

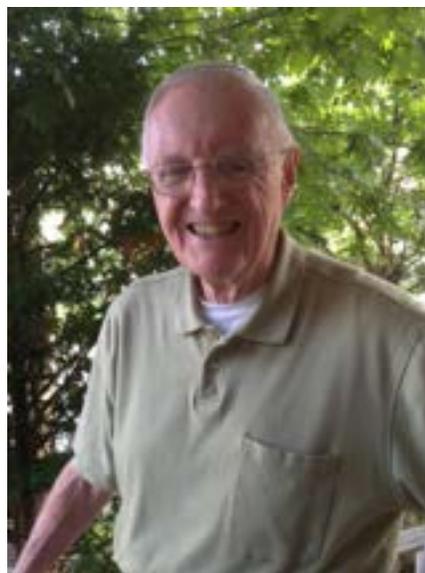
A Reflection on
Francis of Assisi
and His Relevance
for Today

by Joseph Nangle, OFM



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Video Presentations by Fr. Joe Nangle

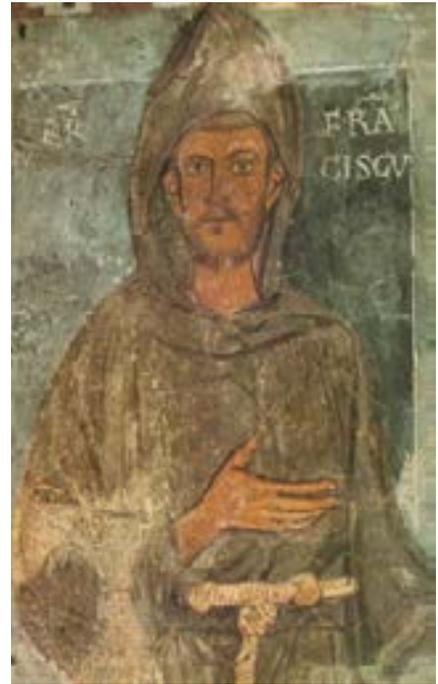
- Fr. Joe Nangle: A New Way of Being Church
 - Video Part 1: <http://bit.ly/1nSR2Ot>
 - Video Part 2: <http://bit.ly/1sXBufz>
- Fr. Joe on War: <http://bit.ly/1lx8s7N>

INTRODUCTION:

Francis of Assisi, arguably the best known and most popular saint in Christian history, could also be described as the least understood. Both within and outside Catholic circles the mention of this medieval holy man conjures up images of conversations between him and the birds; of a lifetime spent “tripping through the tulips” happily singing the praises of creation; a person who seemed to live on a different plane in a different zone from the hard realities of the 13th Century.

In a word, people’s image of Saint Francis has often centered on an otherworldly, picturesque person whose very oddity in some strange way has defined for many believers and non-believers alike the stuff of sanctity. The reality could not be further from this image.

So many aspects of Il Poverello’s actual life contradict this infantile categorization of him. Early in his conversion process, for example, Francis walked away forever from his father, Pietro, when the elder Bernadone tried to dissuade Francis from his calling; despite a natural love for life to the full he embraced celibacy and literal poverty; he remained throughout his life an obedient son of the Institutional Church with all of its flaws and sins; and Francis consistently showed himself to be the tough and demanding leader of a challenging new movement in the Catholic world.



All of these dimensions of the Man from Assisi have been studied and documented in Franciscan historical research. They stand as challenges to the traditional and often superficial popular understanding of the man and to people’s somewhat “pat on the head” relationship with him. In fact, the book, *Saint Francis and the Foolishness of God* (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York: <http://bit.ly/1rL1AGN>) describes a number of these characteristics as “Francis’ discomfort factors” for modern people. To put it more positively, this 13th Century saint has a serious and pointed message for us who live eight centuries later.

FRANCIS AND THE FIFTH CRUSADE

There is no better example of St. Francis’ relevance for our times than newly discovered details and interpretations of a famous incident in his life: the saint’s lengthy visit to the Sultan Malik al-Kamil during the Fifth Crusade which took place from 1217 to 1221.

It is well-known that the Crusades, begun in 1095, were considered “holy wars” by Church leaders. Initiated by a series of Roman Pontiffs, their objective was to reclaim the Christian shrines in the Middle East which had fallen into the hands of Islam. No less a noteworthy figure than St. Bernard of Clairvaux, reformer of the Benedictine monastic movement, encouraged the crusaders early in the 12th Century to go out confidently and repel the foes of Christ.

