

## **Pope Francis and St. Francis and the “periphery” of inter-religious dialogue**

**[Anglican Centre, Rome 20 October 2015]**

When Archbishop David invited me to give this presentation he suggested the topic be “The Francis Effect: a close walk with Pope Francis and his inspiration, Francis of Assisi”. My own patron, St. Columban, give us the vision to be pilgrims for Christ “peregrinari pro Christo” and I suppose another translation of “peregrinari” is to “wander”. So I hope you will forgive me if you think I have wandered too far and taken a mental pilgrimage away from the charted path with David gave me when I willfully lead you elsewhere under the topic **“Pope Francis and St. Francis and the “periphery” of inter-religious dialogue.**

I am greatly honoured and most delighted to be with you today. Since I came to Rome in 2011, the Anglican Centre in Rome has been a place where my heart is always at home.

It seems to me that considering **“Pope Francis and St. Francis and the “periphery” of inter-religious dialogue** takes on a special relevance in the immediately “now” context of the huge people movement which is taking place into Europe from both Africa through Italy and from Syria and other Middle Eastern countries especially through Greece and beyond. I am at the same time concerned that issues in inter-religious dialogue are being seen majorly in terms of Islam and Muslims with the result that the wellsprings of devotion and holiness manifested by Hindus and Buddhists and Sikhs and other believers are being marginalized and even, can we say, peripheralized.

An article in the June 2015 issue of *Australian Journal of Mission Studies* has ripped into St. Francis of Assisi. Francis, as you know, joined the boats carrying the 5<sup>th</sup> Crusade in 1219 and got himself to Damietta on a missionary journey to convert Sultan Malik al Kamil. Before this he had set off in 1212 on a missionary journey to Syria but didn't get very far as he was shipwrecked on the other side of the Adriatic. After this in 1213 he tried to go to Morocco but became desperately ill while travelling south through Spain. We find this urge of the heart of St. Francis towards Muslims manifested in the Rule which he wrote in 1223 at Fonte Colombo near Rieti with a sense of desperation to ensure his vision for his brothers when he appealed to them to go among Muslims in a peaceful way. However this article I have referred to claims that Francis compromised himself by traveling in the boats connected with the 5<sup>th</sup> Crusade: “His intentions were good but his association with the 5<sup>th</sup> Crusade conveyed a contrary message.” Leaving aside the fact that Ryanair wasn't about at the time and that the only way to get to Egypt 800 hundred years ago was to get on one of the many boats going back and forward with the crusaders, it is more helpful to see what Sultan Malik thought about Francis' arrival at his court. Francis was a disheveled unkempt man like the many dervishes and malangs that must have infested Malik's court at Damietta. There would have been Orthodox Christians there as well in the pay of the Sultan. So Francis's appearing was not that a Christian had come to the court but that “an odd man from the West” had appeared on the Sultan's doorstep. According to the Fioretti, the Sultan and his advisors prepared a trap for Francis, much like what happened in Iran after the fall of the Shah when crosses were painted at the entrances to public buildings so that people would walk on them in derision. When Francis was invited to meet the Sultan [and he was invited, not dragged in as a prisoner], carpets were laid at the

entrance with crosses woven into them. Francis strolled happily forward looking toward the Sultan without worrying wear his feet went. Mocked for walking on the cross, his sacred sign, Francis is reported to have cheerily said: "We have the True Cross. You have the crosses of the two thieves and that that is what I am walking on." I imagine that I can hear the applause that must have come at Francis' quick sharp and sensible repartee. He might have thrown off the clothes of his father when he chose his Lady Poverty but he still had the sharp wit and capacity for happy banter into which he was educated by his mother. We know nothing more except that the Sultan set Francis on his way, moved no doubt by his encounter with this strangely holy man. It seems to me that not only has the author of the article I have referred to mistaken history but has, more seriously, misread the hearts of both Francis and the Sultan Malik.

Francis lived on the margins of society in Italy and struggled to remain on the ecclesiastical periphery where he would not be overwhelmed by the world of popes and cardinals and the demands on him to write a "sensible" Rule. Francis travelled to a far periphery in Egypt. The periphery for Francis was not simply a geographic measurement to be travelled. He had what I want to call an "inner periphery" which impelled him and enable him to move imaginatively well beyond. I think St. Paul was impelled by this "inner periphery" when he said "caritas Christi urget nos", "the love of Christ impels us" beyond the beyond.

