seljuqs in Baghdad itself. In their case as well, robust economic development favored learning and ingenuity in the arts. The Fatimids controlled the Red Sea

and maritime commerce as far as the Indian coast, while agreements with Italian cities gave them control over much Mediterranean commerce. In the Syrian region, Fatimid control was limited to the coast, leaving the interior zone to numerous local dynasties.

At the same time, Islamic groups of Kurdish and Turkish origin moved into the regions of northern Iraq toward the Anatolia Peninsula and the Syrian region. Aleppo, Damascus and the surrounding cities were ruled from the 12th century by the Zengid *atabeg* (governor) who restored the splendor that dimmed under the Abbasid caliphate. Cities were enriched with religious and civic monuments, schools, fountains and thermal baths, above all Damascus, thanks to the underground water

from the Barada River.

Still, society in the Middle East of that era, although rich in religious confessions, ethnic groups and groups of different origins, was not tolerant and inclusive. The Islamic *umma* was born as a community of believers open to other monotheistic faithful but soon became a community of Muslims alone. Muslims themselves had endured internal battles over orthodoxy, above all in an early ninth century Abbasid inquisition called the *mihna* that eventually vindicated Ibn Hanbal, a hadith scholar whose legal school is predominant in the Gulf today. The *umma* was characterized by a doctrinal rigidity followed by a withdrawal into itself in an exclusive community, fighting among themselves. At the same

time, contacts with the “Franks” (Latin Christians) were continuous and dictated by the logic of flexible alliances. The various Muslim potentates held the Crusades to be irrelevant to them, so much so that they never coined a word to identify this phenomenon.

The Ayyubid Dynasty

In this climate the figure of al-Malik al-Kāmil stands out. He was the nephew and second successor of the more famous Saladin and eventually became head of the Ayyubids, alternately described as a “dynastic power group” (Franz Halm) and a “federation of families” (Claude Cahen), in other words, a dynasty of military leaders (*malik*) and sultans.

Managing this federation—held together only by a dynastic

tie and realized through military action and the control of numerous local lords—required notable military, diplomatic and economic abilities well expressed by the first three *maliks*. The Ayyubid family arrived in the Syrian region and then Egypt, after the Zengid *atabeg*. Replacing the Fatimids, they returned the land to Sunni worship. Saladin (who reigned from 1171-1193), was primarily interested in Palestine and Jerusalem. Described by the historian Ibn al-Athir as “a scholar serving under arms, a *jihād* warrior”, he succeeded in conquering Jerusalem in 1187, after defeating the Frankish armies in Galilee at the Battle of the Horns of Hattin.

His brother, al-’Adil, his

right-hand man and successor, managed to maintain intact the territorial power established by Saladin and took power in place of Saladin’s sons, who were little able to navigate between combat and diplomacy. On the other hand, the unity of the Ayyubid confederation was threatened by its own divisions into five spheres of power (Cairo, Aleppo, Damascus, Hama and Mosul) subordinate to the *malik* residing in Egypt, who in 1207 was confirmed as the sultan of the Baghdad Caliphate.

Al-’Adil’s prestige allowed him to negotiate commercial treaties with the local Crusader states and with Italian powers, with the double objective

of increasing his own military resources and discouraging support for new Crusades. This permitted him to assure peace through a series of truces that covered almost all the period of his reign, and at the same time reinforce himself against the danger that materialized with the Fifth Crusade (1217). The defense of Jerusalem and Damascus and, even more important, the defense of Damietta, was entrusted to his son al-Kāmil after his death in August 1218.

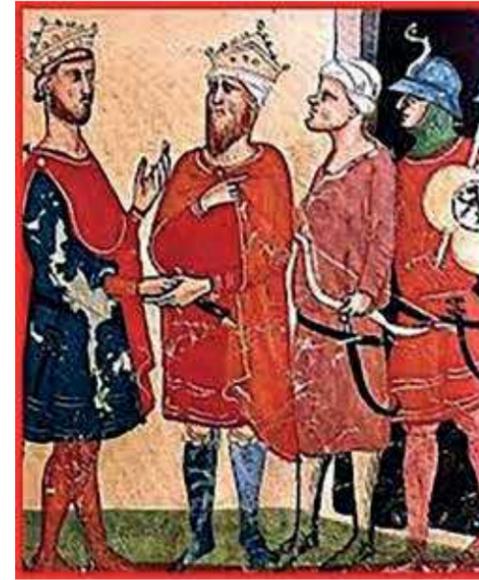
Sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil

The leader Francis would meet inherited a difficult situation, complicated by the Crusade. He asked his Syrian

brothers to support him in combat, then moved to diplomacy. In exchange for Damietta he offered to return Jerusalem to the Franks, who refused, considering it a temporary victory (1219) and a brief conquest (1219-21).

For about six years, al-Kāmil managed the Ayyubid federation with its internal fights and problems until he met the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II and agreed with him to a ten-year truce and the ceding of Jerusalem (1229), with the reservation that it not be fortified, and that freedom of religion be maintained. It was an opportune diplomatic action and a politically valid one, but

nonetheless caused scandal among pious Muslims and Christians. Muslims cried over the loss of one



of their most holy sites, where the prophet Muhammad, after his “nocturnal voyage” from Mecca, ascended to the Divine presence. Christians held that it was not completely valid to obtain Jerusalem without the ordeal and fatigue of an actual battle.

Even during the course of the attacks by European armies, al-Kāmil managed to arrange commercial ties with the maritime Italian cities of Pisa and Venice. They had an active role in the Mediterranean and offices on the Egyptian and Syrian coasts, paying taxes and commissions for the purchase of spices from India, furnished by a Muslim mercantile class called *Karimi*. They were already active in the Fatimid era but in these years built their fortune, which lasted even into the Mamluk era.

Left: Equestrian statue of Saladin in front of the wall of the old city of Damascus, Syria.

Above: The Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (left) encounters al-Malik al-Kāmil (center), illustration from *Nova Cronica di Giovanni Villani*, 1348

Sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil founded Sufi monasteries as well as schools in the most important cities. He founded new ones in Cairo and in Damascus he restored and reorganized them, ordering that only religious sciences be taught there and no longer “the sciences of the ancients,” those derived from Greek and similar philosophies. Not lacking were military constructions, fortresses and citadels. He began the recruitment of Turkish slaves who later became the origin of the Mamluk dynasty.

Finally, we know al-Kāmil’s interests in the preservation of forests and works of irrigation, through the cultivation of sugar cane, through the creation of an economy partly controlled by the state regarding forestry and mining products, and through the commercializing of wood and metal as well as the means of transportation and arms. His interests were especially evident in Egypt. From there we can reasonably hypothesize the foreseeing of a land registry mapping system and a favoring of what we know were efforts at restoring the value of the *dinar* to the level before Saladin’s devaluation of the currency.

The Sultan dedicated the rest of his life to reinforcing the kingdom and managing the attacks of the Seljuqs and the main Ayyubid minorities. With his death ended the most flourishing period of this domain, accomplished of course with arms but also dedicated to the care of social, economic and cultural issues aimed at forming a good Muslim society. ✚



Caption Caption



At far left: Francis at Damietta (bas relief by Arnaldo Zocchi, 1909, St. Joseph Church, Cairo, Egypt (Photo by Greg Friedman, OFM); modern-day friar at the Mediterranean Sea, Damietta, Egypt (Photo by Kathy Warren, OSF)

ENGAGING MUSLIMS: THE FATE OF FRANCIS' RADICAL VISION

By Michael F. Cusato, OFM

The rediscovery of the importance—indeed, centrality—of Francis' encounter with the Sultan, al-Malik al-Kāmil, outside the city of Damietta in August 1219, represents one of the most significant moments in the Franciscan historiography of the early 21st century. Brought to our attention back in the 1950s by Giulio Bassetti-Sani (though virtually ignored by scholars), then quietly revived again by Francis DeBeer in the 1970s, this momentous

encounter became the subject of several monographs in the 1980s and 1990s by two historians in particular: Jan Hoerberichts from the Netherlands and Gwenolé Juisset from Brittany in France.

The traumatic events of September 11, 2001, in the United States, and its subsequent reverberations around the world since that day, helped to focus the attention of Franciscans and non-Franciscans alike on the unique, if not radical vision of

Francis of Assisi. That vision embraces an improbable yet hoped-for coexistence between the two monotheistic religions of Christianity and Islam.

More recently still, other scholars—myself included—have examined the historic event under the tent of al-Kāmil with respect to its broader context. Such study is important as we mark the 800th anniversary of the encounter.



After the encounter

But what happened in the immediate aftermath of the 1219 encounter, especially within the Franciscan order itself? Did it in fact assimilate and implement this remarkable vision of coexistence? It is now common to assume that—in response to the ill-fated outcome of the missionary venture of Berard and his friar-companions in Morocco in January 1220 and combined with his own, more felicitous experience with al-Kāmil—Francis either refashioned or created out of whole cloth a new chapter (Chapter 16) in what is known as the “Early Rule for the order” (not approved by the pope). This chapter outlines what we might call today, a two-fold missionary strategy for the friars when they go among Muslims: namely, to simply live out their fraternal vocation of reverencing the universal fraternity of creatures in the midst of others and then, only if so inspired by God, to publicly go out and preach the values of the gospel in spoken word.

