

St Francis of Assisi - Works of Mercy (2)

In the name of the Father...

On the feast of St Francis, I spoke of the corporal work of *mercy - to liberate the captive* - as the motive of the Crusades, i.e., to free the Christians enslaved by Islam. I also spoke of mercy's spiritual works: that *to bear wrongs patiently - to turn the other cheek*, does not prohibit taking up arms in defense of Christianity; and that the more important spiritual works of mercy pertain to liberation from a captivity far worse than physical - the captivity of ignorance, error and sin.¹

I also spoke of St Francis who, as a zealous youth, took up arms but whose *zeal* Our Lord directed to a higher cause; who joined the Fifth Crusade, the Crusaders wielding corporal arms intent on liberating the Christians, Francis - resplendent with the spiritual arms described by St Paul - intent upon liberating even the Muslims. During a truce, Francis departed from the safety of the Crusader camp and walked into the camp of the Sultan Malik al-Kamil.

An eye-witness account records: *We saw Brother Francis... a simple and unlearned man, though very amiable and beloved by God and man... [A]n excess of fervor had such an effect on him that protected solely by the shield of faith, he had the daring to go to the Sultan's camp to preach to him and to his subjects the faith of Jesus Christ.*²

Muslim sentries seized Francis and Brother Illuminato, beating and binding them. By God's providence, rather than being executed immediately, they were dragged before the Sultan who demanded to know their motive: were they messengers sent by the Crusaders or did they seek to convert to Islam? Fearlessly replying that, yes, they were messengers, sent however by God, Francis said that his motive was the salvation of the Sultan and his men, i.e., his motive was their conversion, that - as St Paul writes - they might... *turn ... to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus.*³

Under the impulse of the Holy Ghost, Francis did not directly attack Islam but rather proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ, true God and man. An early biographer records: *With what strength of spirit he spoke... with what eloquence and confidence he replied to those who insulted the Christian law.*⁴ One of Francis' spiritual progeny - St Bonaventure - observed that Francis' preaching, like that of his fellow

¹ [St Francis of Assisi - Works of Mercy \(1\)](#)

² [Frank M. Rega, St Francis and the Conversion of the Muslims \(TAN, 2011\), p58](#)

³ [1 Thess 1:9-10](#)

⁴ Rega, p60

deacon St Stephen before the Sanhedrin,⁵ reflected the Gospel promise: *I will give to you a mouth and a wisdom which all your adversaries shall not be able to resist.*⁶

In stark contrast to the sentries who seized Francis, the Sultan listened intently, entranced by Francis' courage, enthusiasm and steadfastness. Our biographer observes: *While it might seem unusual that a Muslim potentate should be so attracted to Christianity, one has to consider the merits and person of this bearer of the Gospel message... Francis was one of the most charismatic and remarkable saints in the history of the Church.*⁷

The Sultan demonstrated familiarity with the Christian scriptures by quoting Our Lord's teaching on not resisting evil but turning the other cheek.⁸ Why, he asked, in light of this teaching, were the Crusaders invading Muslim lands?

Quoting Our Lord, that... *If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away ... and if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away,*⁹ Francis surprised the Sultan with his unique interpretation: *Here he wanted to teach us that every man, however dear and close he is to us, and even if he is as precious to us as the apple of our eye, must be repulsed, pulled out, expelled if he seeks to turn us aside from the faith and the love of our God. That is why it is just that the Christians invade the land you inhabit, for you blaspheme the name of Christ and alienate everyone you can from his worship. But if you were to recognize, confess and adore the Creator and Redeemer, Christians would love you as themselves.*¹⁰

The Sultan in fact had condemned Islam for invading Christian lands, acknowledging an evil which he thought the Christians should bear with. Francis' answer demonstrated that far from opposing the Crusade, he saw it as a justified attempt to retake the Holy Land. Indeed, experts on the fifth Crusade observe: *Francis of Assisi went... on a mission of peace. There can be no question about this. We should not, however, try to make of him a pacifist or to label him as a critic of the Crusade... Francis accepted the Crusade both as legitimate and ordained by God, and he was quite obviously not opposed to the use of violence when it came to the struggle between the Christians and the Muslims.*¹¹

Francis offered to demonstrate the truth of Christianity and the falsity of Islam. The Sultan

⁵ [Acts 6-7](#)

⁶ [Lk 21:16](#), c.f., [Acts 6:10](#)

⁷ Rega, p61

⁸ [Mt 5:39](#), [Lk 6:29](#)

⁹ [Mt 5:29-30](#)

¹⁰ Rega, p69

¹¹ Rega, p70

summoned his advisers, but they refused to debate, stating only that according to Islamic law Francis and Br. Illuminato should be beheaded. The Sultan refused, saying that this would be unjust compensation for their efforts to save him.

