

New pope has a model for Muslim engagement in Francis of Assisi

March 22, 2013

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Just as many Catholics have connected Pope Francis' humility and austere lifestyle with that of Francis of Assisi, those seeking clues on the new pontiff's approach to Christian-Muslim relations see another example in the iconic namesake.



Detail of St. Francis of Assisi from "Madonna Enthroned with the Child, St. Francis and four Angels," a fresco executed by Giovanni Cimabue between 1278-80 for the lower church of St. Francis Basilica in Assisi, Italy. (RNS Photo) In a little known episode in 1219, Francis of Assisi left the camp of the crusaders besieging the walled Egyptian city of Damietta and crossed enemy lines to meet with Malik al-Kamil, the young sultan of Egypt.

“I can’t believe that the choice of his namesake is only about deference to poor people, as important and admirable as that is,” said [William Hugo](#), a Capuchin Franciscan brother and priest in St. Joseph, Wis. “The story of Francis seeking out Al-Kamil would surely raise up in Pope Francis the desire to reach out and be in relationship with those suffering a separation or (who are) excluded.”

A desert encounter

Scholars are divided, however, on whether it was peace or proselytizing that motivated Francis of Assisi. The earliest biographies of him depict a more hardline Christian evangelist who sought to convert Al-Kamil.

“Francis’ goal was, of course, conversion, not coexistence. And while some 13th-century Christian commentators criticized the crusades for their violence, Francis was not among those critics. His joining up with the fifth Crusade suggests a tacit acceptance of crusading,” said [Philip Daileader](#), a history professor at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va.

Many later biographies, however, say Francis’ motivation was more dovish.

“He wanted to see the sultan because he was pained, and he felt guilty,” said [Jon Sweeney](#), author of the new book, [*Francis of Assisi In His Own Words: The Essential Writings*](#). “He saw the carnage, and it was his church that was doing it.”

Conversion or coexistence?

[Chris van Gorder](#), a scholar of Christian-Muslim relations at Baylor University, asserts that Francis of Assisi, a former soldier, was driven by compassion, a hatred for war, a desire to learn from others, and “to build missionistic bridges of reconciliation and healing.”



St. Francis of Assisi (seen here in a stained glass window at St. Andrew's Episcopal Cathedral in Honolulu, Hawaii) is the patron saint of animals. (RNS photo by Kevin Eckstrom) "St. Francis of Assisi was a confident evangelist and a fearless peacemaker who was appalled at the rapacious violence of his era," van Gorder said.

But even if Francis' goal was conversion, it was not an end unto itself, but a means to peace.

"We're seeing the church interpret Francis in modern times as a bridge," said [Paul Moses](#), author of [*The Saint and the Sultan*](#), a 2009 book that explores Francis' pivotal engagement with Islam. "To Muslims ears, the choice of Francis for a name should sound good."

Andrea Stanton, a religious studies professor at the University of Denver, said peace was Francis' motive.

"His attempt to convert the sultan was a conflict-resolution exercise. If the sultan embraced Christianity, the wars would end, because a Christian

would govern Jerusalem,” Stanton said.

What makes Francis’ trip all the more improbable is Muslims were depicted as blood-thirsty heretics inspired by the devil, and venturing into their camp meant certain death.

“Attitudes toward Muslims at that time were hostile beyond imaginings,” van Gorder said. “St. Francis was prepared to be a martyr and was warned by his colleagues that there was a price for the head of a Christian in the sultan’s court, and that his death would almost be certain if he persisted in his plans to go to the sultan’s camp.”

Although there are no first-hand accounts of the meeting, historians say it had a tremendous influence on both men. Al-Kamil, known as a tolerant ruler who offered religious freedom to Christians, received Francis hospitably, allowing him to stay in his court for several days and even preach.



The two talked about religion, war and other issues. During his stay, Francis made no requests of the sultan, except shortly before he departed, when he asked for a meal, possibly with the hope of breaking bread with Al-Kamil.

“The hagiography portrays the two men as having a profound impact on each other. They parted in peace with each other and gained respect for the other,” Hugo said.

A model for 21st-century dialogue

The visit had a profound impact on Francis, who returned to Italy the next year, and made a monumental change to his nascent order's rules. Before the visit, Franciscans were allowed to engage Muslims with the goal of converting them. After the trip, he revised the rule to say it also was permissible to live peaceably among Muslims and under Muslim rule, without trying to convert them.

"That was revolutionary at that time," Moses said.

While it's not clear if Pope Francis will look to Francis of Assisi for interfaith guidance, he wouldn't be the first pontiff to do so. In 1986, Pope John Paul II led the [World Day of Prayer for Peace](#) in Assisi, inviting religious leaders from several different faiths to the saint's birthplace. Benedict, who was not a big supporter of the World Day of Prayer, according to Moses, returned for the 25th anniversary in 2011.

"Pope John Paul II looked to Francis as a figure that can provide inspiration in today's world as to how we approach other religions," Moses said. "The pope didn't just pick that site because it's easy to get to."