This was an important addition to the articulation of the concrete manifestations of the minorite (Franciscan) charism out in the world.

The experience on Mount La Verna

We likewise posit the formative importance of the historic encounter upon Francis as he went up to the wooded heights of Mount La Verna in August and September of 1224. For here, after the mystical experience of the stigmatization, Francis would then ask Brother Leo for something upon which he could write down a few of his reflections.

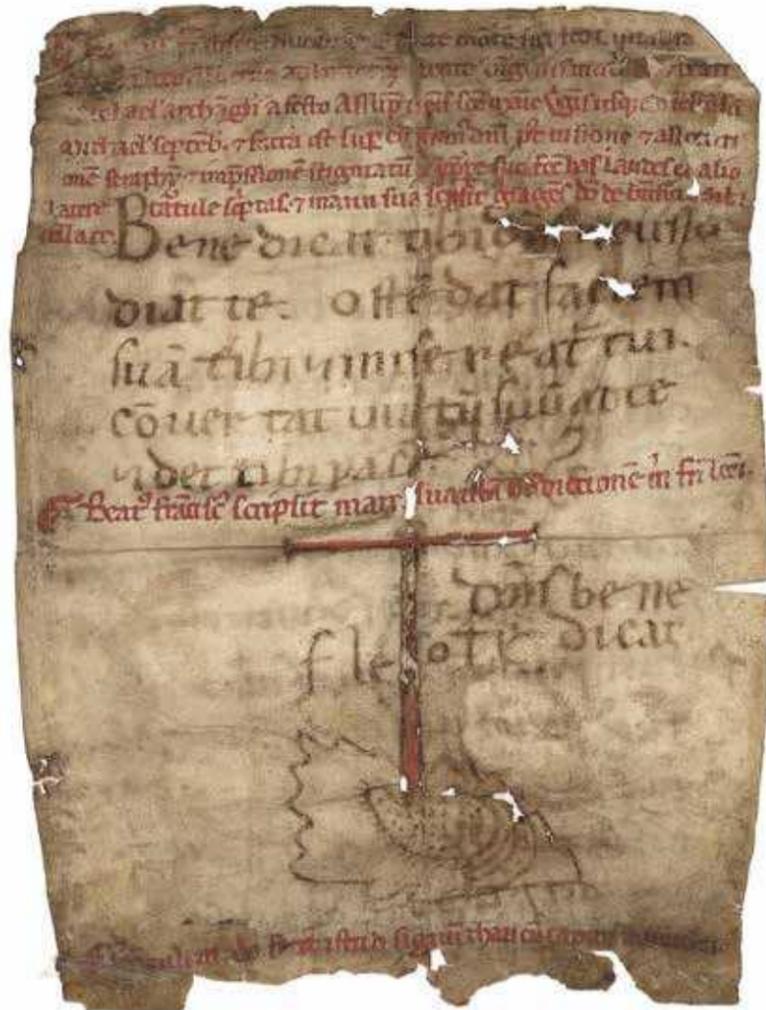
This parchment, known as the *Chartula*, contains (or so I have conjectured) both the *Praises of God*, representing Francis’ Christian version of the *Beautiful Names of Allah* and, on its reverse side, a prayer for the protection of the Sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil (“May the Lord bless and guard you...”), replete with a crude drawing near the bottom of the page of a Muslim—most likely the Sultan himself—“confessing” the cross of Christ, as a Tau cross does indeed sprout from his mouth.

This was both Francis’ prayer of thanksgiving for the mystery of the stigmata now emerging in

his own flesh, as well as a prayer of supplication for his newly-discovered brother, hoping that al-Kāmil might acknowledge Jesus as his Christ before death would overtake him. Indeed, what has been little appreciated is how the announcement of a new military push against the Sultan, by the combined papal and imperial armies of Frederick II, framed and influenced these events on La Verna.

After the saint’s death

Francis died on the evening of October 3, 1226, asking—according to the account related only in the



version of his biography known as “2 Celano”—to be placed naked upon the ground in a gesture of total surrender of his body and spirit. This posture seems reminiscent, it must be said, of the most profound moment of the prayer posture of Muslims which he had observed in Damietta, whereby the bare forehead touches the bare ground in a similar act of full surrender and acknowledgement of the sovereignty of God.

But bereft of their father and model, how then did the friars carry on this stunning vision of their founder vis-à-vis the Muslim “other”? It is true that, after Francis had given up the reins of authority over the fraternity which he had founded at the Emergency Chapter in late September of 1220, first to Peter of Catania (who died even

before the next chapter in May of 1221) and then to Elias of Cortona (1221-27), he was indeed handing the direction of the order to two men who had shared—at least to some degree—his vision of living among Muslims. For Elias had been minister of the newly-created province in the Holy Land since 1217; and Peter had accompanied him to Acre in 1219.

However, we search the record in vain for any real signs that Francis’ transformed vision of evangelical witness and peaceful coexistence (as laid out in Early Rule, 16) was actively being carried forward with renewed vigor. Surely, there were missions sent to various parts of the Muslim world and well beyond, particularly in the early 1230s, during Elias’ second term in leadership of the Order (1232-39).

But one searches without success for any furtherance of the radicality of Francis’ vision in the deeds and writings of the friars.

Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to assume that, with Francis now gone, the friars—increasingly having been formed in the traditional ecclesiology and classical categories of the Christian theology in the schools of the High Middle Ages—simply defaulted to the common position propagated by the Church’s depiction of Muslims as “infidels” and “unbelievers.” (I refer the reader to Gwenolé Juisset’s article in this issue in which he highlights the language used by Pope Gregory IX, friend of Francis and supporter of the order of Friars Minor, first as cardinal and then as Roman pontiff.)

This is the real nub of the

Left: The reverse side of the *Chartula* of St. Francis (Photo courtesy of the Photographic Archive of the Sacred Convent of Saint Francis of Assisi)

Above: St. Francis receiving the stigmata on Mount La Verna (mosaic on the facade of St. Joseph Church, Cairo, Egypt (Photo by Greg Friedman, OFM)

issue of clericalization in the order of Friars Minor: that the newer recruits were being formed not by the primordial experience of the fraternity in the Umbrian Valley but by the mindset, prejudices and categories employed for centuries in the West. For, one would search in vain for even a glimmer of that radical vision of the sacred fraternity rediscovered by Francis.

Creating the story of a saint—Thomas of Celano

With one notable exception, that is. When Thomas of Celano wrote his *First Life of Francis* in 1229, in the wake of the Poverello's canonization and by virtue of a papal commission, the biographer was fairly circumscribed in his mandate: to compose a "hagiographical account"—namely, a portrait that would portray the man from Assisi as

befitting his elevation to sainthood by casting his life, deeds and words in the mold of the standard hagiographical *topoi* (models) requisite for such a saint.

In keeping with such models, his portrayal of Francis' failed attempts to go to the East in 1212, then to Spain in 1213, and finally the successful mission in 1219-20 during which time he met the sultan (1 Celano 58): all bear, for the most part, a standardized imprint from the conventions of hagiography.

However, it is only with his second major literary endeavor—traditionally referred to as 2 Celano—that we see Thomas including additional information as well as his own reflections on incidents in the life of Francis which often reflected the current situation of the order at the time of its redaction (1246-47). And an excellent example of this is his treatment of the events of 1219.

Here Celano, for the first time in narrative form in the Franciscan corpus, writes about Francis' time in the camp of the crusaders, accompanied by Brother Illuminato, prior to the meeting with the sultan. (There is mention of their presence in the camp within the chronicles contemporary to the events.) It should be noted that this story is told in direct relationship to the fact that the friars were being asked, at the time of its composition in 1247-48, to accompany the crusade of Louis IX to...Damietta. And Celano is signaling that they must go—if they go at all—with the same pacific mindset as did Francis in 1219.)

But this still being a public, official composition, commissioned

this time by the order itself, Thomas had to be careful—or better, clever—about how he presented Saint Francis in this account (2 Celano 30).

Suffice it to say that Thomas cleverly alluded to Francis' profound dissatisfaction with the bellicose attitude and eventual behavior of the crusading army: The soldiers, whipped up by Cardinal Pelagius (who overruled the leader of the campaign, John of Brienne, more prone to negotiation) are portrayed as itching for battle and eventually are given the authorization to attack—only to have the ill-considered decision go terribly wrong.

What is unique in Celano's account, however, is Francis' unsuccessful attempts to dissuade the crusaders from further bloodshed. Thomas, in short, seems to have been aware of Francis' stance against the violent nature of the crusade and the further annihilation of yet more members—Muslims and Christians—of the universal fraternity of creatures.

Buried under layers of the hagiographical (idealized) construct, this quite astonishing glimmer of the radical vision of Francis can only be unearthed by the discerning reader who knows how to decode, as it were, the scriptural references used by Thomas to lay out the specifics of the story.

Searching the documentary record

Other than this one glaring exception in 2 Celano 30, there is precious little else in the documentary record after the death of Francis for the next 50 years

which might demonstrate that the friars had caught the radicality of Francis' vision and its counter-cultural thrust regarding Muslims.

