

St. Francis and the way of nonviolence

John Dear | Oct. 10, 2006 On the Road to Peace

Every year, on Oct. 4, the feast of St. Francis, memories of my first visit to Assisi come to mind. The occasion was the 50th anniversary of Pax Christi International. Some 800 Catholic activists converged on the town and a lavish conference got underway. I attended a presentation or two and heard some eloquent speakers from around the world pleading for justice and disarmament. But I found myself beckoned by the beautiful and irenic landscape, so I left the talks behind and headed for the quaint streets and the fertile hills and the town's glorious churches -- the Church of San Damiano and the Portiuncula, the little chapel Francis erected by hand.

I covered every inch of Assisi and contemplated the ambience. And as the week wore on, Francis' spirit seemed to descend upon me. I began to understand anew his life of prayer and penance, his poverty and preaching and peace. And soon my heart resounded with that famous prayer: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace."

Some 800 years have come and gone since Francis' rowdy youth and the storied conversion that set the town spinning. Eight hundred years and his shining witness has scarcely dimmed. His example teaches us yet -- his journey from violence to nonviolence, wealth to poverty, pride to humility, power to powerlessness, selfishness to service, indifference to love, cruelty to compassion, killing enemies to loving them.

His conversion spurred him into Assisi's narrow streets, preaching, *Pace e Bene!* Peace and goodness to you! We smile at the words today, regarding them as sweet and quaint. But his benediction earned him scorn and ridicule. He often received hurled rocks in return -- the abuse reserved for troublemakers and fools.

In his day the Crusades were in full force. Once of age, he joined up, accoutered in shield, helmet and sword. He joined the Crusades again after his conversion, but this time a different crusade, the campaign of Gospel nonviolence. He gave away his possessions, lived in caves, kissed a leper, served the poor, and built a community of peacemaking friends. In 1219, he embarked on a year-long pilgrimage of nonviolence -- from Italy to Northern Africa -- right into the war zone. And there, at great peril, he secured a meeting with the sultan, Melek-el-Kamel, the leading Muslim of his time. He met, too, with the sultan's counterpart, the Christian general Cardinal Pelagius. Put a stop to the killing, he urged them both.

The cardinal dismissed Francis out of hand. The campaign, after all, was being conducted in Jesus' name, and under his sign and blessing. Interfere with that and one interferes with heaven's very purpose. For the purpose of heaven and the state are one, so we're told.

Francis would have none of it. Likewise, we too must dismiss such blasphemy out of hand. There is no theological justification for the bombing of Iraq, the spending of billions on weapons of mass destruction, the death penalty, our corporate greed or any such violence.

The sultan received Francis with an altogether different attitude. The sultan, historians say, was impressed by

this mendicant friar -- such exemplary kindness and gentleness. "If all Christians are like this," said the sultan, "I would not hesitate to become one."

My Franciscan friend, Fr. Richard Rohr, tells me that Francis, heading toward home, fell into a series of crises. His first stemmed from the crusaders themselves. They declared him a heretic and wanted his head. It was the sultan who saw to it that Francis got safe passage and who kept the Christian warriors from killing one of their own.

The second crisis hit once he arrived home -- his friars began to murmur and grumble. They took poorly to his politics, his outreach to the Muslims. They chafed against the strictures of the Franciscan rule: own nothing, beg for food, serve the poor, preach the good news of peace -- sometimes using words. And now, in light of his journey, a new stipulation: Love your enemies. Tensions mounted. His nonviolence and his voluntary poverty proved too much. The friars wanted houses. So they turned on him. They rejected him and his orders. And Francis soon fell into despondency.

He eventually resigned the administration of the order and suffered, I believe, a severe depression. Off he trudged to a hermitage on the mountain of La Verna, where he spent his last years in solitude, prayer, penance, sickness, hunger and sorrow. A story of woe on the face of it.

Yet it was in this spiritual darkness that Francis plumbed the depths -- or, the heights -- of contemplative nonviolence. In the end, he retracted nothing of his vision. He experienced the fullness of nonviolent, suffering love for Christ and all humanity.

"If you own possessions, you need weapons to protect them, and so we do not own anything and we are at peace with everyone," he once said. He lay on the ground near his Portiuncula, his friars gathered, and he said, "We have just begun to live the Gospel." And then he died. Recent studies of his bones determined that Francis suffered from leprosy and starvation.

Francis lived by a hallowed logic. Embrace simplicity and poverty, serve the needy, live in peace and nonviolence, love one another including your enemies, spend your days in contemplative prayer, and be devoted servants of Jesus and his Gospel. Here is a mighty social ethic. If the whole world, especially First World nations, practiced the Franciscan ethic of social justice and nonviolence, hunger and warfare would end.

His ethic casts a wary eye on the United States most of all. Its citizens number only 4 percent of the planet's population. Yet it controls more than 60 percent of the world's natural resources. It maintains the world's largest arsenal, including 20,000 nuclear weapons -- clearly, from the Franciscan view, to keep the world from seizing back the resources we've muscled from them.

Francis' Gospel ethic, if practiced, would make momentous changes to the global landscape. It would have us revert resources back to the world's poor. It would have us relinquish the world's oil fields to their rightful owners, including Iraq. It would have us dismantle our nuclear weapons; and live in peace with everyone. It would have us respect creation itself. And in the process, it would teach us, like Francis, to trust the God of peace.

Francis is not just for the birds. His example holds the key to the solutions of all the world's problems. He may be the greatest of Jesus' witnesses. "I have done my part," Francis told the friars around him as he died. "May Christ teach you to do yours."

May we do our part, and become, like Francis, instruments of Christ's peace.

This reflection is featured in John Dear's latest book, *You Will Be My Witnesses* (Orbis Books), which includes

magnificent icons of the saints by Fr. William Hart McNichols. For further info, see: www.fatherjohndear.org [1].

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