

A REMARKABLE ENCOUNTER:
FRANCIS' DIALOGUE WITH THE SULTAN

The following could be part of a reflection based on the story of Francis' encounter with Sultan Malek el-Kamil in Damietta, 1219. (Cf 1C 20:57, 2C 30, LMj 9:5-9, LMj 11:3.) Other related sources include Chapters 16 and Chapter 22:1-4 of the Earlier Rule. The latter is sometimes referred to as Francis' Testament of 1219, written prior to his departure for the Levant. It contains Francis' vision of unconditional love towards all people – even those deemed the “enemy.” (For the following dialogue, Francis and the Sultan are standing at two podiums, reading their remarks. The language is meant to be natural and not “stilted” or “formalized.”)

Sultan: I am a bit surprised you made it through the front lines to reach me, holy man.

Francis: I am a bit surprised to see you myself, Sultan, sir – I thought I was certain to suffer the martyrs' fate.

Sultan: I assure you it was not out of the question.

Francis: And Martyrdom comes at such a great cost!

Sultan: Unfortunately, both of us have long traditions of martyrs. I have learned that martyrdom is never a virtue in itself, however.

Francis: Indeed. My brothers have been trying to convince you and your people for over five years now to give up your resistance and give in to the faith of Jesus Christ. In Morocco, over 3 years ago, some paid the price.

Sultan: From what I hear, they were awfully insistent about converting the Moroccans. They roused up the people who readily facilitated the martyrdom they sought.

Francis: Right – that's the point. Martyrs seldom get the leisure of having a long, heartfelt chat with their adversaries. If they spoke to one another and learned to respect one another, maybe martyrdom would be as archaic as building pyramids.

Sultan: So you have come to chat?

Francis: I don't see any other way to reach understanding, do you?

Sultan: But aside from trying to convert each other to the true Faith, what do we have to talk about?

Francis: The story of your Wisdom precedes you. You studied among us, you are friends with our emperor, you have a thirst for knowledge and truth. I know that you have so much I can learn.

Sultan: So you have come to learn and not to teach?

Francis: Is there anywhere a better teacher than the one who knows how to learn?

Sultan: For a little man, you yourself have some experience of wisdom!

Francis: I am not sure of that. Just walking in here, I had a thousand questions: why your soldiers were so courteous to me, why you were letting me pass each check point, why they all paused for prayer in the middle of our journey to your camp, why they had these beads in their hands, why they bowed to me with reverence, why their faith seemed so genuine .

Sultan: Yes, yes, I understand: you have a lot of questions.

Francis: That is pretty much what I am bringing. A person without questions is a person with his eyes shut, it seems to me.

Sultan: I always thought, on the contrary, that you Christians had all the answers, though of course, I know that you hardly have a lock on self-righteous fanatics!

Francis: I dare say that your response shows signs of humility – a virtue for which I'm quite fond. Why DO we create such simple answers to such complicated questions?

Sultan: Both of us are fighting to defend our holy lands from desecration. The problem is that you believe we are desecrating them now, and we are repulsed by the thought that you may win them over and desecrate them all the more! The battle goes on! Theoretically, given sufficient resources of money and hate, we could continue this battle, killing one ungodly pagan after another (depending who the pagans are, of course) until we have no one left except you and I standing here. At that point, who would win?

Francis: What profit is there in winning?

Sultan: If I win, then I will be sure that Allah is praised and that all people will worship him alone.

Francis: Obviously then, you do not want peace – only victory.

Sultan: And what is the difference? If we can call an end to this ghastly fratricide – because that's what it is, you know? – if we can stop this senseless slaughter, we will finally have peace.

Francis: But Sultan, sir, you can't in your right mind believe that peace is as simple as victory – as though there will be a time when there would be no more conflict? Your "victory" will bring only hatred and continued attempts at revenge - not peace. You know already that neither victory NOR peace happen when one side supposedly "wins."

Sultan: I am up against a bigger enemy than I had imagined!

Francis: You are up against only a brother.

Sultan: If only! If only we could act from the knowledge of being from the same Creator! If only we could see one another through the eyes of the Great and Holy One.

Francis: Now you are beginning to speak sense. You have finally stopped talking about winning games and decided to talk about reality.

