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and  
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Christian Muslim  
Dialogue:  
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# Christian Muslim Dialogue: Continuity from Francis of Assisi to Pope Francis

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1219, during the Fifth Crusade, St Francis of Assisi set out for Egypt to visit the head of the Muslim armies. The crusades were essentially holy wars prosecuted against the Saracens or Muslims.<sup>1</sup> Pope Innocent III (1198-1226), a powerful and influential figure, approved of St Francis' way of life. But he also instituted the Fourth and Fifth crusades which, like the others, were built on a theology of violence as can be seen from St Bernard of Clairvaux, a voracious advocate for them, writing in *Praise of the New Militia* (Chapter Three):

‘The knight of Christ, I say, may strike with confidence and die yet more confidently, for he serves Christ when he strikes, and serves himself when he falls ... when he inflicts death it is to Christ's profit, and when he suffers death, it is for his own gain. The Christian glories in the death of the pagan, because Christ is glorified ...’<sup>2</sup>

Eight hundred years later two interesting happenings occurred in the first quarter of 2019. First, Pope Francis visited the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (3-5 February) and second, in stark contrast,

1 Saracens is Arabic for Easterners. The crusades extended from 1096-1221.

2 <https://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/344bern2.html> accessed 26th March 2019.

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the Christchurch, New Zealand, mosque shootings (15 March) resulted in 50 deaths and many non-fatal injuries. Clashes between Christians and Muslims have a long, sad history and are still with us. Some have even suggested an impending clash of civilisations where cultural and religious identities will be the primary source of conflict.<sup>3</sup> Such thinking may, at least in part, account for US President Trump's controversial ban on entry to the US of nationals from several Muslim countries.

### ST FRANCIS OF ASSISI AND THE FIFTH CRUSADE (1217-1221)

Pope Innocent III writes, in the context of the crusades, 'If anyone wants to follow me to the cross let him also follow me to the battle.' He proposed this as a test of faith for all Christians. In St Francis' time those who joined the crusades marked their clothing with a large red cross as a symbol of 'taking up his cross'; the cross became a symbol of violence. The Fourth Crusade was a disaster whose legacy is still felt in Christendom. The crusaders reached Constantinople and instead of proceeding further ransacked the city to an extent that the people declared the 'Saracens would have treated us better'" – giving rise to a lasting split between the Orthodox and Latin churches, not healed to this day. Notwithstanding this, its author, Pope Innocent III ordered a new crusade – the Fifth.

St Francis and his followers would give a new meaning to the phrase "taking up his cross" by proposing the cross in the form of the Tau (a capital T) as a symbol of peace-making. In addition, a cosmic dimension to his spirituality became evident when he takes the unusual initiative of setting out for Egypt, not to engage in battle but to seek peace. During the journey, he arrived in Damietta, a town on the Egyptian coast, and against the advice of the Christian military commanders, crossed the demilitarised zone. Saracen soldiers captured him and his companion, Bro Illuminatio, and after beating and insulting them brought them to Malik al-Kamil, the head of the Muslim army and the Sultan of Egypt, who was well known for his erudition and justice.<sup>4</sup> Some considered him to be the antithesis of the crusading mentality of the Christians, and 'to be educated, interested in religious poetry, learned in science, a patron of poets and intellectuals.'<sup>5</sup> He showed his openness to dialogue

3 See for example, Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996); Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin Books, 2012)

4 John Tolan, *Saint Francis and the Sultan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 12.

5 *Ibid.*, 310. Malik al-Kamil, to Christians of that time, was the enemy. But Tolan is of the view that he wanted peace, and was tired of the wars that were impoverishing Egypt.

by presiding over debates between Muslims and Christians.<sup>6</sup> Some early writings on the meeting between St Francis and Malik al-Kamil suggest that the latter's religious advisers strongly advocated that he simply, in accordance with the law, not listen to St Francis but rather execute him and his companion.<sup>7</sup> Malik's magnanimity, sense of justice and predilection for dialogue, is seen in his rejecting this advice. Instead, what happened is that the Sultan spent some time with St Francis, and this left a lasting impression on both. Thereafter, St Francis was allowed visit the Holy Land under the Sultan's protection and was away from Italy for about a year.