St. Bonaventure—in his life of Francis—goes even one step further, introducing the story of the ordeal of fire into the narrative. There is some glimmer of a somewhat different approach, albeit contained within the theological writings of Roger Bacon during the latter half of the 13th century. It is only with Ramon Lull at the end of this century and into the next that a different approach will emerge, not only advocating but actually engaging in direct discussions with Muslim leaders. (I have sketched out the remarkable absence of Francis' vision among the friars in an article titled: "The Loneliness of Francis of Assisi," to appear in journal, *The Muslim World* (2019).)

What became of Francis' radical vision?

One might, therefore, wonder why the striking absence of any furtherance of this vision among the friars of the order he founded and formed?

This is a point worth pondering since it can have similar ramifications as to whether we are able to bring this new dynamic forward into our own age. An answer to our query about the absence of this vision among his followers is found by delving deeply into our understanding of how Francis himself came to a considerably different view of Muslims than that held by the vast majority of the Christian world and which was being propagated within theological and catechetical



Window in the church at Rivo Torto, near Assisi, Italy, shows the story related by St. Bonaventure in his life of Francis, of the saint facing the ordeal of fire before the sultan. (Photo by Greg Friedman, OFM)



Thomas of Celano (c. 1185-c. 1260-1275) was the first to write a biography of St. Francis. His incorrupt remains are in St. Francis Church, Tagliacozze, Italy (photo by Greg Friedman, OFM).



Statue of St. Francis and the leper, outside the church at Rivo Torto, Italy, near Assisi (photo by Greg Friedman, OFM)



circles in western Christianity.

For, even though what occurred within Francis during his sojourn in the camp of the sultan in Damietta would profoundly and definitively transform him for the rest of his life, this transformation had already begun its work within him the moment in which he encountered a group of lepers outside the city of Assisi, probably in 1206.

A universal and sacred fraternity of creatures

From that moment onward, Francis would no longer see such men and women as non-entities and non-persons—as people having nothing to offer the city of Assisi on the cusp of its economic burgeoning and prosperity; as people to simply be cast aside as untouchables and subsequently forgotten about by an ostensibly Christian society of Assisi. Rather, in that great moment of grace, when (as he writes in his *Testament*) what had once been bitter to him was transformed into sweetness.

Francis came to the cardinal insight of his renewed life in Christ: namely, that all men and women, regardless of social, economic, political or moral status, were brothers and sisters, one to another, constituting a universal and sacred fraternity of creatures, all sharing the same status by virtue of their creation by God as sons and daughters of God.

This is the revelation given to him by God and which he endeavored to share with those who gathered around him in this microcosm of the sacred fraternity of creatures. And even more: If true for those human beings around him

in the West, such inherent sacrality was, of necessity, also shared equally among all other human beings in the world, including those whom the West branded as infidels and unbelievers.

One could hardly imagine a more counter-cultural vision of human life in the Middle Ages! Indeed, Francis was impelled to take this vision and to live it out in the midst of the very people whom the Church was hell-bent on destroying through the crusades. This is the radicality of the minority vision with respect to Islam and its adherents.

Early Franciscan formation had consisted, quite simply, of remaining proximate to the lives of the poor and neglected of their societies. Or, as the first lines of the ninth chapter of the Early Rule would have it: “And let [the brothers] rejoice when they find themselves among wretched and despised persons, among the poor and weak, the sick and lepers, and all those who beg along the wayside.”

This was the essential crucible for forming true Friars Minor. Alas, it was not to be so. To the extent that they distanced themselves further and further from these kinds of social locations outside the cities, out on undesirable and hard-scrabble lands, a prey to the riff-raff and near-do-wells who were the detritus of grinding poverty: to that extent, busy now about preaching and confessing the faithful in the cities, the friars would lose the experience necessary to enable the critical and transformative upheaval of the way they received and saw the world—not through



the eyes of ambition and prosperity but through eyes of the poor and lepers.

They would, in other words, simply enter the order having absorbed the traditional ways the Church viewed itself, regarding its own poor as accursed and those outside the fold of the faith as minions of Antichrist.

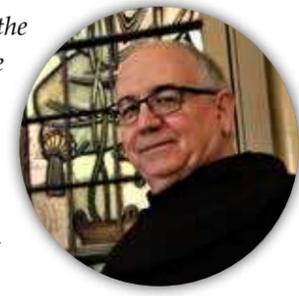
The silence of the historical record on the radical vision of Francis is telling.

This is one of the byproducts of the clericalization of the order. The issue was less a matter of an increasing number of priests and clerics flocking into the fraternity than it was the absorption of a classical way of seeing the Christian and non-Christian worlds in which the poor were largely scorned and forgotten and Muslims remained the “enemy other,” fit to be either converted or killed. To absorb a

similar read on the world would leave little place for the radical vision of the Poverello and, with it, the loss of the hope for a more faithful version of the sacred fraternity of creatures willed and desired by the Creator.

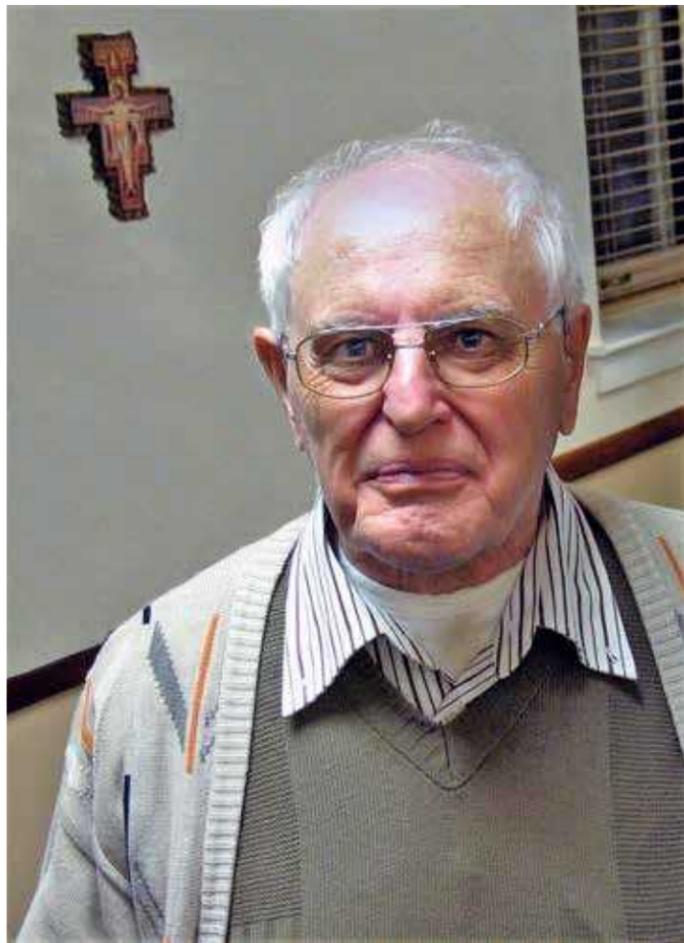
We, today, truly live in a privileged time to recover that vision. ✚

Franciscan Father Michael F. Cusato is an historian of medieval Franciscan history. He earned his doctorate in medieval history at the University of Paris IV (Sorbonne), and has written extensively on Franciscan texts and the pivotal figures in the Franciscan movement. He lives at the Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land in Washington, D.C., and serves as a translator for The Holy Land Review.



This sculpture, located in the shrine known as the “Carceri,” on Mt. Subasio, near Assisi, suggests “the universal and sacred fraternity of creatures” envisioned by St. Francis, encompassing all believers before God (photo by Greg Friedman, OFM).

Jan Hoeberichts: Scholar of the Man of Peace



Editor's Note: In 2008, six years before his passing in 2014, Dr. Jan Hoeberichts journeyed to Colorado Springs, Colorado, for a conference on the encounter between St. Francis and Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil. I had known him only by reputation, for his ground-breaking book, Francis and Islam (published in the U.S. in 1997). He was a gracious, grandfatherly man who radiated warmth and Franciscan peace. At the time, I was working on project about the encounter, and Jan graciously sat for a long interview, despite his difficulty in speaking via a tracheotomy tube.

Jan Hoeberichts was born in the Netherlands in 1929. He entered the Franciscan Order in 1946 and was ordained in 1953. After doctoral studies in Rome, he went to the mission of the Dutch friars in Pakistan, where he taught at the National Seminary in Karachi until 1974. He left the Franciscans in 1986 and married Fidelis De Cruz. But his enthusiasm for Franciscan scholarship and Christian-Muslim dialogue and Franciscan continued; he held a number of editorial and academic positions, helping further Franciscan missionary work and the study of the writings of St. Francis.

