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At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

From enemy to brother: celebrating 800 years since encounter between Saint Francis and the Sultan



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The **poor man of Assisi** is known in the Catholic world for many reasons and is probably one of the most cherished saints for many faithful. However, perhaps few know the event that marks its 800th anniversary this year: his meeting with the **Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil**.

In 1219, Francis decided to embark for **Egypt** where at that time the **Fifth Crusade** was being fought pitting Christian troops – accompanied by the papal delegate, Cardinal Pelagio – against the Sultan's army in Damietta. Francis obtained permission together with Fra' Illuminato to enter the Muslim camp and to speak with the Sultan al-Kamil. The available sources are hagiographic and we do not know exactly what these two important figures said on that occasion. One thing is certain: in a context of war, Francis and Fra' Illuminato **emerged alive from an "enemy" camp**.

Although we know many details of the life of St. Francis, we do not know much about the life of this Muslim ruler who on more than one occasion proffered peace agreements to the Crusader forces. He was even willing to grant Jerusalem and other holy places to them to avoid an armed confrontation that would surely have caused so many victims on both sides, as indeed was the case. During a recent conference at Rome's Centro Pro Unione, scholar of Islam **Brother Michael Calabria**, member of the **Special Commission for Dialogue with Islam of the Franciscan Curia**, said Sultan al-Kamil was likely close to the spiritual environments of Sufism, that is the mystical trend that insists particularly on the uniqueness of existence, the imminence of God, his mercy and contemplation, as well as on fraternity and spiritual poverty. Considering his religious background, one can perhaps better understand the openness he had towards Francis, who probably did not seem too distant from Muslim mystics with whom he was accustomed.

"Certainly Francis' purpose in life was evangelization: the whole life of St. Francis is centered on this. He was a traveling preacher, would announce the Gospel everywhere, and to everyone," commented

Brother Michael. Before leaving, he expected that he would probably be killed for this attempt. But this did not happen and this helps us understand that **Francis's sharing and proclamation have been imbued with respect** and nothing that he said was considered an insult to the faith of those he had before him. "What Francis discovers is different from what he had expected. The meeting with a man of faith, who surely shared his spirituality with him, probably led to a certain brotherhood between the two", underlined Brother Michael.

On his return from Egypt we find some indirect evidence of the experience lived there, of the importance of a proper discernment of his own testimony and of not upsetting peace in chapter XVI of the **Earlier Rule** written in 1221 where we read: "The friars who go among the infidels, they can **behave spiritually among them in two ways**. One way is to avoid quarrels or disputes, but to be subject to every human creature for God's sake and confess that they are Christians. The other way is that when they see that it pleases the Lord, they announce the word of God that they believe in God Almighty, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, Creator of all things, and in the Son Redeemer and Savior, and be baptized, and they will be Christians, for if one is not reborn through water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

Brother Michael Calabria also invites us to recognize **a trace of the encounter between Francis and the Sultan** in a well-known text: at La Verna, towards the end of his life, Francis wrote the **Praises of God Most High** where he refers to God by various names and attributes. This is a rather unusual prayer and some Franciscan scholars put forward that the text is an echo of the Islamic prayer of the 99 beautiful names of Allah (al-asma' al-husna), the **divine attributes that Muslims find in the Qur'an and they repeat with devotion**: many of the attributes quoted in Saint Francis' prayer are the same ones that belong to the Islamic tradition: whether it is a "case", that shows the intrinsic closeness between Islamic and Christian spirituality, or that it can be hypothesized that Francis was inspired by the prayer he heard during his time in Egypt, today we have a text of praise that brings the Christian and Muslim communities closer in a special way together.

"The meeting was successful because the **two people involved both experienced God** not only in the formalities of their respective religions but in the depths of their hearts and this led them to see in the other not an enemy but a believer and a brother. We need good theologians to explain and justify our commitment to interreligious dialogue based on doctrine. However, without spirituality, dialogue remains an intellectual exercise. Spirituality allows us to see each other as a brother or a sister," concluded Brother Michael.

In **1229 al-Malik al-Kamil was the protagonist of the negotiations that led to the agreement without bloodshed with Frederick II**. In exchange for a ten-year truce, al-Kamil ceded Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and other villages on the way to Jerusalem to Frederick while Muslims would retain control over their holy places on the Haram al-Sharif and enjoy some autonomy.

Sometimes the events of the past remain closed in history books. Yet this encounter still resonates with us today. During his recent visit to the United Arab Emirates in February (February 3-5, 2019), Pope Francis together with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyeb signed the **"document on human fraternity for world peace and shared coexistence"**. Already from the title of this text, we hear our inheritance from the vision of St. Francis.

On his return from this journey, **Pope Francis** wanted to underline how the example of that meeting that took place 800 years ago guided his steps: "For the first time a Pope has traveled to the Arabian peninsula. Moreover, Providence wanted it to be a Pope by the name of Francis, 800 years after the visit of St. Francis of Assisi to the Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil. **I often thought of Saint Francis during this journey**: he helped me to keep the Gospel, the love of Jesus Christ in my heart, while I was living the various moments of the visit; in my heart there was the Gospel of Christ, prayer to the Father for all his children, especially for the poorest, for the victims of injustices, wars, misery ...; prayer for

dialogue between Christianity and Islam to be a decisive factor for peace in today's world" (General Audience, February 6, 2019).

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