

**“St. Francis of Assisi and the Meeting with the Sultan Malik al-Kamil”**

**9<sup>th</sup> Annual Interreligious Prayer Service for Peace and Justice**

**Celebrating World Interfaith Harmony Week**

**Monastery Church of the Sacred Heart**

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**“The Crusades” are probably the two most unlikely words one would expect to hear at an interreligious prayer service for peace and justice celebrating World Interfaith Harmony Week.<sup>i</sup> Yet, if we are to talk about the meeting that took place between St. Francis of Assisi and Sultan Malik al-Kamil, in the fall of 1219, during the 5<sup>th</sup> Crusade, it is unavoidable.<sup>ii</sup> But there is another reason why “the Crusades” are appropriate for today’s service, because they continue to be used as a metaphor for religious hatred and war between Christians and Muslims today.<sup>iii</sup> And if we are to pray for, and work for, peace and justice, in the present and future, we have to remember and learn from the past, or we are doomed to repeat it (George Santayana).**

**The 8 crusades lasted for 196 years from 1095-1291. It would be like a war that started in 1817 and is continuing today. In 1065, the Turks had taken over Jerusalem and 30 years later Pope Urban II and the Catholic Church blessed the “Holy War” to restore and regain access to the Holy Places in and near Jerusalem. The wars involved were typical wars in which innocent men, women, children, and soldiers from the Jewish, Muslim and Christian religions were slaughtered in the name of God. The Crusades totally contradicted the mission and message of Jesus who blessed the peacemakers in the Beatitudes, in Matthew’s Gospel, and the teachings of peace at the heart of the Jewish, Muslim and all religions.**

**It was also a time when anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism flourished in the Catholic Church. Pope Innocent III would call the 4<sup>th</sup> Lateran Council, in 1215, which included canons 68-69, and 71 calling for Jews and Muslims to wear a symbol to distinguish them from Christians, in order to prevent intermarriage; to not appear in public on days of Lamentation and on passion Sunday, lest they insult the services and public processions; to not hold public office; and to continue the crusades to recover the holy land.<sup>iv</sup> All of these canons of 1215 would rear their ugly head when Adolf Hitler would promulgate the Star of David marking Jews for the ghettos, concentration camps, and ultimate final solution: total extinction in the Shoah, or Holocaust, of World War II.**

**In 1219, during the 5<sup>th</sup> crusade Francis decides to cross enemy lines to have an opportunity to meet with Sultan Malik al-Kamil, at Damietta, Egypt. The motivations of**

**Francis are open to interpretation. Was it primarily to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and convert the Muslims, die of martyrdom, or both?<sup>v</sup>**

**Perhaps what is helpful to understanding the motivations of Francis is to understand his experience of war. Early in his life Francis was involved in a war in his own country in the battle of Collestrada between Assisi and Perugia. In this war Francis lost many friends, was imprisoned as a POW, and became seriously ill. After recovering, while contemplating a return to war, Francis has a vision in which he chooses to serve God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>vi</sup> He gives up all to follow Jesus as a beggar and mendicant.**

**He also had a significant conversion experience when he encounters a leper and learns how to practice peace and compassion towards all people.<sup>vii</sup>**

**In order to meet the Sultan, Francis and his companion, Illuminato, cross enemy lines and were captured, beaten and brought before the Sultan.<sup>viii</sup> We do not know what was said between the two men who were born a year apart.<sup>ix</sup> Francis was one year younger than the Sultan. They met as contemporary men at the ages of 38 and 39. Francis would die 7 years later, at the age of 45 and the Sultan, at the age of 58.**

**But, while we do not know what was said, we do know what happened as a result of the meeting. Both men maintained their respective religions of Christianity and Islam, but both men were changed, converted, and transformed by what was said. Out of this meeting the Franciscans would be given custody and care of the Holy Places of Jerusalem that they continue to have today. When Francis is offered many gifts, by the Sultan, he chooses a horn used for the call to prayer by the Muslim religion.<sup>x</sup>**

**Sultan Malik al-Kamil, who was known to have offered a Byzantine gold coin for every Christian head brought to him, grants Francis safe passage.<sup>xi</sup> He later agrees to an 8 year peace agreement with Europe and also allows Christians to rule over most of Jerusalem from Acre to Jerusalem, while the Muslims were given control of the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosques, which continues today. In 1244, 6 years after the death of Sultan Malik al-Kamil the Muslims regain control of Jerusalem.**

**John S. Dunne<sup>xii</sup> describes a process of “passing over” that can be found in the meeting with Francis and the Sultan and that has the potential to happen to us today at our service today. It is a process of starting in our own religious tradition and crossing over into the religious tradition and experience of the other, or even encountering the suffering of the other, as with the leper. Through the encounter one is changed by what they learn and upon returning back to their religion of origin they have a different experience that has been transformed by the experience of the other and allows for greater insight. And so it is with of our encounters with the Other we call God, or enlightenment, or oneness with all beings and the universe.**

**Today's service is on the High Holy Day of Sports in the United States called the Super Bowl, and my own home team is playing, the Ravens, so I have a vested interest in the outcome. Steve Sabol, of NFL films, made this statement on a recent broadcast. "Tell me a fact and I'll learn. Tell me a truth and I'll believe. Tell me a story and I'll carry it in my heart forever." The story of what happened between Francis and the Sultan is a story that needs to be carried in our hearts forever, just like the stories in each of our religions traditions. But merely to carry the story in our hearts is not enough, for we need to live out in word and deed what we believe and, in all religions, it is the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do to you. It is the Truth of Love found in each religious tradition that challenges us to cross enemy lines, to risk being captured and beaten, in order to meet the other and be changed by that encounter, so that we have a transformed perspective and new insights on how to love God and neighbor as you love yourself, and to love your enemies as Francis and the Sultan loved each other into friendship and peace.**

**May Peace prevail on earth and in the world!**

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<sup>i</sup> <http://worldinterfaithharmonyweek.com/>

<sup>ii</sup> Steven McMichael, "Francis and the Encounter with the Sultan," in *The Cambridge Companion to Francis of Assisi* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2012), 127-142.

<sup>iii</sup> Peter Ford, "Europe cringes at Bush 'crusade' against terrorists," *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 19, 2001, <http://csmonitor.com/2001/0919/p12s2-woeu.html>.

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Councils/ecum12-2.htm>

<sup>v</sup> McMichael, 127.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, 129-130, 134.

<sup>viii</sup> Paul Moses, *The Saint and the Sultan, The Crusades, Islam, and Francis of Assisi's Mission of Peace* (New York: Doubleday Religion, 2009), 1-11.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>x</sup> <http://darvish.wordpress.com/2008/12/23/st-francis-meets-sultan-malik-al-kamil/>

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>xii</sup> John S. Dunne, *The Way of All the Earth* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 223-224, 85-86, 91.