

Bringing the Gift of Peace

An Interview with Murray Bodo, OFM
by Greg Friedman, OFM

Franciscan Father Murray Bodo is a poet and spiritual writer who has shared the spirituality of Francis of Assisi with countless readers and pilgrims over more than six decades. In this interview, he presents a poet's perspective on the historic meeting between Francis and the sultan.



What in the life of St. Francis led to his encounter the sultan?

Thomas of Celano, Francis' first biographer, says that Francis went to Damietta in the 13th year of his "conversion." So, we need to ask ourselves, conversion from what? What was he? Who was he? Well, by that time he was a deeply spiritual committed Christian in love with Jesus Christ.

By 1219, Francis has been led by God through a process of conversion from that of the son of one of Assisi's wealthiest merchants, with the dream of being a knight. But Francis' experience

of war and a year as a prisoner of war, birthed a long period of soul-searching, through what today we would call "post-traumatic stress disorder." What emerged was a man whose whole orientation is toward the broken, the alienated, the marginal people, and a deep love for Jesus Christ.

In the *Testament* Francis wrote for his brothers, he emphasizes right at the beginning, "When I was in sins it seemed to me a repulsive thing to see lepers. And then the Lord himself led me among them. And what before was repulsive to me was turned into sweetness of



soul and body for me.” That transition is the great conversion of his life.

And now the man who is going to go and appear before the sultan in Damietta in Egypt in 1219 already has over 5,000 brothers all through Europe. He is a man who is the founder of an order in the Church. It’s in the 13th year of his conversion from a way of life he could not have imagined as a little boy born into the emerging middle class, with dreams of glory as a knight, whose exploits matched those sung by the French *troubadours*.

You have written about Francis’ conversion in terms of the “geography” of Assisi.

Another way to look at his conversion is to try to imagine *geographically* what happened to Francis of Assisi. Assisi is a walled medieval city, a world unto its own. Everything outside of those walls was the scary part of the world, a wilderness where robbers and wild animals roamed. Even though changes in the world of commerce meant that the old Roman roads were slowly being opened, the city itself was still self-contained.

Within Assisi there were layers of importance. At the top of the city lived the nobility, the *majores*, an Italian term for those who were “more.” The rising middle class occupied the middle of city, but they

were still *minores* compared to the *maiores*, as were the “lowest of the low,” the serfs and lepers. Francis names his order “the Order of Lesser Brothers,” the *minores* because he begins to identify with people in the lowest stratum of medieval society.

He does more than that however. He goes outside the walls he had been hiding behind all his life and descends to the swampy plain below the city where the lepers lived.

So this “descent” is kind of a way to describe Franciscan spirituality, the Franciscan way we go to God, which is in fact the way God came to us—by going down, by descending. As St. Paul writes in his Letter to the Philippians, “*Christ Jesus...though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness... and became obedient, obedient even to death upon the cross* (Philippians 2:5-8).

That’s the image for Francis: The way to go to God is the way that God came to us, by descending. Francis goes down to the lepers who were considered those most outside of society, lives among them and embraces them and finds God there. This is the great discovery—that Francis finds God, or rather, God finds him in unexpected places—especially among the lepers.



How do we see this “Franciscan way” in Francis’ visit with the Sultan?

From a medieval Christian point of view Muslims were the unbelievers, outsiders living outside of salvation. When Francis goes “among the non-believers,” the Muslims in Damietta, he is undaunted, because he knows from his past experience that God will find him there and he will find God there in an unexpected place.

I think that when Francis left the camp of the European armies at Damietta, he was doing a very countercultural thing. He wasn’t going as a crusader. He didn’t carry weapons. He went as a person of peace. Francis wouldn’t use our term “peacemaking.” For him, peace was a gift. *Jesus* was the gift of peace.

I imagine that the first thing that Francis said going into the Sultan’s presence was, “May God give you peace.” Francis himself tells us in his *Testament*, “The Lord

himself gave me this greeting that I should say, 'God give you peace.'"

And I'm sure that hearing this, the sultan had to be moved because he was in the presence of someone who embodied "dispossession." Francis has relinquished possession of his own life. It doesn't belong to him. It belongs to Christ. And he comes with this gift of peace.

In effect, he would have been telling the sultan, *"I am bringing you peace. And the peace that I have is the gift of Jesus Christ because I am in him and he is in me. This Jesus has told me that the gift that he has given us is the gift of love; we are to love one another. Jesus told us that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for his friends. I will lay down my life for you because you are my friend. I want us to be peace together."*

That's the sort of thing Francis would have said to the sultan. He's bringing a gift that he has received. Because Francis himself has become a person of peace, then he has peace to give. He is the peace that he brings to the Sultan.

The Russian mystic Saint Serephim says that if you become a person of peace, a thousand souls will be converted around you. Francis wasn't coming as a negotiator, to sit down and say, "Now let's work out a peace between the Crusaders and the Muslim population, between the Sultan and the leader of the crusading forces." Francis came talking about the gift that they both have in God, that the great gift of God is peace.