[A presentation at this point of Fr. Noel Connolly's book *Pope Francis' Inspiring Vision*]

I see Pope Francis summoning us both to walk back imaginatively and re-creatively where we have plodded in the past [cf. Fr. Noel Connolly p.3, para 5] and, at the same time, to be impelled creatively and happily by our own personal inner periphery to live and move and have our being in the context of the religious, political, social and economic peripheries of our world. Our unlimited "inner periphery" enables us to stretch beyond, to imagine beyond, to think of the possibilities rather than the obstacles, from the perspective of *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* without a pre-occupation about where I stand in the pecking order. I think it is a sort of "partially realized immortality", as a movement into the limitlessness of God. What Fr. Noel Connolly has written [p.10, para 4] sits well here. Pope Francis encourages us to have a religious imagination which engages our inner periphery so that we may keep seeking for God in all things.

For many people the challenge and distant margin of fruitful inter-religious dialogue [some prefer to say interfaith dialogue] sits out there on the intellectual or faith periphery as unachievable. Often the reference point is that because there is so much religious-based terrorism then we need to have religious dialogue to back the fires and cool the tensions and... be seen to be doing something or other. Violence in the name of God has penetrated to the streets of London, Paris, Melbourne and Sydney without speaking of the awful bestialities being committed in Syria and Iraq and elsewhere. The response to this is not knee-jerk "let's dialogue" or throwing money at committees to de-radicalize youth. As Pope Francis said in 2014 while in Jerusalem and Pope Benedict had said in 2009 at Regensburg, there has to be a rallying cry for solidarity between men and women of goodwill against the violence of fundamentalism, to name the evil, and to embrace one another in the heart: "May no one abuse the name of God through violence". The issue, of course, at the heart of fundamentalist-based

violence is not religion but atheism which denies the divine reality of God and elevates a humanly constructed control model to which God is expected to conform.

This is why I am speaking about the **periphery** of religious dialogue with all believers and not just Muslims [because they are “in the news”]. This sort of periphery is not an unachievable but is an expanded religious imagination which enables our hearts to dialogue, a dialogue which is more primary than the activity of our minds. 50 years ago next week, *Nostra Aetate* from Vatican II, the document on other faiths, called us to have the religious imagination to be able to recognize truth and holiness in other religions. This was breakthrough language at Vatican II years ago and I feel it is language still waiting to breakthrough now 50 years later. There is a wonderful Urdu proverb that seems to have been made to describe the dialogue of believers, “dil se dil tak rah hoti hai”: the surest road is the one that runs from one heart to another. Cardinal Newman had exactly the same in his motto “cor ad cor loquitur”: heart speaks to heart. [cf. Fr. Noel Connolly p.5, para 5]. For St. Francis it didn’t matter what he was or wasn’t standing on when he came to meet the Sultan. I like to think that the only people during that encounter in Damietta in 1219 who knew what was going on were Francis and the Sultan through their encounter in the heart. The rest with their games just did not matter. [cf. Fr. Noel Connolly p.12, para 1].

In his first message in January 2014 for the World Day of Peace, *Fraternity, the foundation and pathway to peace*, Pope Francis spoke about fraternity over and over again. [Distribution of the text, examination of the headings which divide the text which enables a quick introduction to the text, discussion and referral to several headings, n.1 as foundational attitude for interreligious dialogue, n.1 and forthcoming *The Joy of the Gospel* [2014], n.9 and forthcoming *Laudato si* [2015].]

Pope Francis has called us to communion in heart. On his way back from Cuba, UNO, and USA, he appealed to us to build bridges. “Fraternity”, “communion”, “bridges”. I think that taking these from Pope Francis and joining them to the call of *Nostra Aetate* to recognize truth and holiness in the hearts of believers can nurture in us the religious imagination needed for dialogue. Pope Francis indicates to us that what actually enables us to use our religious imagination in dialogue is a commitment to compassion and a readiness to be pilgrims who are explorers, who are not self-sufficient, and who cannot afford to be superior [cf. Fr. Noel Connolly p.10, para 2].

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