Sultan: Reality? The blood I see every day is real. It pours out of the sons and the husbands and the uncles of real men. Even if their thoughts before death had been of anger or hatred or justice to the forces of hate, I can assure you that their final thoughts were none of those. As life slipped by, they must surely have said, "At what cost?" Reality is a word that is forbidden on the battle field. If we thought of reality, we would not be greeting one another in these trenches from hell. We would all be headed home to the ones we love in the safety we cherish.

Francis: A safety that is only precarious and deceptive, if you don't mind me saying, Sultan. A safety for what? From what? For how long? If we are not at peace with our God and do not know the wisdom of love for our neighbor – all neighbors -- we will never have the security that comes only from loving them both – God and neighbor. Oddly, I have found that

security comes only when I am NOT secure -- when I live and serve the other through what the other wishes and desires of me.

Sultan: There is something profound in that altruism! When will our consciences grow so tender that we will act to prevent human misery rather than avenge it?

Francis: I do see, at least, that you and I have a common goal: to keep God OUT of this ghastly war fought in the Almighty's Name!

Sultan: Why do we glorify the games we play by claiming some divine warrant?

Francis: At least now we are talking about real peace . . .

Sultan: and real victory.

Francis: Can anyone win if our God loses?

Sultan: And can Allah ever claim a victory when his sons and daughters are slaughtered in agony?

Francis: See! So you have questions too! If only our world had the courage to live its questions. I know that you recognize my Lord and Master as a great Prophet, and I know that you can appreciate his holy Word to us – unless we die to ourselves to live for God and our neighbor, unless a seed fall to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat – doomed to be stuck in the ground.

Sultan: And if it dies, it is really born – to a life above ground.

Francis: Yes. Love didn't die on the cross – it simply chose not to fight – and gave birth to a love that would never die.

Sultan: A real and eternal love – the love of the Creator, holding precious every precious particle of what the Creator envisions.

Francis: Speaking of what the Creator envisions, is it not all summed up in one word, one reality: PEACE – one of the names of God?

Sultan: Indeed! It is indeed, and our dialogue helps me believe that peace can be possible. For that I praise Allah!

Francis: Yes! Our conversation raises many more glorious questions in me about God's Goodness – beyond limits I had never thought possible! I so desire to search for answers. Questions always lead me to places I've never been – and to people as precious as you.

Sultan: Few are the men from whom I can hear those words and trust their sincerity.

Francis: Sultan, I am a poor man. I have nothing to offer you except my honesty.

Sultan: Then, I thank you in all humility. Had I not allowed you into the camp tonight, I'd never have realized how precious a Christian can be.

Francis: Who knows what we can discover when we let ourselves explore?

Sultan: And what is exploring except the voyage we can all make as we enter into the mystery of Allah – always more than we think possible and always less than we presume.

Francis: Yes! There is so much mystery and majesty in our Good God! Praise comes so easily to the lips of those who recognize both the complexity and the simplicity of God.

Sultan: Indeed! Together let us praise – and explore – our Good & Merciful God, shall we?

Together Francis and the Sultan pray:

You are the One God who does wonderful things.

You are love, charity; You are wisdom, humility, You are patience, You are beauty, You are meekness, You are security, You are rest.

You who are The Benevolent, The Just, the Mild. You who are The Infinitely good, The Merciful, The All-Forgiving. You who are the Nourisher, the Generous, the Loving-kind.

All praise is Yours, Most Merciful, Most Compassionate One.

You are gladness and joy and our hope. You are justice, moderation, and all our riches to sufficiency.

You are the protector, You are our custodian and defender.

You who are The Truth, The Strong, The Praised. You who are The Life-Giver, The Restorer, The Living. You who are The Magnificent, The Eternal, All-Powerful, and Holy.

All praise is Yours, Most Merciful, Most Compassionate One.

You are strength, refreshment, You are our hope, You are our faith, our charity, You are all our sweetness, You are our eternal life.

You who are The Guardian, The Faithful, The Protector. You who are the Light, the Guide, the all-Seeing. You are Good, all Good, the Highest God: Great and wonderful God, almighty God.

All praise is Yours, Most Merciful, Most Compassionate One.