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Saint Francis and the Sultan Muhammad

Damietta, 1219. The meeting of a Christian saint and a Muslim king

A contemplative reading of an Italian Muslim

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Since 2014 Italian Islam, represented by the COREIS Italian Islamic Religious Community, has participated in Abu Dhabi at the Forum for Peace in Muslim societies, promoted by shaykh AbdAllah Bin Bayyah with the Minister of Tolerance. Parallel to this initiative was also established in Abu Dhabi the World Muslim Communities Council who appointed me as executive member in charge of interreligious dialogue.

Now, five years after this path of theological and institutional coordination and discussions among Muslim representatives in the world, I am honored to present some guidelines inspired by the encounter between Saint Francis of Assisi and the sultan of Egypt al-Malik al-Kamil Muhammad bin Ayyoub on the occasion of the commemoration of its 800th anniversary and in conjunction with the official visit of Pope Francis in the United Arab Emirates.

The universal principal of brotherhood that is coherently lived between Christians and Muslims is the foundation for an alliance between believers to defend and bear witness to a sacred view of life and of the human family.

Assisi is a medieval city in central Italy, not far from Rome, the capital of the Italian Republic, and from the Vatican Papal State, the Holy See of the successor of Peter, apostle of Jesus, ‘Isa ibn Maryam (Peace be upon them).

In the city of Assisi in 1986, Pope John Paul II, now recognised by the Catholic Church as a saint, promoted the historical world meeting of religions, inviting the representative authorities of many religious confessions to travel to the city of Assisi to pray for peace in the square of the Basilica of the brothers of the order that follows the rules of Saint Francis.

Saint Francis, patron saint of Italy, was born in Assisi in 1182 and was also buried in Assisi in 1226. His tomb is until now a destination for pilgrimages, visits and prayers by Christians as well as believers of other religions who know how to cultivate, with deep respect, a sensibility towards the saints who were able to bear witness, during their lives, to knowledge of and encounter with God, the One God of all creatures.

For a Muslim visitor in Assisi who observes the procession of Christian pilgrims that stop and pray in front of the tomb of Saint Francis, there is a deep correspondence and similitude with the memory of Muslim pilgrims in front of the tomb of the prophet in Madinah or in the mausoleums of the sages and masters in all the regions of the Muslim world, from Senegal to Indonesia, from Sudan to Kazakhstan. This is a first “universal” signal of spiritual affinity and brotherly respect between Christians and Muslims who know how to express their devotion to prophets, to men and women who were traditional models of devotion and illumination and who were able to renew the faith of believers in the remembrance of God.

Saint Francis left from the city of Assisi 800 years ago in 1219 in order to undertake a long journey towards the Muslim world. In Egypt, in Damietta, in this city, he met sultan Muhammad bin Ayyoub, al-Malik al-Kamil. The Islamic caliphate was administered by regional governors and Muhammad bin Ayyoub’s brother, Sharaf al-din, al-Malik al-Mu’azzam, was the governor of Jerusalem.

Perhaps, Saint Francis’ spiritual aim was the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, at the cost of dying a martyr as other brothers had in Morocco, executed by the almohad governor, Yusuf al-Mustansir, a sentence given to them for instigating civil disorder through gospel propaganda and the sacrilegious provocation regarding the messenger of Islam.



To reach the Holy Land, Saint Francis had to leave from Italy, sail the Mediterranean, arrive in Egypt and physically cross the lands of conflict between Christian and Muslim troops, pass the caliphate of Sultan Muhammad, and that of his brother Sharaf al-din, in order to visit the Holy sepulchre, the cenacle and the Mount of Olives.

However, Saint Francis' intentions ended up being concentrated on one part of this itinerary: the encounter with the Ayyubid sultan Muhammad at Damietta, to bear witness to the Truth of the Christian faith, convert the Muslim governor, and obtain Peace. Some western Christian chroniclers conclude that, from this encounter, if it ever truly occurred, there was no great outcome.

In fact, the war continued for a long time, the Muslims remained the governors of the region and Saint Francis never made it to Jerusalem. Yet, these same chroniclers, admit that the war continued despite the fact that the Muslim sultan had proposed, as his father, from his deathbed had advised him, a peace agreement that included an exchange of dominions, Damietta would go to the Muslims and Jerusalem to the Christians. However, there prevailed, among the military commanders of the West, the stubbornness to fight for the commercial interests of Egypt and not to defend the holy city. His very own Italian Christians as well as the papal legate therefore, betrayed Saint Francis, whereas the barons of the reign of Jerusalem and the German allies wanted to accept the proposal of the sultan and end military hostility.