Francis of Assisi, however, had a very different outlook on war in general and the Crusades in particular. He himself had tasted the bitterness of armed struggle early in his life when he had set forth as a soldier of Assisi to battle against neighboring Perugia. This short-lived misadventure ended for Francis in total failure, sickness and imprisonment, and proved the beginning of his conversion to Gospel living, including its non-violent mandate.

Despite Pope Innocent III’s call in 1213 for the Christian world to prepare another Crusade, fully four years before it was actually launched, Francis never once preached or wrote in favor of the Pope’s initiative. This in itself is remarkable given the fact, as noted above, that the Saint of Assisi was known to be a loyal son of the Church, the “*vir catholicus, totus apostolicus*” (the entirely Catholic, apostolic man). In addition to his “passively aggressive” resistance to war, even a conflict considered by the Church as just and “holy,” it is not surprising that Francis would act to mitigate the horrors of what another Crusade would inevitably produce. The action he took was surprising, daring and dangerous. In 1219, two years after the conflict began, he sailed from Italy to Egypt, crossed the line from the Christian army to that of the Muslims and approached their leader, Sultan Malik al-Kamil.



Sultan Malik al-Kamil and Francis, models for peacemaking.

THE PEACEMAKERS

The traditional interpretation of this dramatic initiative on Francis’ part has seen it as an attempt in the first place to convert the Muslim leader, then perhaps in the process to effect some cessation of the bloody conflict between Christians and “infidels.” Recent scholarship, however, has pointed to a very different scenario. It turns out that the Sultan Malik al-Kamil himself wished for peace and had made several overtures to the Christian military leader, the pope’s delegate, Cardinal Pelagius Galvani. These proposals had been routinely rejected.

There seems to be persuasive evidence that al-Kamil saw in this holy man from the West a possible ally in achieving peace. Francis, after all, approached the Sultan with his usual greeting: “the Lord give you peace”. In addition the saint refused to take the gifts of gold, silver and silk garments offered him by the Muslim leader, proving that he was not there for personal gain. From the beginning there seemed to exist a relationship of respect between the two men. Indeed the Sultan allowed Francis to remain in the Muslim camp for the better part of a year – even as the Christian crusaders laid siege to the nearby city of Damietta, causing the Sultan’s people there immense suffering and deprivation.

FRANCIS' OWN CONVERSION

What is more, evidence now shows that Francis himself underwent a significant conversion thanks to his experience of Islam and his relationship with al-Kamil. And here we come directly to the relevance St. Francis of Assisi has for our times. While Francis refused the gifts offered him by al-Kamil, he did take with him on his departure an ivory horn, the instrument used to call for “salat,” the Muslim period of prayer five times each day. This Islamic practice particularly impressed the Saint. In addition, some of Francis’ own written prayers after 1221 in certain ways parallel the well-known ninety-nine names for the Divine in the Qur’an, among them the Compassionate, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Peaceful, the Mighty. Francis calls God the Most High, King of Heaven and earth, Good, all Good, supreme Good, love, wisdom, humility, endurance, rest, peace, beauty, gentleness, our great consolation, eternal life.

“Liberation Theology gives us a vocabulary and a praxis here. It calls for us who strive for integrity and an inclusive, Christ-like attitude toward all: “salir al encuentro” (go out toward the encounter) with the stranger, the newcomer, the ones whom we do not as yet know. Saint Francis would greatly approve of this insight.”

Additionally, after Francis returned to Assisi from Egypt, he set down another Rule of Life for his fellow friars in which the saint urged them to “observe the strictest poverty and TO BE SUBJECT TO MUSLIMS!” Then, when the Pope in Rome, Honorius III, called for yet another Crusade in 1224, Francis went to one of his favorite retreats. La Verna, for a long period of prayer and fasting. Some see this action of the now infirm, nearly blind saint (he died in 1226) as his only possible course of action in the face of this latest call to military arms. (It was during this period at La Verna that Francis received the marks of the Crucified on his hands, feet and in his side.) And concern for his friend Malik al-Kamil is also cited as a further motive for this action of Francis.