MISSIONARY AND AUTHOR

In this anniversary year, The Holy Land Review is a fitting place to include a sampling of Jan's work—in the light of the publication of his final work, Francis and the Sultan: Men of Peace, by his widow, Fidelis (reviewed here). His confrere and good friend, Franciscan Father Louis Mascarenhas, offers this tribute:

I have lived and worked with Jan for many years. We first met in Rome after the defense of his doctoral thesis in 1958. I had just come to Rome at the *Antonianum* to do my doctorate in theology, specializing in mission history. He left that same year for Pakistan and began to teach at the Major Seminary of Christ the King in Karachi, Pakistan. We had just taken responsibility for the running of the Major Seminary. Jan had just started his teaching of moral theology when a few months later on January 25, 1959 Pope John XXIII announced the convening of Vatican II,

Jan made use of this opportunity to help our local bishops to understand the documents that were being prepared for the council. When the council started in 1962 he prepared papers for our Franciscan bishop of Hyderabad, Pakistan, to understand what issues needed to be reflected on, and the value not only of the universal Church but also of the local Church.

He conducted many seminars during the next four years helping the bishops and clergy of Pakistan understand what was being discussed in Vatican II. He also kept us informed about various issues of dogmatic and moral theology that were just emerging in the council.

We organized many seminars for the priests and religious and also for the laity. Many priests and religious from Asia and Africa used to visit our seminary and to listen to what we were teaching and writing at this time.

It was not easy because the bishops—even though they were present at the council—did not understand what was happening in the Church and began to criticize our teaching. In 1974 we handed over the running of the seminary to the Bishop's Conference of Pakistan, and we Franciscans began to pay more attention to the founding of the Order in Pakistan and to stress our Franciscan contribution.

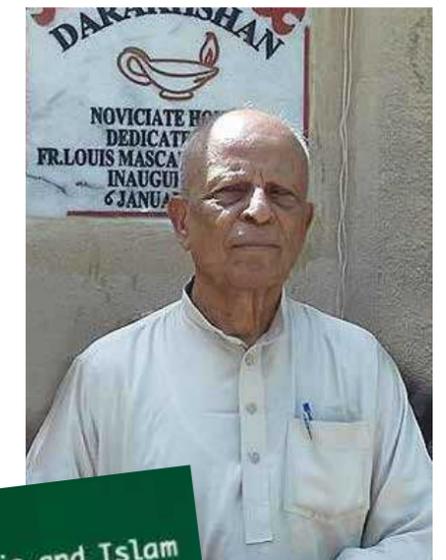
Living in a Muslim country, Jan already began to speak of interfaith dialogue and our Franciscan contribution to the local church. In 1974 he was a great support to me when we started a new formation house inserted in apartments where almost all the residents were Muslim. That same year we set up a post-novitiate program for our young friars where—

in line with the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences—stressed experienced-based theological reflection, encouraging the friars to get closer to the poor and the down-trodden.

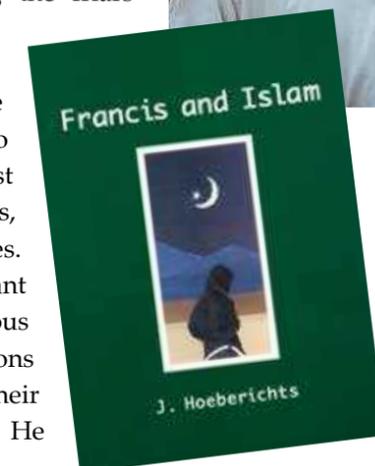
It was at this time that Jan also began to take a greater interest in the life of St Francis, and in Franciscan issues. He played an important role in helping the various Franciscan congregations understand their Franciscan vocation. He

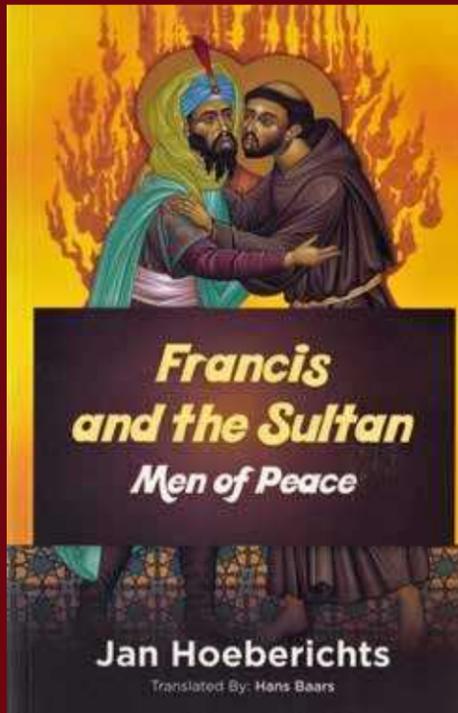
returned to Holland in the 1990s, and there he continued his research in Franciscan values and specially Francis' openness to the Sultan and to Muslims in general. He started publishing his reflections. The first book was: *To See as God Sees*, which was a big success and was welcomed by all of us in Pakistan.

Jan's final work, *Francis and the Sultan, Men of Peace*, is a very good and positive reflection on Francis and his contact with the sultan in Damietta, at a time when the Church was encouraging the Crusades against the Muslims. Francis stressed a new way of encounter, a very respectful approach to the sultan, encouraging peace and harmony.



Louis Mascarenhas, OFM





BOOK REVIEW

Francis and the Sultan: Men of Peace

by Jan Hoeberichts
(Dehli: Media House, 2018)

Review by Jason Welle, OFM

Many scholars hope that in their final years, they will have the time and energy to write that one last book, the work that ties together the themes they have been thinking about for decades. Jan Hoeberichts, a Dutch scholar of the Franciscan tradition, has accomplished this in *Francis and the Sultan: Men of Peace*. Hoeberichts witnessed the publication of the Dutch original but did not survive to see this posthumously commissioned English translation, released just in time for the 800th anniversary of the encounter.

The subtitle indicates the book's primary theme, present from the first page to the last: Francis of Assisi and Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil were men of peace, the former committed to a spirituality of peace, humility, and universal fraternity, and the latter committed to tolerance and diplomatic finesse in lieu of military conflict whenever possible.

The lion's share of the book, however, deals with Francis, and appropriately so. Hoeberichts was primarily a scholar of Francis's writings and this work tracks the development of Francis's spirituality

over the course of his life, with a special eye to the transformative influence that his encounter with Islam played upon Francis's piety in his later years.

Writing in a popular style that nonetheless manifests his academic seriousness, Hoeberichts argues that most admirers of Francis fail to appreciate the profound effects of his time in Egypt. Francis's description of the "two ways" that friars could go among the Muslims, discussed in the chapter on mission in Francis's *Earlier Rule* for the fraternity, has long been known—and Hoeberichts himself penned an excellent book on the subject, *Francis and Islam*, more than 20 years ago.

This new book extends the argument to the remainder of Francis's writings, identifying images and turns of phrase that "exhibit a remarkable similarity with themes, words and expressions that are characteristic of the faith and the prayer of Muslims" (p. 176). Perhaps the best example lies in the *Praises of God*, a litany of names for God that may exhibit stylistic parallels with the "99 Beautiful Names of God" invoked by Muslims.

One cannot prove a dependence on the voyage to Egypt for the individual elements Hoeberichts identifies in Francis's writings, but Hoeberichts argues that "the similarities are so numerous that it is difficult for us to think in terms of coincidence. They rather have a kind of cumulative effect which suggests very strongly an influence from the Muslim world" (p. 176).

This reviewer thinks that Hoeberichts has overstated his case somewhat and leveraged the evidence in some anachronistic ways, but Hoeberichts does force readers to look with fresh eyes at some passages in Francis's writings that once seemed familiar but could be read in a different direction.

Whereas most scholars of Francis's life and writings lack formative experiences among Muslims and thus may lack the ability to notice the subtle ways Francis's travels affected him, Hoeberichts presents here the most comprehensive argument to date that Islam left lasting marks upon the mind and piety of St. Francis.

The book's epilogue briefly surveys some Franciscan-inspired initiatives in recent decades that give contemporary expression to Francis's spirituality of peace in different parts of the world, an appropriate conclusion to the study of an event in 1219 that should not remain ossified in history but should spur reflection and action from believers today. One must also mention, sadly, the numerous and distracting typographical errors in the English edition; hopefully these will be rectified if the work is republished, as would be fitting for the final work of a respected scholar and tireless promoter of Muslim-Christian dialogue whose presence is much missed but whose memory remains.



Franciscan Father Jason Welle, OFM, holds a Ph.D. in Theology and Religious Studies with a concentration in Christianity and Islam from Georgetown University and is Director of Studies and Lecturer at The Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies in Rome. Fr. Jason also graciously edited the accompanying interview, taken from a transcript of the original, conducted in 2008.



Window in the church at the Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land, Washington, D.C. (photo by Greg Friedman, OFM)

An Interview with the Author

Jan Hoeberichts

What led you to be interested in the encounter between St. Francis and the Sultan?

That is a little bit of a long story. My interest in it awoke particularly in 1976. I had already been in Pakistan for 18 years. Before that, in our Franciscan province, we were prepared for the mission by a special year of formation and during that year we read also chapter 16 of the *Earlier Rule*, but it went in one ear and out the other! It really didn't affect me at all. I went to Pakistan to teach theology, at the diocesan seminary.

