

LIVING FRATERNITY

Theme: Francis and the Sultan, 800th Anniversary

In the second month of 2019, we are proposing the reading of the Letter of the General Minister of the Order of Friars Minor, Br. Michael A. Perry, OFM, on the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the encounter between St. Francis and the Sultan al-Malik al Kāmil.

Good reflection and good sharing.

Recall: A spirit of prayer heralds a good encounter, and a good preparation promotes communal experience. At the meeting, having a copy of the Holy Scriptures, the Rule and General Constitutions, will provide clarity and depth for our edification and experience.

FEBRUARY 2019 MONTHLY MEETING

Opening prayer or song (according to the Ritual or a song chosen by the fraternity)

Introduction

My dear brothers of the Order of Friars Minor,
all brothers, sisters and friends of our Franciscan Family,
and all my Muslim sisters and brothers.

May the Lord give you all His peace!

Eight hundred years ago, our Seraphic Father St. Francis set sail for Egypt, finally fulfilling a long-held dream of reaching out to Muslims. He arrived at the camp of the crusading army, among Latin Christians who through years of preaching and the rhetoric of holy war had been taught to scorn Muslims. Those same Muslims had every reason to scorn Francis, assuming that he, like most in the crusader camp, was an enemy and not a bearer of peace. We today celebrate what no one at that moment could have foreseen: that a Spirit-filled man with nothing of his own crossed the battle lines unarmed to request a meeting with the Sultan, was received with grace by that Sultan, enjoyed an extended period of hospitality with the Muslim leader, and emerged from the visit to reflect anew on the mission of the Friars Minor. Francis returned safely to his homeland profoundly moved by the encounter and crafted a new and creative vision for his brothers about how they could go among the Muslims, about the things Friars could do and say “that would please God” (RnB 16,8). The anniversary of Francis’ encounter with al-Malik al-Kāmil at Damietta in 1219 beckons us to ask again what deeds and words, amid the pluralism and complexity of the world today, would be pleasing to God.

Reflection and sharing:

1. What was Francis' dream in sailing to Egypt?
2. What is his attitude while heading there?
3. Why?
4. What is my attitude and what thoughts inhabit me when I meet a Muslim?
5. What words at the heart of pluralism and the complexity of the world today would be pleasing to God?

Continue the reading

Discerning the signs of the time (Mt 16, 3), the Church increasingly highlights interreligious dialogue as an essential element of the mission of the Church today. The Second Vatican Council exhorted the Christian faithful to engage in “dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life” (*Nostra Aetate*, 2). In particular, the Council taught that the Church regards the Muslims “with esteem,” and urged Christians to work with their Muslim sisters and brothers to promote social justice and moral welfare, peace and freedom, for the benefit of all (*Nostra Aetate*, 3). St. John Paul II carried this mission of dialogue forward in his ministry as Bishop of Rome, most especially when he called religious leaders of the world to our spiritual home, Assisi, to witness there the transcendent quality of peace. For those who gathered to pray for peace, the “permanent lesson of Assisi” consisted in Francis’ “meekness, humility, deep sense of God, and commitment to serve all” (John Paul II, *Speech at Assisi*, 27 October 1986).

Reflection and sharing:

1. What quality should be kept in an interreligious dialogue and to what aim?
2. What permanent lesson should we retain from the meeting of St. John Paul II in Assisi?

Continue the reading

Popes Benedict XVI and Francis likewise invited religious leaders to make pilgrimage to Assisi and pray there for peace, and Pope Francis invoked the intercession of the *Poverello* during his own trip to Egypt, praying that Christians and Muslims truly call one another brothers and sisters, living in renewed fraternity under the sun of the one merciful God (Francis, *Speech at the International Peace Conference*, 28 April 2017). It is thus the universal Church calling the Franciscan family to animate this interreligious fraternity in the peaceful spirit of our Seraphic Father. The Church calls us to raise up this seminal moment in our history, the journey of St. Francis to Egypt, to open ourselves anew to the transformation the Saint of Assisi experienced, and to walk together with Muslims and people of all faiths as fellow travelers, as builders of civility and most fundamentally, as sisters and brothers, children of Abraham, our father in faith.

I encourage the Franciscan family to celebrate this anniversary as a moment when the light of the Gospel can open one's heart to see the *imago Dei* in a person one regards with fear and distrust,

or even worse, in a person one has been urged to hate. To that end, a number of resources have been prepared to assist all those inspired by this encounter to commemorate it in a fitting way...

In April, the General Curia will make available an online resource book, prepared by the Special Commission for Dialogue with Islam, that provides historical background, Franciscan and Muslim perspectives on the encounter and other materials to commemorate Damietta. Our fraternity in Istanbul, a community of Friars primarily dedicated to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, will host a gathering in October of Friars working in Muslim-majority countries. The Pontifical University *Antonianum* has likewise organized several public events in different countries over the course of the anniversary year. Whether academic or pastoral, I encourage you to actively participate in these and other events, and further, to consider creatively how your local community might commemorate Damietta in light of your local reality.

This anniversary offers a unique opportunity for collaboration between different branches of the Franciscan family. A number of Friars, Sister and scholars of the Franciscan movement, and promoters of Muslim-Christian dialogue have prepared publications for release during this anniversary; I invite you all to take time this year to study and prayerfully reflect on how, in your local situation, the courage and openness to the Spirit seen in the Nile Delta so long ago might live afresh in you. The General Curia is eager to share the news of such efforts to build bridges of interreligious understanding, so please inform us of the events and initiatives to commemorate Damietta in your community and in various Entities of the Friars Minor.