Ten years later, in 1229, the very same sultan Muhammad renewed the proposal to emperor Frederick II, who became King of Jerusalem without fighting any battle against the Muslims and despite the excommunication of Pope Gregory IX who had accused him of betrayal, taking advantage of his absence while he was in the Holy Land, to promote the revolt and occupation of Frederick's properties in the Reign of Sicily.

To deny that the influence that the encounter of sultan Muhammad with Saint Francis could have contributed to the peaceful return of Jerusalem to the Christians and to the consequent, and until now in force, custody of the places of pilgrimage and of the Holy sepulcher for Christians, seems to be a reductive and skeptical interpretation of sacred history.

As believers in the One God, sultan Muhammad and Saint Francis must have felt anything but indifferent following their encounter that lasted “various days”. The sultan of the Ayyubid dynasty must certainly have been touched by the strength of this friar who fearlessly faced the long journey by sea, the battlefield, and the Muslim jurisdiction, to come and convert him to the “real religion” at the cost of martyrdom. Even the Christian bishop had tenaciously resisted Saint Francis’ insistent request of a blessing for this mission.

Maybe the sultan saw in Saint Francis a man of faith and searcher of the Truth of God, like he himself was, willing to travel and die and overcome the appearance of worldly distances as well as inner struggles. Both served and controlled a jurisdiction and a community rule and were not attached to material possessions.

We are convinced that Saint Francis deeply succeeded in his intent to bear witness to the Muslim sultan of the Truth of the Christian faith as no one before or after him, including priests, governors, and Christian militaries, had done. We imagine that the Egyptian sultan, of Kurdish origin, was amazed to discovery Saint Francis’ gift of language, of a man that converses by overcoming human contingencies and diplomatic conventions, and who is able to have the faith of God the Highest speak as the only solution for Peace in front of human tribulations.

Of course, he could not have known that that very same friar had, in the past, softened a wolf who had scared the inhabitants of an Italian town and that, in the future, he would have conversed with the birds provoking stupor and embarrassment among his very companions. The Muslim sultan could not have known of Saint Francis’ noble, aristocratic roots and of the violent opposition of his family to his vow of poverty. Yet, he must have recognized an affinity with the miracle of the divine language that the Sacred Quran represents for Muslims, and the ability of some men, such as the prophet Moses (Peace be upon him), to speak with God or like the prophets Adam, Noah, Joseph (Peace be upon them), Muhammad (may the Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), to order and manage creation.

And, in the same way, the sultan must have recognized the inner richness that transpired from the simplicity of the clothes and the pureness of the behavior of his Christian interlocutor and, at the same time, the dignity and total absence of vulgarity and violence in his action.



We can only imagine the re-proposal of a dialogue that already occurred in the past between the prophet Muhammad (may the Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and the Christian delegation of Najran and some conversations regarding the figure of Jesus, ‘Isa ibn Maryam (Peace be upon them). Perhaps, in a similar way, the Muslim sultan and the Christian saint, through dialogue and shared silence, were able to compare themselves and discover similarities and differences on Christology or the common feeling shared as believers in the One, Merciful God.

Some narrations tell of, or describe, an ordeal, the test of fire, that Saint Francis proposed to the sultan as a demonstration of the truth of his faith. In fact, Saint Bonaventura, in his writings on the life of Saint Francis “lit by perfect love”, clarifies that the sultan had proposed a theological debate with his ministers. “But Francis replied that it was not possible to debate on faith following the laws of reason, because faith is superior to reason; and it was not possible to debate through Scripture because they would not have accepted it. But rather, he begged him to light a fire and he would have jumped in with the ministers. The sultan refused” and so there was no test of strength or theatrical competition.

Unfortunately, some frescoes depict an interpretation by the artists that overturns the story of the encounter between Saint Francis and the sultan. They present, based on their tendency towards the phenomenal or dramatic, some depictions that instead of representing the saint’s “burning love of God” outline the myth of courage or the impossible mission of converting the infidel.

The mistake of these artists was to associate a historical fake, like that of the test of fire, with a victory and a loss- respectively of the Christian and the Muslim, as if in order to recognize the legend of the saint it was necessary to demonstrate his power of persuasion and the submission of the Muslim or, alternatively, the presumption of the sultan and the friar’s ability to withstand it.