Then, reminiscent of St Paul evangelizing the Thessalonians: *[O]ur gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Ghost,*¹² Francis offered to prove the truth of the gospel by the ultimate trial: he and the Imams would walk through fire to see who would emerge unharmed. The Sultan declined, reckoning that the Imams would be unwilling to face death for their beliefs. Indeed, St Bonaventure records that the Sultan saw one of his most respected Imams quietly slip away upon hearing Francis' proposal.

Francis then offered to walk through fire alone: if he emerged unhurt then the Sultan and his court must convert to Christianity. Again, the Sultan refused, probably fearing that Francis might - would - emerge unhurt. Perhaps also - like St Paul when convicted by St Stephen's preaching - the Sultan now was starting to kick against the goad.¹³

Unwilling to convert at that time, unwilling to *become an example to all the unbelievers,*¹⁴ the Sultan had his own guards escort Francis back to the Christian camp to the amazement of the Crusaders who had presumed him dead. Indeed, the Sultan granted to Francis throughout all his domains both safe passage and the freedom to preach. This was the beginning of the Franciscan mission in the Holy Land.¹⁵

Francis' experiences in the Middle East prompted him to update the rule of his order,¹⁶ proposing two alternatives for missionary activity. Articulated in a solitary sentence, one was passive: that the friars proclaim the gospel by leading a Christian life without openly preaching Christ. Forming the rest of the chapter, the other was active: the friars were to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ so that the Muslims - not presupposed to be a peace-loving people open to dialogue - might be baptized and become Christians. Francis recognized that proclaiming the Gospel to the Muslims was essentially confrontational: he was not opposed to proselytizing. Even during his own lifetime, friars were martyred for the faith by Muslims.

What became of the Sultan? There is evidence that, long after Francis had passed into eternal glory, the Sultan converted to Christianity, Franciscan friars baptizing him on his death bed as Francis had

¹² [1 Thess 1:5](#)

¹³ [Acts 9:5 \(DRA\)](#), [26:14](#)

¹⁴ c.f., [1 Thess 1:7](#)

¹⁵ Indeed, for the next six centuries, the only official Christian missionaries in the Holy Land were the Franciscans.

¹⁶ Although this modified rule was never presented for papal approbation, it is instructive regarding relations with Islam.

prophesied.

Moderns would portray Francis' mission to the Muslims in terms conformable to their own sensibilities. Our biographer concludes: *It is of crucial importance to emphasize that Francis visited the Sultan for the purpose of converting him to the Christian Religion, not to engage in a friendly dialogue in order to establish a non-belligerent tolerance of the two parties for each other's religion. Francis was able to sustain this friendship while engaging in his conversion-oriented talks, even despite the sharp and blunt statements that Islam was not the true religion and therefore could not bring eternal life to its followers ... St Francis was bold yet gentle. His gentleness and Christian meekness were not timid or cowardly and did not cause him to draw back and shrink before the threatening situation... His confidence and fearlessness reflected the action of the Holy Ghost [who] inspired his zeal and emboldened him to overcome human weakness... [For Francis], preaching Christianity meant preaching Jesus Christ, because the divine head of the Church is a person. This is nothing novel... The mission of St Francis must be ongoing and must continue because at the very beginning of his calling he was charged by Christ to rebuild the Church: "Francis, go, repair my house which, as you see, is falling completely into ruin." ... Today more than ever, Christendom is divided and in ruins... [laboring under] a long and obvious list of problems which range from today's apparent triumph of secularism to tomorrow's possible ascendancy of Islam... [Francis] made the attempt at the risk of his life to save the soul of the Sultan. It is this noble endeavor which is the true legacy of the Franciscans and of all Christendom.¹⁷*

The Franciscan mission must continue because it is the mission of the Church, that for which she was founded and commissioned by her divine head, a mission in imitation of the God become man, a mission which the Church has even codified into law: *Prima lex est salus animarum* - *the first law is the salvation of souls*. Therein lies the true work of mercy.

¹⁷ Rega, p128-131