In our daily living chapter 16 didn't play much of a role for us as friars in the country. It started [becoming important] only in 1976 because that was the 750th anniversary of Francis' death, which was being celebrated also by our community in Pakistan. At that time Father Anselm Moons was our Franciscan superior and he came up with the idea to go out and do a mission station and come together for three days for a "chapter of mats" [a meeting of friars modeled on a famous gathering held in Assisi in 1213].

At that time there was no one really who had studied very much about Francis and chapter 16. So Anselm asked me, "Could you at our chapter meeting introduce chapter 16? Particularly, what could we as a group of followers of Francis mean for a Church in Pakistan." We had been there as missionaries, priests, teachers...but we hadn't really been present there as friars. Now that we are handing over parishes [to the Pakistani friars and local bishops], what can we as friars mean for the Church in Pakistan?

So I started really studying chapter 16 and I became very much interested in it, particularly in view of Vatican II and dialogue with other religions. Later, when I went back to Holland in 1986, I had a research fellowship at a Franciscan study center to work for two years on chapter 16 of the *Earlier Rule* and to see where it could lead as a publication. My book, *Francis and Islam*, is the fruit of that research.

But again, I didn't want just an intellectual dialogue....I had learned much about the movement within the Church in Asia toward a different type of dialogue, what they then called "the dialogue of life,"

which is what Francis wanted: [something] concrete, concretizing life as service, being subject. That is also where I think that the importance lies of Francis' approach for today.



Can you take us back to Francis' encounter with the sultan and why his journey was a different than the crusaders?

Francis lived at a time of violence and war, everywhere around him. The pope was organizing his crusades but also each city was having its own wars with the neighboring city: Assisi with Perugia, and Pisa with Genoa, Padua with Venice. They were all fighting one another.

Then Francis comes to his insight about why all this fighting was going on. The bishop asks him, "Francis why do you want to live without any possessions?" And Francis tells him clearly, "Because I consider possessions the cause of all of the violence and war.... If you have possessions you need an army to defend them."

So there it starts, with that insight—the evil of appropriation, when you start grabbing things and consider them your own and don't want any longer to share them with others. More recently I have come to the insight—and I don't know whether it is entirely

correct—that Francis saw also how *truth* could become a possession and how then in defense of the truth the Church did many things that he could not approve of: the crusade against the Albigensians, or other crusades, using violence in order—as it were—to defend its truth.

I think that Francis was moving away from that somehow. Even in Francis's [ocean] passage to the crusade, he practiced a mission of peace and service. Most probably, he just went to the captain of the ship and said, "Can I be of service?" There were always sick passengers on board and I imagine that he and his brother took care of sick passengers, earning his safe passage to the Middle East.

Elsewhere in the *Earlier Rule*, Francis says that the brothers should work in the spirit of being subject to everybody in the house. He wants their greeting of peace to be made concrete

by the brothers, [offering] their work as a service to whoever is there. In this sense, the term "mendicant" doesn't do justice to the typical charism of Francis. We are workers. We do our work not to gain. We do our work as a service and to hope also that we are paid. With what we receive in payment we can also help the needy people, the lepers, and so on. But that is our task: work. And in that way, by work as service, being subject does bring peace to the world. Work as a means to increase property divides people, while work—not as a means of appropriation—but as a service of peace, brings people together. That is the basic insight that Francis has. ✚

Photo: Sr. Kathy Warren, OSF, Dr. Jan Hoeberichts, Cathy Tisel Nelson and Fidelis Hoeberichts, Colorado Springs, 2008. (photo courtesy of Fidelis De Cruz Hoeberichts)

Franciscan Mission: A Pilgrimage of Encounter

By Manuel Corullón, OFM



The Franciscan missionary presence in the midst of Islam sinks its roots in the encounter of Francis with the sultan. It is a mission characterized by moving about in the world among the people and mixing in with them. The mission is to announce peace, without becoming involved in disputes. Rather, the friars are to be subordinate to all creatures, doing honest work (Test 20).

Such an attitude applies to friars who accept the difficult vocation of a mission among unbelievers. As other articles in this special issue point out, that mission was a part of Francis' earliest preference (see chapter 16 of the Earlier Rule). With

it comes one of the most distinctly Franciscan ways to spread the Gospel: preaching by example.

After eight centuries the preference of St. Francis for missions to the Muslim world is still in force. The privileged option of the Order in this sense makes it the inheritor of a beautiful presence "with humility and great dedication." It embraces different

realities and forms of service, and a presence in the breadth and width of lands where Islam flourishes.

In these places the brothers combine pastoral activities and service to the local Church with service to Muslims through various social and cultural works—in countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Djibouti, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Libya,

Malaysia, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Syria, Somalia, Sudan and Turkey.

Our presence as missionaries

The legacy of the missionary presence among Islam is above all a call to responsibility for today's brothers because, if it is true that going among Muslims supposes a "special vocation," it is also certain

that it continues to be a call to generosity.

From the moment of Francis' first mission, the Friars Minor put the accent on interreligious dialogue and, concretely, dialogue with Islam within the broad spectrum of the Church's evangelical mission. It continues being part of our charism as Friars Minor. We are grateful to those brothers who, since the example of Francis in his encounter with the sultan, evolved the basic model of evangelizing: simple presence, coming together and silent witness. They established in this way the foundation for the mission *ad gentes* (literally, "to the nations"), always open to new discoveries. Every day we must be willing to initiate unknown paths of presence and witness.

Five signs of encounter and friendship

The encounter between St. Francis and the sultan continues alive today in our midst, not only as a model to follow but as a live and real incarnation of coming together by way of those brothers living amid Islam. I would like to share five stories from my own experience as a missionary in Morocco:

The bishop's muddied boots

I had recently arrived in Morocco. I had in mind all that my years of education had taught me about theology and inter-religious dialogue. Now was the time to make it come alive. The Muslim holy month of Ramadan was at hand. The late Franciscan Archbishop of Tangier, Morocco, José Antonio Peteiro Freire—who headed the archdiocese from 1985-2005—a great man within and without, asked me to accompany him.

We drove to a place where the highways and roads ended. A group of youths led us through the mud of the shantytown to the home of a humble family which was waiting for us as their illustrious guests to break the fast on the first night of Ramadan. There, lit by a gas lamp, hot soup and homemade bread were laid on a table moved to the corner to avoid a leak entering from between the roof tiles. Back home with my bishop my memory retained the picture of that encounter, his boots caked with mud, a big smile on his lips.

The tallin of condolences

A deceased father or mother is never fully dead. This fact



Marie-Armelle Beaulieu/CTS

impresses itself on us when the moment of mourning arrives, when we rush to leave, hurrying to our family for the last goodbye to a parent no longer alive. In my case there were two messages, some cancelled appointments and two journeys to reach my family's home. While I was away with my family, my Moroccan friends went to visit my "family" here—my Franciscan brothers, to bring

their condolences accompanied by sweets, *tallin* and *couscous*. Upon my return they surprised me again with the table set, sharing the pain of a lost father and sharing the same hope. After 40 days, there was the *sadaqa*, celebration of appreciation to friends for condolences received.

Ramadan with friends.

Many of our Muslim friends surprise us with their well-wishes

on the feasts of Christmas and Easter. And many also surprise all of us each year inviting us to share their feast of sacrifice, the *ftur*, during *Ramadan*. At one such feast, we Franciscans gathered in the home of one of our friends, a Moroccan Muslim, to celebrate with him this holy time of Islam. Many questions arose during the dialogue about his traditions and the meaning of the holy month-long celebration. Our host concluded by saying, "Let Manuel explain it as he can say it better than I can." And curiously, I found myself, there in the home of a Moroccan family, giving almost the entire religious teaching on the penitential meaning of *Ramadan* and its spiritual importance for all Muslims.

Street bread

Bread can be a sacred food, respectfully kissed before eating. At the entrance of old Medina marketplace of Marrakech, I observed street kids looking for discarded pieces of bread, their only food. With a certain feeling of shame, I opened my shopping basket and shared my bread with them. Surprised, they began to accompany me for quite a while, opening a path for me in the middle of the tumult of the marketplace,

helping me shop while I continued sharing my bread with them.

Evening prayer

I was on a train trip, enjoying a moment of silence, rest and meditation, and a moment of prayer in the middle of a voyage. A youth alongside observes me with curiosity, intent to decipher what I am reading and what he could read on my face while my eyes were closed. A dialogue began. I simply said I was praying. We began to speak of prayer—his and mine, Islamic prayers and Christian prayers—of his desires and aspirations for peace and his projects as a youth. On arriving at my destination, we said goodbye. He told me. "God looks at you kindly and grants you peace." We said goodbye with a handshake and at that moment I felt blessed. ✚

Franciscan Father Manuel Corullón is a missionary in Morocco, and a member of the Franciscan (OFM) Order's Commission for Dialogue with Islam.



'The Sultan AND the Saint'

A contemporary film documentary revisits the historic encounter.

By Greg Friedman, OFM

On the day after Christmas 2017, a national public television audience had the opportunity to experience the story of Sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil and Saint Francis of Assisi. An estimated audience of between three to six million viewers watched *The Sultan and the Saint* on their local PBS stations.

