

From Francis to the Franciscans today

# Promoters of human fraternity

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*Pope Francis' recent travels in Arab countries have distant "roots" in the past. Eight centuries ago another Francis, from Assisi, firmly believed in the power of dialogue and fraternity. We asked Fr. Egidio Canil of the Conventual Friars Minor to talk to us about how Franciscan contacts with Islam and other faiths became a sign of the vocation to interreligious dialogue in places like Assisi.*

## ▲ Francis of Assisi – prophet of universal fraternity

Exactly eight centuries ago, in 1219, the "other Francis" was the instigator of events similar to the journeys of Pope Francis to Muslim lands. As with now, there were two main figures: Brother Francis of Assisi, himself, a Christian, and Sultan Al-Malik Al-Kamil, a Muslim. The meeting took place in Damietta on the Nile delta during the fifth crusade and even then the circumstances surrounding that encounter were both difficult and complex. There was a war going on.

It was not easy for St. Francis to obtain the consent of the papal legate but nonetheless he was eventually able to cross enemy lines to reach the sultan's palace. He went "unarmed" and "in the name of God the Most High" which were the two reasons that persuaded the sovereign to accept the request of the humble friar from afar for a meeting. For Francis, the sultan was not an enemy, but a brother.

The meeting did not produce any political results and Francis and his companion, Friar Illuminato, were not in any danger of their lives. Tradition has it that the sultan wanted to lavish them with gifts as they were departing but the saint firmly refused these because he did not wish to "betray his wife: Lady Poverty". However, as a sign of friendship, he did accept an ivory horn which is still preserved among the relics in the Basilica of Assisi, saying: "I gladly accept this horn because I need it to invite men to praise God".

The episode caused a stir among the Christians of the West. Information about it has been handed down by numerous written testimonies since the 13th century and it has frequently been reproduced in the figurative arts over the centuries, the most famous of which is the fresco painted by Giotto in the papal basilica of Assisi at the end of the same century. Since then the Franciscans have always been welcomed and respected and continue to be present in Muslim countries to this day.

## ▲ The Franciscans sent to the world, witnesses of fraternity

However, the most important point of the meeting with the Sultan must be understood in the light of the later writings of Saint Francis especially in the *Second Rule* (1221) and of the later rule approved by Pope Honorius III (1223). In both of these the saint not only authorizes his friars to go among the "Saracens" (the Muslims), but he is very specific about

the way in which they should do so. "The friars who go among the infidels are not to engage in arguments or disputes but should be servants to every human creature for the sake of the love of God and in their confessing to being Christians". And he adds: "When they see that this pleases the Lord, the word of God should be proclaimed so that they (the Muslims) may come to believe in God ... and be baptized" (2<sup>nd</sup> Rule XVI). The quoted text was written two years after the meeting with the Sultan and just one year after the martyrdom of the five Franciscan protomartyrs which took place in Morocco in 1220. Francis and his friars were obliged to go around the world in a spirit of peace and fraternity to meet "brothers and sisters", never enemies or adversaries. Thus was born the "universal brotherhood" that the followers of Francis were called to bear witness to to the ends of the earth. By the 13th century they had already reached the European countries, China and the peoples of the Far East, the Middle East and North Africa.

### ▲ A challenge and an ideal for the globalized world

Throughout the centuries the idea of "fraternity" was often, even for Christians, a principle which was ignored and at times rejected. Proof of this can be seen in the internal divisions which arose among the Franciscans themselves and within the Church. It was also evident at times in the distrust and hostility shown towards other cultures and religions. The French Revolution at the end of the 18th century saw a secular attempt to revive the gospel principle of "fraternity", however, as this was imposed through violence, it became embroiled in contradictions and soon faded from the scene. Only in the last century, through various charismatic personalities and especially with the Second Vatican Council and the encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* of St. Paul VI, did decisive progress emerge on the path of dialogue and universal brotherhood.

In particular, St. John Paul II, with prophetic foresight, proposed the path of dialogue and encounter to believers. This was seen in Assisi, October 27, 1986, with his invitation to representatives from the different Churches and world religions to come together. For the first time in history, religions met in harmony to share in offering prayers for peace together. The event was repeated by John Paul II in 1993 and 2002. In 2011 Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis in 2016 convened the meeting again in Assisi. Since then the tomb of St. Francis has been called the "chair and altar of brotherhood and peace" by both the Franciscans and believers of all faiths.

### ▲ The contribution of an experience: men and women of God

I lived in Assisi for 21 years, from 1996 to 2017 and right from the beginning I was aware of an atmosphere of dialogue, fraternity and peace which emanated from the city and the tomb of the Francis. It was a climate which John Paul II defined as the *spirit of Assisi*.

As a Franciscan and a member of the Focolare Movement living in Assisi, I immediately felt my vocation materialize: to live for "universal brotherhood", for the *ut omnes unum sint* (may they all be one). In fact, whenever I recognized faithful from other Churches or religions, I felt driven to meet them with a special love following the example of Saint Francis, the great "universal brother". It was also a call to live the charism of unity that Chiara Lubich had transmitted and entrusted to me.

A year after my arrival, a group of Hindu faithful visited the city. They were the family members of Dr. M. Aram, founder of the *Shanti Ashram* of Coimbatore (India). Because of his love for Saint Francis, Dr. Aram had asked that his ashes to be brought to Assisi. I

recognized that God had given me an opportunity to love brothers of another religion and from it a deep friendship was born. In 2016, on my trip to India, I was welcomed into their home as a brother.

In 2004, I spent almost a whole day with a Thai Buddhist monk who, in addition to loving Buddha, also fell in love with St. Francis. He left us a copy of a profound meditation which he had written. Among the things he said: "Assisi has its own charm and stimulates the mind to contemplate wisdom. Our thoughts are inspired by Francis, the purest of heart ... Buddhists and Christians have long been in dialogue; Nirvana and Agape attract each other".

The same happened with other Buddhist monks, with Jewish rabbis and with many Muslim imams. My superiors and the bishop then entrusted me with the task of taking care of the initiatives which arose from this "spirit of Assisi".

In 2017 I made another trip to Asia and stopped in Thailand to visit some Buddhist monasteries in the cities of Bangkok and Chang Mai. Everywhere I felt welcomed like a real brother. The same love that I had reserved for them in Assisi, I found again in their monasteries.

I was also in Taiwan to participate in the sixth Buddhist-Christian symposium promoted by the Focolare Movement. That week I visited the *Ling Jiou Mountain* monastery in Taipei for a special meeting with its founder: Master Hsin Tao. He welcomed very much as a brother and I was struck by his profound spirituality and great warmth. In answer to my final question to him: "How can we, believers, bring peace to humanity?", his immediate reply was: "Going along the path of Love! Bringing Love to the world! " A month later he came to Italy with about twenty Buddhist nuns and faithful to meet Pope Francis and to pray at the tomb of St. Francis.

After each meeting with brothers of other faiths, I always came away spiritually enriched by the wealth particular to all of them. I was able to recognize that they were authentic men and women of God, assiduous promoters of peace and of "human brotherhood".