We live in a time when people of various faiths traffic on the demonization of Muslims and incite other to fear them. Aside from study and prayer about the themes of encounter and dialogue, I encourage followers of Francis who lack much personal exposure to Islam to recall the experience of our founder by taking a simple and concrete step: meet a Muslim. Get to know him or her, beyond the pleasantries of a cup of tea and social nicety. Try to learn and appreciate what experience of God animates him or her and allow your Muslim friend to see the love God has poured into your heart through Christ. Despite the Second Vatican Council's insistence that Muslims, with us, adore the one and merciful God" (*Lumen Gentium* 16). Many voices somehow sadly insist that dialogue between Christians and Muslims is impossible. Many contemporaries of St. Francis and the Sultan agreed, seeing conflict and confrontation as the only response to the challenge of the other.

The examples of Francis and the Sultan witness a different option. One can no longer insist that dialogue with Muslims is impossible. We have seen it, and we continue to see it in the lives of many Franciscans and their Muslim brothers and sisters who, with sincere and loving hearts, share the gifts that God has given them through their respective faiths. Fidelity to Francis' vision involves sharing with humility. Indeed, the distinctively Christian gift we have to share with our Muslim sisters and brothers is not merely a humble Christian, but the experience of a humble God. Unique in his age, Francis praised God by saying, "You are humility" (PrsG 4), and spoke about the "sublime humility", the "humble sublimity" of God (LtOrd 27). The Christian heart's quest for God finds rest in the humility of the crib and the cross, signs of a God who stoops down in service and humbles himself for love of us. Francis invites us to reflect that divine humility to

those we meet by taking the first step in service and in love. Moreover, fidelity to Francis' vision calls us to receive the beliefs and believers of other faith traditions with a sense of reverence (*OFM General Constitutions*, art. 93.2, 95.2), with hearts and minds open to the presence of God in such an encounter.

I recognize that there are some in the Franciscan family, who live as minorities in the lands of their birth or adoption, find themselves caught up in political and sectarian strife, and may feel the threat of violence, as do many today in the land Francis once visited. In some countries, Christians *and* Muslims share the pains of social injustice and political instability. I invite you to reflect on another of the names Francis used in his *Praises of God*: "You are patience" (PrsG 4), or as Muslims invoke God: Yā Sabur – "O Patient One!" Francis himself learned the virtue of patience through his ministry among lepers, through the challenges of his travels, and through trends he saw in the Order at the end of his life, when his own brothers abandoned some of the ideals he cherished. Francis mediated at length on the patient love Christ showed in his passion, coming eventually to identify patience as an attribute of a merciful God. "You are patience." God follows a schedule unknown to us, and God stirs the hearts of women and men in ways unknown to us. Francis struggled to understand God's plan for those who failed to follow Christ as Lord, and Francis found refuge in the prayer of praise that God is patience. May God grant the grace of patience to each of us as we learn to live together.

To our Muslim sisters and brothers, let me say how warmly we Franciscans remember the hospitality shown to our Holy Father Francis when his life was at risk. The interest many Muslims have shown in commemorating this anniversary testifies to the desire for peace expressed anytime a Muslim greets a fellow believer. I pray that this year will deepen the brotherhood we share under the God who created all things in the heavens and on the earth and that this bond continues to strengthen long after 2019. God could have made us all the same, but God did not (*Al-Shūrā* 42.8). With you, your Franciscan sisters and brothers are eager to show the world that Christians and Muslims can and do live alongside each other in peace and harmony.

In conclusion, let us never forget that the example of St. Francis was a life of ongoing conversion. A youth, he was repulsed by lepers, but an act of mercy changed his heart and "what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness" (*Testament*, 3). That moment, the beginning of Francis' life of penance, is intimately linked to Francis' experience at Damietta in 1219. Francis' heart had been opened by lepers before, and when he found himself in the presence of a Muslim he had been taught to hate, it was opened once more. The biblical call to conversion (Heb., *shuv*; Aram. *Tuv*) is echoed in the Qur'an's repeated command to turn to God (*tūb*), to avert evil with goodness and acts of charity to society's most vulnerable. Believers today --- are called to the same courage and openness of heart. Amid the groans of the world for interreligious understanding, may our humble, patient, and merciful God show all of us the deeds and words that most pleasing to God.

Rome, 7th January 2019

Br. Michael A. Perry, OFM
Minister General and Servant

Reflection and sharing

1. How does this letter ask you to have a new glance at our Muslim brothers and sisters?
2. In the text, find what invites you to journey as the Magi did, and to live and possibly act otherwise, as true sons and daughters of the Gospel and of St. Francis?

Articles of the Rule

Slowly read one or more article of our own Way of life

Life Objective:

Open our heart to the presence of God in all our brothers and sisters, of all faiths they may be.

Events and Information from the Church and the Order

Remind to mention meetings and local and regional activities.

End of the meeting: Recite the prayer « Lord make us instruments of your peace ...»

At home

Read this text to deepen it further and pray frequently « Lord make us instruments of your peace where there is ... etc.»

A thought from our Pope Francis

The gospel of mercy remains an open book, where one continues to write the signs of the disciples of Christ, the concrete gestures of love, that are the best witnesses of mercy.

Peace and Joy