The film, written and directed by Alex Kronemer and narrated by Academy award-winner Jeremy Irons, has gone on to win “best documentary” at some 20 film festivals. It continues to be shown around the world, prompting local dialogue centering on this historic encounter.

Maryland-based Unity Productions produced the film. Founded in 1999 by two American Muslims. *The Holy Land Review* spoke with Unity’s Daniel Tutt, who served as associate producer and coordinates Unity’s educational outreach for its media. He explained that the founders “began a sort of reach-out campaign to the Muslim community here in the United States.” With a background in media, they were “interested in telling the story of this religion, of its history, of its culture, with the focus on broad education.”

Rather than focus only on a Muslim audience, Unity “would be reaching out, promoting interfaith engagement, promoting religious literacy and competency in understanding this religion.” He added, “You’re fighting almost a Sisyphean task [in the face] of the world’s political events. But it’s also an opportunity...[to look] at this culture and this religion in a different way. Our mission, therefore, is to counter a lot of the Islamophobia and the bigotry that exists in the Western European and American context.”

After Unity’s first film project, on the life of the

Prophet Muhammad, the group recognized “that there’s more to be done with film than just broadcast, film festivals, awards, and screenings. There’s actually a relational component involved and an educational component...to get it in front of librarians, teachers, interfaith activists, pastors, rabbis and imams, to really drive conversations at a grassroots level around the films.

“We’ve been able to do a high quantity of engagements through support from different foundations, like the United States Institute of Peace, the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and many, many other family foundations, to really drive discussions, to reach wide numbers of people.”

A forgotten history

The Sultan and the Saint was Unity Production’s ninth documentary. Daniel Tutt pointed out that “in some ways, the story is still a forgotten history.” He added that “in interfaith circles, this story is certainly talked about, it’s certainly referenced, but those circles tend to be more academic. They tend to be folks that are in the know. I felt that the narrative was a very rich symbol for interfaith dialogue and encounter.

“On the one hand, you have [what] I would call ‘distorted histories’ on the Catholic side. And then on the Muslim side, you have a complete lack of awareness, mainly of the figure of alKamil, who, as you know, is eclipsed by the figure of Salah ad-Din [ruler of Egypt and Syria who fought and defeated the Crusader armies in the 12th century].

Franciscan author Sister Kathy Warren, who has

Above, the film presents St. Francis in the Crusader camp, with his companion, Br. Illuminato, presenting the request to visit the Muslim camp, to the papal legate, Cardinal Pelagius. At the far right: the filmmakers imagine the meeting of the sultan and Francis. (Images courtesy of Unity Productions)

written about the encounter from a Christian and Franciscan perspective (*Daring to Cross the Threshold: Francis of Assisi Encounters Sultan Malek Al-Kamil*) and appears in the film, resonated with the filmmakers’ approach: “For too many centuries the story was used to promote a message of Christian superiority. Unsubstantiated embellishments were added to the story to give a very different interpretation of Francis’ presence in the Muslim camp as well as his purpose in going there.”

Daniel Tutt said that Unity’s previous work focused on “bringing to life forgotten stories.” He added, “We had the idea of doing this film probably a decade prior. We had always kicked it around, sort of waiting for the right moment to do it. And I really think that what Pope Francis opened up, especially with his engagement with the Muslim world in a very positive way, felt that it was the right time to do this.”

Recreating a medieval story

The film is a “docudrama,” built around historical reenactments, supplemented by interviews with scholars. “We shot everything in Baltimore at a bottling factory that had shut down and had been reconverted into a film studio in the harbor,” Tutt recalled. “All of the interior shots were recreated in that studio, and all the scholarly interviews....All of the exterior shots, the battle scenes, and all of the scenes



of Francis and al-Kāmil in Egypt and Damietta were actually filmed at Assateague Island in Maryland.”

While the coast of Maryland substituted for the Mediterranean Ocean and the Nile River, the producers tried to make the other visual elements true to the story’s medieval setting. “All of the costuming was as authentic as we could get,” Tutt pointed out. “We not only interviewed the leading Franciscan historians and scholars on the encounter, but they also weighed in on costuming, scenes and background settings.” The goal? “To preserve as much authentic portrayal as possible.”

Research for the project stretched over two years before its November 2016 release. As part of that process, the producers interviewed some 25 experts over hundreds of hours to develop the working script. About a third of those scholars appear on camera. They provide expertise in Islam, Christianity and Judaism—including three Franciscan scholars.

Pulitzer-prize-winning journalist Paul Moses, whose popularly written book, *The Saint and the Sultan*, explored the lives of both al-Kāmil and Francis, appears in the film. “We consulted with Paul a great deal,” said Daniel Tutt, to present “a nice background story summary of the encounter. And I felt that his

Below, a Crusader on the shore at Damietta, Egypt, stands over the dead body of one of his victims. As part of its presentation, the film examined the effect of violence on the human brain. (Image courtesy of Unity Productions)

portraying it in such a way where secular audiences can resonate with it, is very important to keep the story still relevant.” Paul Moses agreed. “I was very happy to see the film being made,” he told *The Holy Land Review*. It’s done a lot to make the story better known. He added, “That’s what I was hoping for, to get the word out in a way a TV show could do.”

Violence and the human brain

One perspective unique to *The Sultan and the Saint* came from neuroscience. The producers wanted to explore how the religious and political conflict depicted in the film involved both the demonization of the other and its accompanying violence. The question, according to Tutt, was “What’s actually going on at this subjective level when people are thrown into violent situations?”

Dr. Emile Bruneau, a neuroscientist at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication, narrates how the human brain functions in violent conflict situations. His remarks are complemented by a mix of reenacted battle scenes with animation suggesting the working of the brain and nervous system. Bruneau has himself worked in conflict regions around the world and specializes in applying neuroscience to the study of hostility between political or religious groups.

The Crusades are the historical backdrop for the encounter in the film, which depicts the political and religious issues involved, as well as the reality that

the Church’s efforts to re-claim the Holy Land for Christianity became sidetracked into violence against Jews and even Christians in the East, in addition to the de-humanization and bloody wars against the Muslims who were the declared enemies.

Daniel Tutt pointed out that the producers’ hope was to explore what took place. “Of course, it’s an incredibly complex phenomenon, like all social phenomenon are, but I think this [film] gives people a sort of framework to understand it.”

In doing so, the film does not shy away from a graphic depiction of the brutality of war. “If the film were rated it would be PG with violence,” Daniel Tutt observed. Franciscan historian Father Michael Cusato, who appears in the film, noted that “One of the most original—though not uncontroversial—aspects of the *The Sultan and the Saint* is its visual emphasis on the violence of the Fifth Crusade and of warfare in general.”

Other treatments of the Crusades have, Fr. Michael observed, “more often than not, soft-pedaled [it] in favor of putting the emphasis upon the religious fervor supposedly underpinning—and therefore, justifying—the extreme violence of the western Christian campaign to crush Muslim strongholds in the Holy Land. But the fact of the matter is that these were bloody, face-to-face, hand-to-hand clashes resulting in the deaths and injuries of thousands of men and women.”

Commenting on the film’s “exploration of the neurological processes which occur in human beings during moments of violent urges and actions,” he added, “by contrast the film asserts how those same processes can be reversed or abated when they are redirected towards more positive human relations and actions. This is really what the director of the film was trying to get at; and the pacific relationship struck up between Francis and al-Malik al-Kāmil is the prime example of how violent, ingrained urges can be transformed into something more positive and constructive.”

Zack Beyer portrayed Sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil in the film. (Image courtesy of Unity Productions)



Who was the sultan?

Daniel Tutt pointed out that “St. Francis has thousands of pages written about him. al-Kāmil on the other hand, is a fascinating figure but in many ways unknown in [our] contemporary period both to Muslims and to the West.

“But this was not the case during his own time. Here’s a man who was a fond admirer of scholars. He was an incredible diplomat. He was an incredible military tactician and strategist, and what we discovered through research was [that he was] very much a catalyst to rerouting the Crusades from having to do with the attainment of Jerusalem.

“When he created the peace after the Fifth Crusade over Jerusalem, this was a significant event in the history of the Crusades. Of course, it did not end the Crusades, but it was a moment that shaped the future direction and de-intensified the conflict towards a more peaceful resolution.”

As in every docudrama, Tutt noted, artistic and scholarly choices had to be made, especially about figures like Francis and al-Kāmil, whose stories have been embellished and even distorted over time. “We would always choose to emphasize a fact or a story line that had general scholarly consensus. We didn’t adopt any of the outlandish ideas, like al-Kāmil was a secret Christian. We tried to stick very much to the main stream of the scholarship.”





Who was the saint?

“We did not decide to paint St. Francis as a kind of new ager, as a kind of figure who was above religion,” Tutt explained. “Rather, we tried to show that, in fact, he was a medieval Christian who most likely went to the Sultan with the interest in converting him. And that is a beautiful thing from a storytelling standpoint because here you see a wonderful transformation, and we tried to show



that transformation in the film.” The filmmakers highlighted “the modification that Francis made to the rules of his order on how to deal with religious ‘others,’ particularly Muslims. [This] is sort of the proof that his encounter with the Sultan was not only something that was subjectively transformative but actually was institutionally transformative for the Franciscan Order.”