Could it not be that in his many conversations with Malik al-Kamil Francis recalled the directive which Jesus gives in Matthew’s Gospel: “...when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, go first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift”? (Matthew 5:24) Surely the Muslims had much against the Christians, who were rejecting all overtures of peace. As a representative of the Christian Church, Francis surely felt the weight of “being an enemy” to the Muslims and took to prayer and fasting at La Verna in response.

RELEVANCE FOR OUR TIMES

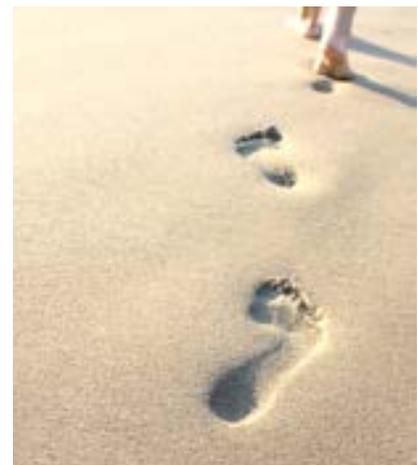
This experience of our 13th Century saint directly challenges us today. Due to circumstances with which we are all so very familiar, a real “Islamophobia” has gripped us in the West, particularly in the United States. Since the tragic events of September 11, 2001 (9/11), even the very names, manner of dressing, physical appearance, and customs of middle-eastern-looking people spark feelings of unease and even fear in many people here. While officials in our government for the most part have distinguished between faithful followers of Islam and, for example, ISIS terrorists, too often in the popular mind anything which resembles Muslims is viewed with suspicion, antagonism, and even outright hatred.

St. Francis directly challenges this mindset. His physical, emotional, and, yes, spiritual crossover to the world of Islam and his clear acceptance of much that is good in that religious tradition stands as an example for our world, increasingly divided as it is between “them and us.”

What is more, the Saint of Assisi causes us to pause before judging who the enemy is today. While the events of 9/11 stand as horrendous acts of terrorism and violence against innocent human beings, now, after nearly a decade and one half, we must ask if we in the West are not equally the enemy. One has to think only of Afghanistan, Iraq, drones, oil, Guantanamo, and renditions to substantiate this question. Saint Francis would have much to say were he witnessing all of this today. His experience and example when faced with an eerily similar scenario in his time – the Fifth Crusade – question us deeply.

CONCLUSION

Of course, the example of Francis with the Sultan applies not only to our views and actions toward Islamic people. All of us harbor prejudices of all kinds. We often see the “others” in our world as suspicious, fearsome, even threats – be they “others” by reason of race, religion, sexual orientation, class, or culture. The challenge Francis lays before us as we learn the facts of his contact, dialogue, and friendship with Malik al-Kamil would have us consciously overcome any and all obstacles we place between ourselves and people who are not like us. Liberation Theology gives us a vocabulary and a praxis here. It calls for people who strive for integrity and an inclusive, Christ-like attitude toward all to “*salir al encuentro*” (go out toward the encounter) with the stranger, the newcomer, the ones whom we do not as yet know. Saint Francis would greatly approve of this insight. He lived it.



CREATIVE VOICE

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Who are the people in your areas of experience who most cause you fear?
- Have you allowed yourself to experience life from the vantage point of “the other” by visiting their church, synagogue, or mosque?
- Have you or your group experienced discrimination? What did that experience teach you?
- How can the people and leaders of the United States overcome our tendency to enemy-making?
- Conversely, how can we begin to see ourselves in many cases as enemy?
- What can our churches do to foster unity in diversity?

PRAYER

Holy One, Creator and Lover of all peoples, grant us through the power of your embracing Spirit to recognize and accept our place in the Human Family and in the vast and expanding Cosmos.

Like Saint Francis of Assisi give us hearts of flesh to understand ourselves as sisters and brothers of all humanity, of all other earthly creatures, and of fire, water, sun, moon and stars – worlds beyond worlds which you continue to bring into being.

Help us, Holy Mystery, to achieve the humility necessary to acknowledge our sins against your daughters and sons who are not like us religiously or culturally and those who differ from us because of nationality, sexual orientation, economic status, or political convictions.

Finally, Source of all Being, Eternal Word, Giver of Life, take away from us all sense of exceptionalism and entitlement, which so alienate us from your people and your creation.

We make this prayer to You in the name of Jesus the Christ, whom we accept as the Universal Savior of all Creation. Amen.

