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Recent release of 'Francis and the Sultan' documentary is perfect timing

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

NCR Today
Pope Francis

When it was announced March 13 that the church had a new pope who had taken the name Francis, the first thing that popped into my head was, "St. Francis was the first one to reach out to Islam." This fact had just recently had been reinforced when I screened a new documentary from Franciscan Media, "In the Footprints of Francis and the Sultan: a Model for Peacemaking."

Talk about great timing for the release of this two-part DVD written and produced by Franciscan Sr. Kathleen A. Warren and Jayasri (Joyce) Hart, who also directed.

Francis of Assisi (1181?-1226) is the saint of the poor, the environment and animals; he was a man who lived a life of evangelical poverty, humility and peacemaking. He sent his brothers out to preach the Gospel -- "and if necessary, [to] use words." As we all know by now, Pope Francis took this name because one of the cardinals told him, "Remember the poor."

But there was one remarkable event, often only mentioned in passing in church history books and even biographies of the saint, when Francis set out for Egypt during the Fifth Crusade. At that time, the Muslims still controlled Jerusalem, but to reach there, the crusaders decided to first capture the fortress of Damietta in Egypt and gain control of the Nile River. The film tells us, however, that Francis did not "buy the pope's call to war but goes instead to embrace the Muslims." When the crusaders laughed at Francis and dismissed him as he tried to convince them not to fight, he decided to meet the sultan. He and Brother Illuminato entered the sultan's camp, where they were treated as spies then brought to Sultan al-Kamil.

No one actually knows what was said since Francis did not speak Arabic and the sultan didn't speak

whatever French-Italian dialect Francis used. It was their way of being together, the attitude of mutual respect and understanding, as well as their belief in one God, prayer, kindness to the poor, and peace that certainly appealed to both men.

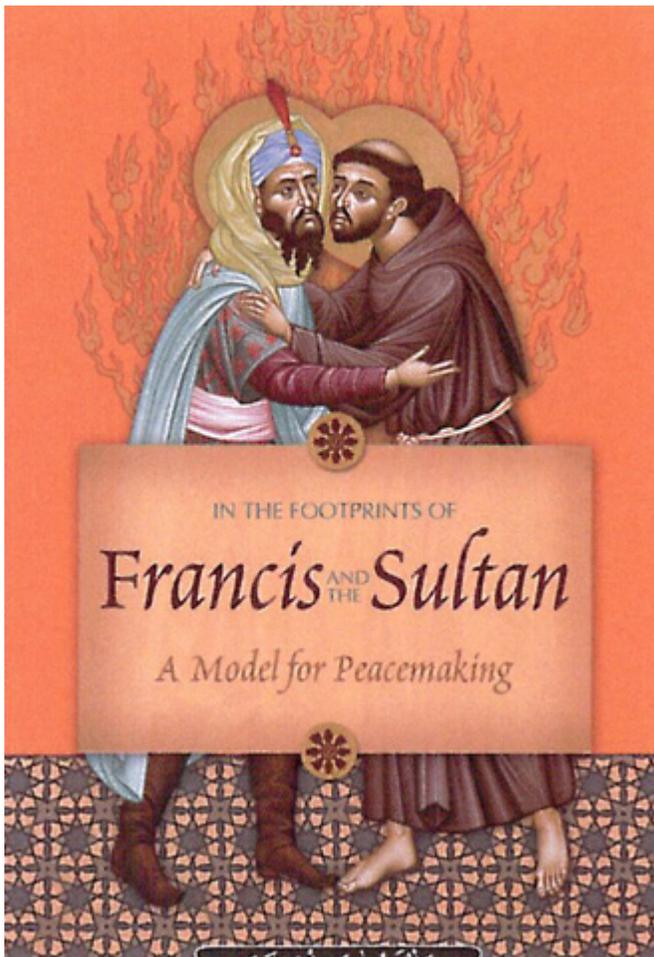
When Francis returned home, he even amended the rule he had written for his brothers, saying that those who feel called to go to Muslims should be allowed to do so. In 1272, a sultan allowed the Franciscans to settle in the Cenacle in Jerusalem. In 1342, Pope Clement VI named the Franciscans the custodians of the Holy Land "in the name of the Catholic church."