Sr. Kathy Warren underscored the deeper lessons of the film. “I agree with the film’s perspective that Francis was not a supporter of the crusades, especially to settle such major conflicts. I believe the portrayal of the dialogue and the respect shown between Francis and al-Kamil offers a powerful method for dealing with conflict today.”

Sr. Kathy explained that “Francis was a master at understanding and embracing the human condition—the whole of it—the joys and the struggles. I believe this is one of the traits that makes Francis one of the most well-known persons in history. Francis’ approach to Islam was simply a stretching of the understanding he had come to about the human condition. Francis, through his encounter with a leper, came to understand that every human being, without exception, is brother and sister. This insight is rooted in the belief that each of us have the same Creator, the One God, from who we come and to whom we are all returning.”

She noted that “this key insight meant that all those who were ‘officially’ excluded from the society in which Francis lived prior to his ‘conversion’—lepers, heretics, Jews, Muslims, etc.—were not ‘others.’ Francis

came to realize the universal kinship of all of humanity, no exceptions. Thus, he approached the Muslims in the Sultan’s camp not as ‘the hated enemy’ or ‘the beast’ but as his own brothers and sisters.” The story, she said, “helps us to realize how very radical Francis’ approach to living in the world and in the Church was and continues to be.

A continuing impact

Daniel Tutt and the team at Unity Productions are pleased with the film’s impact, particularly in its educational outreach. “I think the impact, in addition to the broadcast, the film festivals, and the international distribution of the film, has been most felt at the educational grassroots engagement level,” he said. “To date, we’ve had 5,000 requests from institutions for the film. So this means they’re either receiving it, in most cases, on DVD and will be hopefully screening it multiple times either in the classroom, at the library, at the congregation, etc. That reaches deep.”

Unity has a campaign in the United States to foster dialogue between Christian evangelicals and Pentecostals, with Muslim communities. To date, Tutt says, “We’ve had 50 encounter events with the film... where evangelicals use the film as an invitation to bring Muslims into their sacred space and have a dialogue. It’s very exciting.”

For this anniversary year, Daniel Tutt said he hopes “this docudrama, addressing such an important event in history, when you do it in such a way that resonates for the long duration...becomes evergreen and can be utilized as a tool for many years. It doesn’t go out of fashion.”

Sr. Kathy Warren, from a Franciscan perspective, has found a positive reaction: “I have shown the film to several audiences and found that it shocks, offends, stretches, enlightens and even angers.” She recalled the reaction of one viewer who observed during a discussion following a viewing of *The Sultan and the Saint*, “I think this film and this discussion is turning me into a ‘recovering Islamophobe.’ I am so grateful that I came tonight, and I have much to think about. I know I will attend the follow up session at the mosque to continue hearing about the parts of this reality that I’ve never had the opportunity to encounter.” ✝

For more information on *The Sultan and the Saint*: www.sultanandthesaintfilm.com



Photo at top: Alexander McPherson portrayed Francis of Assisi in the film.

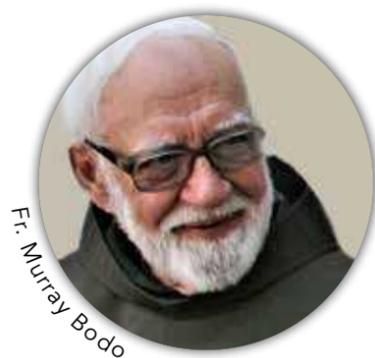
Photo at bottom: Francis in the court of Sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil.

Photo opposite: the Muslim camp at Damietta, Egypt. (Images courtesy of Unity Productions)

Bringing the Gift of Peace

An Interview with Murray Bodo, OFM
by Greg Friedman, OFM

Franciscan Father Murray Bodo is a poet and spiritual writer who has shared the spirituality of Francis of Assisi with countless readers and pilgrims over more than six decades. In this interview, he presents a poet's perspective on the historic meeting between Francis and the sultan.



What in the life of St. Francis led to his encounter the sultan?

Thomas of Celano, Francis's first biographer, says that Francis went to Damietta in the 13th year of his "conversion." So, we need to ask ourselves, conversion from what? What was he? Who was he? Well, by that time he was a deeply spiritual committed Christian in love with Jesus Christ.

By 1219, Francis has been led by God through a process of conversion from that of the son of one of Assisi's wealthiest merchants, with the dream of being knight. But Francis' experience of

war and a year as a prisoner of war, and a long period of soul-searching, through what today we would call "post-traumatic stress disorder." What emerged was a man whose whole orientation is toward the broken, the alienated, the marginal people, and a deep love for Jesus Christ.

In the *Testament* Francis wrote for his brothers, he emphasizes right at the beginning, "When I was in sins it seemed to me a repulsive thing to see lepers. And then the Lord himself led me among them. And what before was repulsive to me was turned into sweetness of



soul and body for me." That transition is the great conversion of his life.

And now the man who is going to go and appear before the sultan in Damietta in Egypt in 1219 already has over 5,000 brothers all through Europe. He is a man who is the founder of an order in the Church. It's in the 13th year of his conversion from a way of life he could not have imagined as a little boy born into the emerging middle class, with dreams of glory as a knight, whose exploits matched those sung by the French *troubadours*.

You have written about Francis' conversion in terms of the "geography" of Assisi.

Another way to look at his conversion is to try to imagine *geographically* what happened to Francis of Assisi. Assisi is a walled medieval city, a world unto its own. Everything outside of those walls was the scary part of the world, a wilderness where robbers and wild animals roamed. Even though changes in the world of commerce meant that the old Roman roads were slowly being opened, the city itself was still self-contained.

Within Assisi there were layers of importance. At the top of the city lived the nobility, the *majores*, an Italian term for those who were "more." The rising middle class occupied the middle of city, but they

were still *minores* compared to the *maiores*, as were the "lowest of the low," the serfs and lepers. Francis names his order "the Order of Lesser Brothers," the *minores* because he begins to identify with people in the lowest stratum of medieval society.

He does more than that however. He goes outside the walls he had been hiding behind all his life and descends to the swampy plain below the city where the lepers lived.

So this "descent" is kind of a way to describe Franciscan spirituality, the Franciscan way we go to God, which is in fact the way God came to us—by going down, by descending. As St. Paul writes in his Letter to the Philippians, "*Christ Jesus...though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness... and became obedient, obedient even to death upon the cross* (Philippians 2:5-8).

That's *the* image for Francis: The way to go to God is the way that God came to us, by descending. Francis goes down to the lepers who were considered those most outside of society and lives among them and embraces them and finds God there. This is the great discovery—that Francis finds God or, rather, God finds him in unexpected places—especially among the lepers.



How do we see this "Franciscan way" in Francis' visit with the Sultan?

From a medieval Christian point of view Muslims were the unbelievers, outsiders living outside of salvation. When Francis goes "among the non-believers," the Muslims in Damietta, he is undaunted, because he knows from his past experience that God will find him there and he will find God there in an unexpected place.

I think that when Francis left the camp of the European armies at Damietta, he was doing a very countercultural thing. He wasn't going as a crusader. He didn't carry weapons. He went as a person of peace. Francis wouldn't use our term "peacemaking." For him, peace was a gift. *Jesus* was the gift of peace.

I imagine that the first thing that Francis said going into the Sultan's presence was, "May God give you peace." Francis himself tells us in his *Testament*, "The Lord



himself gave me this greeting that I should say, 'God give you peace.'"

And I'm sure that hearing this, the sultan had to be moved because he was in the presence of someone who embodied "dispossession." Francis has relinquished possession of his own life. It doesn't belong to him. It belongs to Christ. And he comes with this gift of peace.

In effect, he would have been telling the sultan, "I am bringing you peace. And the peace that I have is the gift of Jesus Christ because I am in him and he is in me. This Jesus has told me that the gift that he has given us is the gift of love; we are to love one another. Jesus told us that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for his friends. I will lay down my life for you because you are my friend. I want us to be peace together."

That's the sort of thing Francis would have said to the sultan. He's bringing a gift that he has received. Because Francis himself has become a person of peace, then he has peace to give. He is the peace that he brings to the Sultan.

The Russian mystic Saint Serephim says that if you become a person of peace, a thousand souls will be converted around you. Francis wasn't coming as a negotiator, to sit down and say, "Now let's work out a peace between the Crusaders and the Muslim population, between the Sultan and the leader of the crusading forces." Francis came talking about the gift that they both have in God, that the great gift of God is peace.

How does this approach of Francis connect to the other themes of his life?

Francis' vision embraced all of creation. Through his time in prison and his own inner spiritual struggles, he learned that things are not always what they seem. Those who seem to be our enemies are sometimes our greatest friends.