How does this approach of Francis connect to the other themes of his life?

Francis' vision embraced all of creation. Through his time in prison and his own inner spiritual struggles, he learned that things are not always what they seem. Those who seem to be our enemies are sometimes our greatest friends.

In 1219, Francis was in the process of writing a rule of life. It went through more than one version and was not approved by the Holy See until 1223. It's very interesting to me that right before he went to Damietta, Francis wrote this passage for his rule:

"All my brothers, let us pay attention to what the Lord says: Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you. For the Lord Jesus Christ whose footprints we must follow called his betrayer a friend and willingly offered himself to his executioners. Our friends, therefore my brothers, are all those who unjustly inflict upon us distress and anguish, shame and injury, sorrow and punishment, martyrdom and death. We must love them greatly for we shall possess eternal life because of what they bring us. And what they bring us is the true vision."

We tend to look for God where things are very comfortable, but

as we grow older we begin to see that we find God in trying circumstances. We find God in people we thought hated us, we thought were our enemies. And we come to see them sometimes as people who have brought us the greatest gift because they brought us true love.

If I can love the person I think is my enemy, then I begin to understand what real love is.



The so-called enemy can become a friend and can see in me what true love is. We call the transformation that takes place, *peace*. We begin to experience peace of soul which is the foundation of all peacemaking. I cannot ever come to that experience unless I learn to love those who don't think the way I do, those who hurt me. I have to forgive those whom I might think are going to hurt me and whom I forgive.

When Francis offers this passage for his rule, he indicates that he is going to Egypt to meet a friend and brother, no matter what happens, because God will be in that encounter if Francis can forgive. Francis comes before the sultan not to pronounce judgment—which is a very violent thing when you think about it—nor to say “I know everything”—which is again a sort of violent possessiveness. Rather, he would have approached the encounter with love for one who was perceived by the Crusader armies arrayed against him as an enemy.

What might Francis have said next?

I can imagine Francis approaching the sultan saying, “Whatever your people just did to me (if Francis had been roughed up on his way in or tortured), I forgive all of that. We’re starting at a totally different level from who is right and who is wrong, or what do you believe and what do I believe?”

Francis would have “made himself subject” to the truth of who the sultan was as “a word of God.” Francis believed that this word of God would have something to say to him. Again, I imagine Francis saying:

“I come with all of my truth to you, Sultan. And you are presenting your truth to me. We are subject to one another in the truth of who we are. Here peace begins to happen. I am open to you. And are you open to me. You’re like a flower that I’m looking at. You are revealing all kinds of blossoming and opening to me. And I hope I am doing that to you.

“I am opening up the truth of who I am as a Christian. You are opening up

the truth of who you are as a Muslim. You have already become a person of peace. I can see it in your eyes. You don’t want this war any more than I do. You want there to be peace. And in our relationship with one another, this peace is beginning because peace is a gift of Allah. It’s a gift of God. Here between us we open ourselves to one another, despite what all of your courtiers are saying.

“I can tell that they are frowning about this. If the crusaders were here they would be very upset by the fact that I am opening myself to your truth and you to mine. It begins with you and me, Sultan. You know that; I see it in your face and you see it in me.”

What would have made that exchange possible?

I think Francis and the sultan were listening to one another. Francis was sharing who he was as a Christian. His whole life had been transformed by Jesus Christ. He was by that time, in my opinion, almost transformed into Christ. He was like a mirror of Christ in his own time.

The sultan is sharing what *Allah* means to him, what *Allah* has done in his life, what that means to him. They are listening to one another. I think that’s where the bonding really happened, between two men who were willing to listen and not just impose their own ideas upon one another.

What does this historic encounter tell us about the Franciscan mission today, especially, in the Holy Land?

The Franciscan approach is just that: becoming familiar with the people to whom you’re supposed

to share this Gospel. We begin by listening. The first thing is to learn their language, and what a listening process that is! To really know a language other than your own, you enter into the soul of the people. It’s only then that you can even begin to share Jesus Christ.

So in that sense, Francis was very countercultural because in the Church of his time, under Pope Innocent III and his successors, a military solution was very much the response of Christians to “outsiders,” or “non-believers,” their so-called “enemies.”

All of this is very important for today because in our world a military response still seems to be the solution to problems. But there are other ways. Francis of Assisi and Sultan Al-Malik al-Kāmil began a tradition among us Franciscans and for all of those who are touched by our lives and whose lives touch us.

In view of this encounter between the sultan and Francis, it’s interesting that today the Franciscans are those who officially represent the Christian world in the places that refer to the life of Christ in the Holy Land. ✝

The illustrations for this article come from a collection of watercolors by a Benedictine priest of the Abbey of Solesmes, France, Father Pedro Subercaseaux Errazuriz, published as *Saint François d’Assise*, by Marshall Jones Company (Copyright 1925 Boston). The illustrations show Francis in the midst of a battle (p. 54); Francis blessing the city of Assisi as he is dying (p. 55) and Francis with the sultan, opposite page.