"Francis and the Sultan" is the result of a collaboration between Warren; Hart; Hart's husband, Bill; and others, which lasted through starts and stops over six years. Funding came from several religious communities, individuals and the USCCB.

Part one is a clear and accessible telling of the story of Francis' journey that concluded with a meeting with the sultan. Part two talks about the legacy of the encounter between Francis and the sultan, the misinterpretations of the encounter through stories and art, and the efforts of a Franciscan artist to render an authentic portrayal of that meeting and dispel the myths that have arisen over the centuries.

The goal of "Francis and the Sultan" is to articulate and demonstrate the essence of interreligious dialogue and encourage viewers to actively participate in dialogic action with people who believe differently because without dialogue, the alternative is hostility and worse. The way to do this is modeled on how Francis and the Sultan were with one another, by starting with the respect they most certainly had for those things that we today hold in common, such as belief in the one true God, the centrality of God's will in our lives, charity for the poor, and the desire for peace.

Experts and scholars include Franciscans Murray Bodo, Michael Cusato and Michael Calabria, as well as Fareed Munir, Imam Yahya Hendi and Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald. Warren is a specialist in interreligious dialogue and is involved in Muslim-Christian activities from a Franciscan perspective. Her book, *Daring to Cross the Threshold: Francis of Assisi Encounters Sultan Malek al-Kamil*, was first published in 2003 and reissued in 2012 (Wipf & Stock). It examines the historical context of the 13th century that led to the meeting of Francis and the sultan. Hart is an independent filmmaker who likes to explore "little-known nuggets of history that have contemporary relevance."



The cover art for the DVD is by Franciscan

iconographer Robert Lentz, who by his art wants to dispel the myths about the encounter between Francis and the sultan perpetrated first by Francis' biography of St. Bonaventure and then by art, beginning with the early Renaissance. Here, he shows Francis and the sultan as equals, where other depictions show Francis preaching and in a position of power. Part two of the film is a lesson in cultural and artistic analysis and the importance of questioning the images we often take for granted.

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The thing that impressed me most about this film is its warmth, lucidity and gentle hope, and the dedication of Sr. Kathy Warren, who also narrates the film, to see this project through in these post-Sept. 11 years. And though more than a decade has passed since the attacks on the World Trade Center, the need for interreligious dialogue is stronger than ever.

Calabria, an Islamic scholar, says in the film, " 'The Story of Francis and the Sultan' gives us a new paradigm for encountering 'the other' and ultimately for embracing 'the other.' " Why is this important? Because "the alternative is violent confrontation."

The online resource materials are filled with references and even a quiz for individuals and interreligious groups to use on how much they know about Muslims and, conversely, Christians. The imaginary dramatic dialogue between Francis and the sultan would make an excellent activity. There are prayers for group sessions, including St. Francis' "Praises of God," which some believe the saint wrote to honor the "99 Names of God" of Islam. If I could add one element to the resource booklet, it would be a study guide for students and adult groups consisting in open-ended questions that would encourage dialogue between

the group itself where differences of opinion may emerge as well. As it is now, the resource booklet is an encouragement to the viewer or leader to take personal initiative to bring the film and conversation to his or her group, but it will require some time and effort to do so -- which is a good thing, but will they do it?

The good news is, the film is divided into two parts of about 25 minutes each and are so accessible to high school ages and beyond that an experienced facilitator can lead successful sessions as-is, though the smart leader will prepare.

Interreligious dialogue -- that is, dialogue between religions (different from ecumenical dialogue that is between Christian churches) -- was endorsed by the Second Vatican Council in the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions* ("Nostra Aetate," 1965). Some of these moments of encounter have been celebrated through international interreligious conferences on peacemaking, most notably in Assisi.

Pope Francis, the former Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, Argentina, embraced interreligious dialogue from his first days by surprising many journalists who were present at his first press conference March 16. He said, as if aware of the example of St. Francis and the sultan and the legacy of Vatican II, "Not everyone present belongs to the Catholic faith and others do not believe ... I respect the conscience of each one of you knowing that each one of you is a child of God. May God bless you."

"In the Footprints of Francis and the Sultan: a Model for Peacemaking" is available from Franciscan Communications. It's a prophetic resource for our times.

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