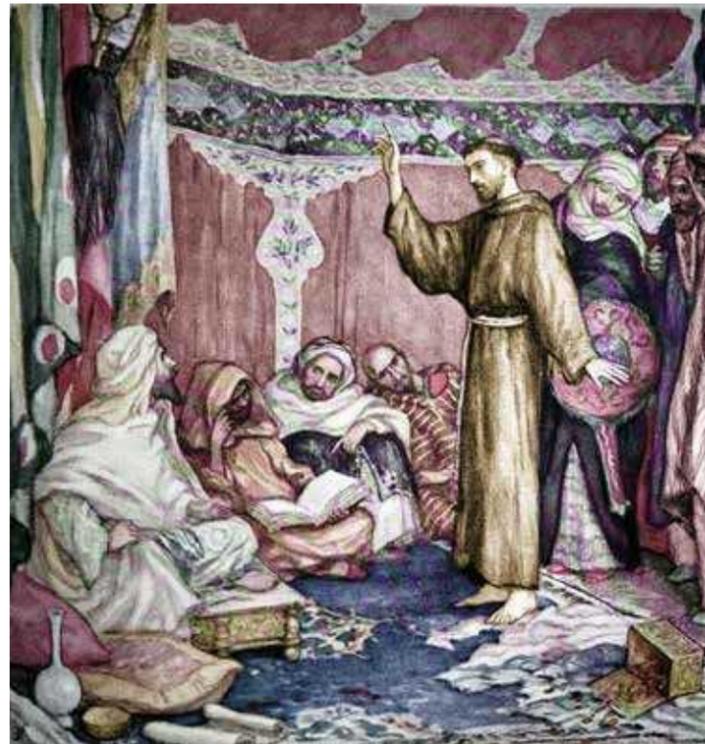
In 1219, Francis was in the process of writing a rule of life. It went through more than one version and was not approved by the Holy See until 1223. It's very interesting to me that right before he went to Damietta, Francis wrote this passage for his rule:

"All my brothers, let us pay attention to what the Lord says: Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you. For the Lord Jesus Christ whose footprints we must follow called his betrayer a friend and willingly offered himself to his executioners. Our friends, therefore my brothers, are all those who unjustly inflict upon us distress and anguish, shame and injury, sorrow and punishment, martyrdom and death. We must love them greatly for we shall possess eternal life because of what they bring us. And what they bring us is the true vision."

We tend to look for God where things are very comfortable, but

as we grow older we begin to see that we find God in trying circumstances. We find God in people we thought hated us, we thought were our enemies. And we come to see them sometimes as people who have brought us the greatest gift because they brought us true love.

If I can love the person I think is my enemy, then I begin to understand what real love is.



The so-called enemy can become a friend, can see in me what true love is. We call the transformation that takes place, *peace*. We begin to experience peace of soul which is the foundation of all peacemaking. I cannot ever come to that experience unless I learn to love those who don't think the way I do, those who hurt me. I have to forgive those whom I might think are going to hurt me and whom I forgive.

When Francis offers this passage for his rule, he indicates that he is going to Egypt to meet a friend and brother, no matter what happens because God will be in that encounter if Francis can forgive. Francis comes before the sultan not to pronounce judgment—which is a very violent thing when you think about it—nor to say "I know everything"—which is again a sort of violent possessiveness. Rather, he would have approached the encounter with love for one who was perceived by the Crusader armies arrayed against him as an enemy.

What might Francis have said next?

I can imagine Francis approaching the sultan saying, "Whatever your people just did to me (if Francis had been roughed up on his way in or tortured), I forgive all of that. We're starting at a totally different level from who is right and who is wrong, or what do you believe and what do I believe?"

Francis would have "made himself subject" to the truth of who the sultan was, as "a word of God." Francis believed that this word of God would have something to say to him. Again, I imagine Francis saying:

"I come with all of my truth to you, sultan. And you are presenting your truth to me. We are subject to one another in the truth of who we are. Here peace begins to happen. I am open to you. And are you open to me. You're like a flower that I'm looking at. You are revealing all kinds of blossoming and opening to me. And I hope I am doing that to you."

"I am opening up the truth of who I am as a Christian. You are opening up

the truth of who you are as a Muslim. You have already become a person of peace. I can see it in your eyes. You don't want this war any more than I do. You want there to be peace. And in our relationship with one another, this peace is beginning because peace is a gift of Allah. It's a gift of God. Here between us we open ourselves to one another, despite what all of your courtiers are saying.

"I can tell that they are frowning about this. If the crusaders were here they would be very upset by the fact that I am opening myself to your truth and you to mine. It begins with you and me, sultan. You know that; I see it in your face and you see it in me."

What would have made that exchange possible?

I think Francis and the sultan were listening to one another. Francis was sharing who he was as a Christian. His whole life had been transformed by Jesus Christ. He was by that time, in my opinion, almost transformed into Christ. He was like a mirror of Christ in his own time.

The sultan is sharing what *Allah* means to him, what *Allah* has done in his life, what that means to him. They are listening to one another. I think that's where the bonding really happened, between two men who were willing to listen and not just impose their own ideas upon one another.

What does this historic encounter tell us about the Franciscan mission today especially, in the Holy Land??

The Franciscan approach is just that: becoming familiar with the people to whom you're supposed

to share this Gospel. We begin by listening. The first thing is to learn their language, and what a listening process that is! To really know a language other than your own, you enter into the soul of the people. It's only then that you can even begin to share Jesus Christ.

So in that sense, Francis was very countercultural because in the Church of his time, under Pope Innocent III and his successors, a military solution was very much the response of Christians to "outsiders," or "non-believers," their so-called "enemies."

All of this is very important for today because in our world a military response still seems to be the solution to problems. But there are other ways. Francis of Assisi and Sultan Al-Malik al-Kāmil began a tradition among us Franciscans and for all of those who are touched by our lives and whose lives touch us.

In view of this encounter between the sultan and Francis, it's interesting that today the Franciscans are those who officially represent the Christian world in the places that refer to the life of Christ in the Holy Land. ✚

The illustrations for this article come from a collection of watercolors by a Benedictine priest of the Abbey of Solesmes, France, Father Pedro Subercaseaux Errazuriz, published as *Saint François d'Assise*, by Marshall Jones Company (Copyright 1925 Boston). The illustrations show Francis in the midst of a battle (p. 54); Francis blessing the city of Assisi as he is dying (p. 55) and Francis with the sultan, opposite page.



A Final Word

COMMISSARY OF THE HOLY LAND,
WASHINGTON, D.C.

Dear Friend of the Holy Land,

This issue of *The Holy Land Review* commemorates a very important moment in the history of the Holy Land—800 years since Saint Francis of Assisi met with the Sultan of Egypt to plead for peace. The year was 1219 and the fighting fierce between the Muslims and Christian Crusaders. It was a very dangerous move for Francis to cross into enemy territory, but his bold gesture—as the articles in this issue point out—became a model for others, and eventually paved the way for the friars to welcome millions of Christians at the sacred Christian sites in the Holy Land.

The Holy Land Franciscans have been a presence throughout the region since that meeting in 1219, often at great danger to themselves but always willing to place the needs of others above their own safety. Eight hundred years later, they continue to care for many of the sacred Christian sites, but more importantly they care for the “living stones,” the Christian people, many of whose descendants have existed in the Holy Land since the early days of Christianity.

The Franciscans live side by side with the Christians who remain in the Holy Land. The friars run schools, training centers, hospitals, homes for the elderly, parishes and many other endeavors that help Christians stay despite immense challenges. Many of these same Holy Land friars have lived here at the Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land in America, learning English or other skills, preparing for the Holy Land or retiring once their life of service enters a new chapter. No matter their situation—their focus, hopes and dreams remain the same as Saint Francis’ 800 years ago: to live with a quiet faith that promotes peace among all peoples in the Holy Land.

Peace today is fragile in the Holy Land and around the world, but we here at the Franciscan Monastery in Washington, D.C., continue to work and pray for peace for all peoples in the Holy Land and peace in the hearts of all those who visit our grounds. Whether you can visit us physically or at our website—www.myfranciscan.org—you are invited to join us in our mission of peace.

In Christ and St. Francis,

Larry C. Dunham, OFM

Fr. Larry Dunham, OFM

Top: Francis and the Sultan, Cristoforo di Bindoccio, chiamato Malabarba o Malombra, e Meo di Pero, ca. 1380, Pienza (Siena), Church of San Francesco

Bottom: Pope Francis and Sheik Ahmad el-Tayeb, grand imam of Egypt’s al-Azhar mosque and university, embrace during an interreligious meeting at the Founder’s Memorial in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, Feb. 4, 2019. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



With a heart grateful to the Lord, in this eighth centenary of the meeting between Saint Francis of Assisi and Sultan al-Malik al Kāmil, I have welcomed the opportunity to come here as a believer thirsting for peace, as a brother seeking peace with the brethren. We are here to desire peace, to promote peace, to be instruments of peace.

- Pope Francis, Abu Dhabi,
United Arab Emirates,
February 4, 2019

WELCOME TO OUR BACKYARD! Let us show you around.

The Holy Land
Franciscans -
celebrating over
800 years of living,
working, and
guiding pilgrims
in the Holy Land.



Many pilgrimages scheduled in 2019 and 2020!

Holy Land and Jordan
September 23-October 3, 2019

Holy Land and Jordan
October 2-12, 2019

Holy Land and Jordan
October 17-28, 2019

For a full list of pilgrimages, visit us at MyFranciscan.org