Here, we had a peaceful encounter, and honest dialogue, between two deeply religious men. A strange and little-known event in the wars between the Christians and Muslims in the middle ages. Both discovered common roots to their spiritualities and the beginning of true friendship. Neither St Francis nor Malik al-Kamil changed their faith but the faith of both broadened through the encounter with 'the other.' Ursula King explains this phenomenon as follows:

'The experience of dialogue has been described as 'passing over' from one's own faith to another, then turning back and experiencing one's faith in a new light. Interfaith dialogue can then lead participants to the existential realization that each faith has received valuable glimpses of a larger vision. It is in dialogue that we learn to complement each other's insights and disclosures of the transcendent of the Divine. It is not about competition and exclusiveness, as so often preached by fundamentalists of all traditions, but about the complementarity of different visions that grow into greater fullness when related to each other.'<sup>8</sup>

#### IMPACT OF THE ENCOUNTER PARTICULARLY ON ST FRANCIS

What were the consequences for the lives of Malik al-Kamil and St Francis? First, with regard to Malik, we briefly note that he later established a ten-year peace with Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, returned control of Jerusalem to the crusaders and gave custody of the Christian holy places, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem, to the Franciscans. The friars continue to enjoy this privilege and to exercise the responsibility it carries sensitively, up to the present time. For example, every evening, they give the key to the Holy Sepulchre Church to a local

6 Ibid., 6.

7 Ibid., 40-42.

8 Ursula King, *The Search for Spirituality* (NY: BlueBridge, 2008), 61.

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Muslim family who, in turn, return it to the friars each morning – in memory of the gift received from Malik al-Kamil. An exceptional gift and legacy.

The impact of the encounter on St Francis can be seen in his writing in 1220 a more detailed rule for his religious order. In Chapter 16, on missionary activity to the Saracens and non-believers, he states:

‘Therefore, any brother who, by divine inspiration, desires to go among the Saracens and other nonbelievers should go with the permission of his minister and servant ... As for the brothers who go, they can live spiritually among the Saracens and non-believers in two ways. One way is not to engage in arguments or disputes, but to be subject to every human creature for God’s sake and to acknowledge that they are Christians. Another way is to proclaim the word of God when they see it pleases the Lord, so that they believe in the all-powerful God – Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit – the Creator of all, in the Son Who is the Redeemer and Saviour and that they be baptised and become Christians’.<sup>9</sup>

This was the first religious rule to refer to the Saracens. The second way of living among non-Christians would have been the standard way of mission for Christians at the time. However, the first way, not to engage in arguments and disputes, in short not to proselytise, and to be “subject” to every human creature was a radical departure from standard practice and echoes the meaning of the word Muslim, i.e. one who is submissive. Patience – a great Muslim virtue – was also vital for St Francis, who was aware that it is ultimately the Holy Spirit who, in God’s own time, will “convert.”

St Francis’s approach gives us an example of how to deal with conflict in situations of extreme polarisation by accepting difference while preserving unity. Scott Thomas, an expert in International Relations and Politics, comments on the significance of the episode of Francis’ meeting Malik al-Kamil as follows:

‘(St) Francis’ approach to peace-making was an openness to learning from the virtues and practices of other religious traditions, while remaining firmly rooted in one’s own. In other words, tolerance and appreciation of the religious sensibilities and traditions of others was not based on scepticism, relativism or syncretism ... Francis of Assisi shows us that a ‘true believer’ does not lead inherently to religious fanaticism and

9 Emilie Griffin, Ed., *Francis and Clare of Assisi: Selected Writings*, trans. Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady (NY.; HarperCollins Publishers, 2006) 29-30.

fundamentalism ... He recognised that a genuine stable peace ... begins with the courage to cross the threshold to ‘the Other’ ... Francis demonstrates that it is possible to arrive at universal values ... through common practice, rooted in different religious traditions, and the virtues necessary to sustain them, such as the practices of *charity, truthfulness and hospitality*.<sup>10</sup>

More generally, the importance of St Francis’s celebration of all of creation cannot be underestimated in this context. He refers to everything in creation as brothers and sisters, and writes in *The Canticle of Brother Sun*:<sup>11</sup>

Praised be You, my Lord, with all your creatures,  
especially Sir Brother Sun  
Praised be you, my Lord, through Brother Wind  
Praised be you, my Lord through Sister Water  
Praised be you, my Lord, through Brother Fire  
Praised by you, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth.

He relates animate and inanimate, everything in its unique being to Christ, who is exemplar or template to all.<sup>12</sup> All things have not only an instrumental but also have a sacramental value. Before his death in 1226 St Francis began his *Testament*<sup>13</sup> by explaining how his encounter with lepers, a despised, rejected and feared group throughout Europe at the time, represented a major influence on his ‘conversion:’

“The Lord granted me, Brother Francis, to begin to do penance in this way: While I was in sin, it seemed very bitter to me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I had mercy upon them. And when I left them that which seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body ...”.