Instead, the reception, hospitality, respect, the exchanges, the offer of gifts (that Saint Francis refused in order to remain coherent with his vow of poverty) and the greeting of peace between the Muslim sultan and the Christian friar, are clear signs of a recognition of faith and holiness and the historical responsibilities that are universal and not unilateral.



That which each one discovers in the other is the value of a different method of being coherent with a specific faith that is oriented towards the service and adoration of God, and, as such, the Muslim and the Christian discover that they are brothers and never enemies.

That which, neither the chroniclers nor the artists know how to narrate or draw is the realization of an authentic knowledge, intellectual martyrdom and inner conversion that touched the hearts of the two men, before even touching their minds or garments or authoritative outer, religious and cultural representations. The history of this world followed, as we have already mentioned, its course one that led, in less than a decade, to a peace agreement and the end of battles between Christian and Muslim armies.

We are therefore convinced, unlike many historians, that from this encounter there were great outcomes and consequences, both with regards to peace between Christians and Muslims, West and East, but also with regards to the intimate testimony to Christianity interpreted by a saint and his search for a complete, deep, integral and universal knowing of the Muslim caliph.

Even on the concept of martyrdom and conversion it seems that it is impossible to negate a reciprocal availability of both to change and be at the disposal of a divine maieutic in the language and the substance of the Truth that allows the believers, Christian and Muslim, to be closer to the mystery of God and discover new forms of understanding and testimony, action and contemplation. If the sultan renewed his offer of Jerusalem to the emperor Fredrick II in exchange for an alliance and respect of the territorial jurisdictions, Saint Francis, upon his return from Egypt, is profoundly transformed “inimitable: he who speaks to the animals and obtains from them obedience, he who performs miracles, who receives the stigmata”, who renounces the guidance of the minor friars, unhappy with the institutionalization of the small brotherhood that he himself had founded, but is grateful to God for the complex approval of the rule by Pope Honorius III in 1223.

For the Christian catholic cardinal, Jacques de Vitry who had the honor of knowing Saint Francis and to write his biography, the figure of the saint of Assisi brings together three key elements: moral and spiritual renewal, through a life of asceticism, simplicity, and humility; preaching through the efficient word, word that inflames the crowds and leads them to conversion, that is it pushes them to reform their lives; the encounter with the Muslims.



We can perhaps say that these key elements are now, as they were then, still determinant both for the Christians and for the Muslims.

In fact, together and in a brotherly way, Christians and Muslims, we must call each other to a moral and spiritual renewal and protect and sustain an attitude of piety and virtue that is the antidote to ignorance, to the decadence of values and the unleashing of violence and abuses of power that are preludes to disorder and injustice among civilians.

For Christians and Muslims, this brotherhood has a common ground in the Revelation of the Word of God and in the faith towards a religious change that is not of this world, but of the hearts of the believers that open themselves to the Mercy of God and follow the example that is lived and taught by the masters, the saints, and the prophets.

In this sense, the encounter that took place eight hundred years ago between Italy's patron saint and founder of the Franciscan order of friars in the world and the sultan of Egypt and Syria, can be of inspiration to the fraternity between Christians and Muslims both in the East and the West, teaching a method of dialogue between political responsibility, that takes into consideration the sacred, and religious representation, that takes into consideration Peace.

For Christian and Muslim believers it is a chance to meditate on holiness that has no limits of space, time and religious structure but also on the legitimacy of religious, national, legal and cultural jurisdictions that need to safeguard a historical and spiritual process without formalisms, ghosts or closed ghettos vis-à-vis the world.

Literature describes Saint Francis as a teacher of humility and the sultan Muhammad as a benevolent sovereign who carefully listened to his interlocutor. Thus, the enemy they had to fight, just like the Christians and Muslims in our contemporary society, is presumption and arrogance, blindness and deafness, the forgetting of a spiritual identity and the attraction for vanity and greed, of individual commercial convenience, that surpass the respect for the lives of the family and the dignity of the population. In addition to this there is falseness and the search for power through the art of provocation and vulgarity.

To be noble, according to Saint Francis and Saladin's descendent, did not mean to be a slave to appearances and the influences of the profane system, but to become interpreters of spiritual poverty, *al-faqr*, as the contemplative Muslim masters call it, and to fight, beyond the palaces of Assisi or Bagdad, for the search to find and realize the common and superior good.