

ENCOUNTER OF PEACE: LESSONS FROM DAMIETTA

Admittedly, the name **Henri d'Avranches** rings very few bells today, but in the mid-13th century he was a poet at the top of his game and in high demand. Hailing from the Norman town of the same name, the Frenchman composed in Latin for one Pope, two Emperors, three kings, six Archbishops and maybe even a partridge in a pear tree! He was a brilliant poet and it is his commission to compose *The Versified Life of Saint Francis* that forms the backdrop of this column. To be clear, his was a hagiographical account (in support of the life of a saint) and not strictly an historical one. Nevertheless, valuable lessons can be derived about the **Siege of Damietta**, part of the Fifth Crusade, of which St. Francis of Assisi played a courageous and unique role.

This year of 2019 marks the 800th anniversary of Francis' historic meeting with **Sultan Al-Malik Al-Kamel**, and that encounter has far deeper than mere historical significance in today's fractured society. The poet cleverly included an **acrostic** as a tribute to his patron, Pope Gregory IX. Henry included the first letter of each of the fourteen chapters in his epic poem spelling out the name *GREGORIUS NONUS*. Henry of Avranches, familiar with the contemporary biographical sources, imagined the actual discourse of Francis to the sultan: While he thus teaches the articles of faith with skillful /Tongue, he impresses sages and king, and nobody dares/ To harm him. Indeed heralds are bidden to make this/ Their cry: "Often may he come and go among us." Another source reports that Francis greeted the Sultan with the traditional Muslim greeting "Assalam Alaikum," translated "May the Lord give you peace." This truly impressed the Sultan.

Two generations removed, the Franciscan St. Bonaventure described the encounter in which the Sultan had inquired as to whom had sent Francis and Br. Illuminatus. Bonaventure writes that Francis replied that he had been sent by God, "to show him and his subjects the way of salvation and proclaim the truth of the Gospel message." Historians believe that Francis obtained permission from Cardinal Pellagio. Bonaventure records, "When the Sultan saw his enthusiasm and courage, he listened to him willingly and pressed him to stay with him." When Francis left a few days later, the Sultan **lavished gifts** upon him, which he politely refused due to his vow of poverty. But the Sultan assured him of safe passage home. Despite the relative paucity of historical sources, this encounter was no pious legend; it was a **real encounter** that provides a valuable lesson of peace for today.

Modern challenges in Christian-Muslim Dialogue exist for many reasons, so it was significant that in his speech, **Cardinal Leonardo Sandri**, Prefect of the Congregation for Eastern Churches and papal envoy for the event noted that St. Francis was not afraid of Mohammed, nor was the Sultan afraid of the Gospel. It is fitting that the local bishop who leads the **Vicariate Apostolic** of Alexandria in Egypt is a Franciscan, whose territory includes Damietta. He boasts a large number of priests (virtually all of whom are Religious), given the relatively small Catholic population of 64,000. There are 110 friars in Egypt, 17 schools, 28 cloisters, 22 parishes between Copts and Latin-Rite Catholics. An Apostolic vicariate is a type of church jurisdiction that is used in missionary regions in which a full-fledged diocese is impossible or impractical. Most of the Christians in Egypt today are Coptic, whether Coptic Catholic or Orthodox.

The seaport town of **Damietta** (pop. 337,000) lies at the nexus of the Nile River and the Mediterranean Sea. It was briefly captured by Crusaders during the fifth Crusade, coveted as a possible inroad to capturing Egypt. The Egyptian government sued for peace, offering to surrender all the territory of the kingdom of Jerusalem (except Transjordan) and adhere to a thirty-year truce in return for the crusaders leaving Egypt. The Military Orders should have accepted in a heartbeat! This situation became the impetus for the visit of Francis, who arrived sometime in July 1219. Historians tell us that on August 24, 1218, Crusaders scored a major victory, blocking the passage of ships up river in the Nile. However, a major setback occurred the next month and several thousand Christian soldiers were killed.

Strictly speaking, historical sources are lacking about the precise nature of the meeting, but this much seems clear. St. Francis **crossed enemy lines** and took a great risk for his life to encounter the Sultan in an attempt to end the horrific bloodshed, as significant majorities of the population were killed. The encounter became the subject of one of **Giotto's** magnificent frescoes that grace the walls of the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi.



St. Francis before the Sultan | Basilica of St. Francis | Giotto di Bondone

At the anniversary commemoration **Fr. Michael Perry**, Minister General of the Friars Minor, said: “Today, in front of this sea which intersects with the Nile, we can make a promise: we can seek peace in the heart of each one of us, we can become people of peace in our families, in all the communities, in service, at work, wherever we are and wherever we will be, we can carry this message which the world so badly needs.” To “re-enact” the encounter, the planners employed both Christians and Muslim children, itself a hopeful sign of greater concord among peoples. May the children teach us an important lesson of peace and cooperation.

- Please see my Sunday Stewardship note on the Page 5 sidebar. Your generous support is as appreciated as it is needed.
- Some good news for the Catholic Church in Egypt. The process of “legalization” of places of worship built without the required permits is moving apace. The former “10 Rules” established by the Ottomans in 1934 had prohibited the building of new churches near schools, government buildings. More than **700 Christian places of worship** have been regularized in the past two years. May this be a time of peace and increased religious freedom in Egypt.
- Can’t make it up! The Twins will give away **30,000 “Twins Puffer Vests”** on Opening Day. How appropriate a gift this year! At least they look cozy. I’d like to meet the young buck from Major League Baseball whose computer spit out a schedule with the Twins opening **at home**, and **on March 28!** I rarely recall my dreams, but had a chilling one about a horrific start to the season. Believe me, I was quite relieved when I woke up!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel
Rector