This makes it easier to appreciate how he might come to aspire to having a real encounter with his brother and sister Muslims, also a despised, rejected and feared group.

#### POPE FRANCIS ECHOES SAINT FRANCIS

Pope Francis, like his medieval namesake, rejects the notion of an apocalyptic clash between Christians and Muslims. During his recent visits to Islamic-majority countries (Egypt in 2017, UAE in

10 Scott M. Thomas, “Franciscan Guide to Dialogue,” *The Tablet*, October 7, 2006.

11 Emilie Griffin, Ed., *Francis and Clare*, 5-6.

12 See John McEvoy and Jim Malone, “Evolution and Incarnation: a Franciscan Perspective,” *The Furrow* 70:1 January 2019: 17-25.

13 Emilie Griffin, Ed., *Francis and Clare*, 63.

February 2019 and Morocco in March 2019), he holds out the hand of friendship, asserting we are all brothers and sisters, and that this must be clearer in the world faiths that share Abraham as father.

During the UAE visit, the Pope advised Catholics living in Muslim-majority countries to emulate St Francis's advice, to avoid being argumentative, and be subject to every creature, while professing their Christianity. While there, he met, among others, Dr Ahmed el-Tayeb, Grand Imam of the Egyptian Al-Azhar university and mosque, which was dedicated in 972AD. Today it is recognised as the second oldest continuously run university in the world and is regarded as the foremost institution for Sunni theology and Sharia law.<sup>14</sup> The Pope and Dr el-Tayeb signed a joint declaration condemning religiously inspired violence and committing Muslims and Christians to dialogue and peace-building; something St Francis would have wholeheartedly approved of.

The declaration, entitled *A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, arises from prayer and reflection by both leaders and opens with the words, 'Faith leads a believer to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved.' While reflecting that the poverty, conflict and suffering of so many 'brothers and sisters,' in many parts of the world is a consequence of the arms race, social injustice, corruption, inequality, moral decline, terrorism, discrimination and many other causes they do not countenance despair. Rather, they write:

'From our fraternal and open discussions, and from the meeting that expressed profound hope in a bright future for all human beings, the idea of this Document on Human Fraternity was conceived... invites all persons who have faith in God and faith in *human fraternity* to unite and work together...[and] to advance a culture of mutual respect in the awareness of... divine grace that makes all human beings brothers and sisters.'

There are concerns about religious freedom in many Islamic-majority countries such as the ban on changing one's religion.<sup>15</sup> In this context it is interesting to note what the joint declaration *Human Fraternity* states:

'Freedom is a right of every person: each person enjoys the freedom of belief, thought, expression and action. The pluralism

14 The university of Al-Karaquine, located in Fez, Morocco, is the oldest continually operating higher educational institution in the world.

15 Denial of religious freedom in many parts of the Islamic world can present an obstacle to peace between Christians and Muslims. The Catholic Church's long and difficult experience of learning to embrace religious freedom may be helpful for Islam. See: Daniel Philpott, "A pathway to freedom," *The Tablet*, 30th March 2019, 6-7.

and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings... Therefore, the fact that people are forced to adhere to a certain religion or culture must be rejected, as too the imposition of a cultural way of life that others do not accept’.

There is little doubt that, like St Francis, the Pope aspires to build bridges with Islam and rejects approaches that assert a clash of cultures between the Christian and Muslim faiths, or excludes them from living together in peace, harmony, and mutual respect. In Morocco, he suggested that the Church should become ‘a living sacrament of the dialogue that God wants to initiate with each man and woman.’ Christopher Lamb, Rome Correspondent for *The Tablet*, endorses this and celebrates the evident parallel between events now and those of 800 years ago. He sums up stating:

‘Watching the Pope up close in Rabat, Cairo and Abu Dhabi, it was hard not to sense the spirit of his namesake, St Francis of Assisi, who 800 years ago made a bold visit to Egypt’s Sultan al-Kamil to try and bring an end to the crusades’.<sup>16</sup>

16 Christopher Lamb, “The end of the numbers game,” *The Tablet*, 6th April 2019, 6-7.

**Families.** Families are our backbone. They give us a sense of where we came from and where we are going. Families create homes. And homes can be places of love, nurturing and welcome. They are places where we can tolerate mess and celebrate our difference, and where we gather round one truth – we are all created by a loving God whose love for us knows no limits and who wants our families to be an expression of Church, of the Gospels and of the Joy of Love itself.

– BRENDAN MCMANUS, SJ and JIM DEEDS, *Deeper into the Mess* (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. 98.