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The Peaceful Crusader

By THOMAS CAHILL

AMID all the useless bloodshed of the Crusades, there is one story that suggests an extended clash of civilizations between Islam and the West was not preordained. It concerns the early 13th-century friar Francis of Assisi, who joined the Fifth Crusade not as a warrior but as a peacemaker.

Francis was no good at organization or strategy and he knew it. He accepted the men and women who presented themselves as followers, befriended them and shared the Gospel with them. But he gave them little else. He expected them to live like him: rejecting distinctions of class, forgoing honors of church or king or commune, taking the words of Jesus literally, owning nothing, suffering for God's sake, befriending every outcast -- leper, heretic, highwayman -- thrust in their path.

Francis was not impressed by the Crusaders, whose sacrilegious brutality horrified him. They were entirely too fond of taunting and abusing their prisoners of war, who were often returned to their families minus nose, lips, ears or eyes.

In Francis' view, judgment was the exclusive province of the all-merciful God; it was none of a Christian's concern. True Christians were to befriend all yet condemn no one. Give to others, and it shall be given to you, forgive and you shall be forgiven, was Francis' constant preaching. "May the Lord give you peace" was the best greeting one could give to all one met. It compromised no one's dignity and embraced every good; it was a blessing to be bestowed indiscriminately. Francis bestowed it on people named George and Jacques and on people named Osama and Saddam. Such an approach, in an age when the most visible signs of the Christian religion were the wars and atrocities of the red-crossed crusaders, was shockingly otherworldly and slyly effective.

Symbolic gesture, Francis' natural language, was a profound source he called on throughout his life. In one of its most poignant expressions, Francis sailed across the Mediterranean to the Egyptian court of al-Malik al-Kamil, nephew of the great Saladin who had defeated the forces of the hapless Third Crusade. Francis was admitted to the august presence of the sultan himself and spoke to him of Christ, who was, after all, Francis' only subject.

Trying to proselytize a Muslim was cause for on-the-spot decapitation, but Kamil was a wise and moderate man, who was deeply impressed by Francis' courage and sincerity and invited him to stay for a week of serious conversation. Francis, in turn, was deeply impressed by the religious devotion of the Muslims, especially by their five daily calls to prayer; it is quite possible that the thrice-daily recitation of the Angelus that became current in Europe after this visit was precipitated by the impression made on Francis by the call of the muezzin (just as the quintessential Catholic devotion of the rosary derives from Muslim prayer beads).

It is a tragedy of history that Kamil and Francis were unable to talk longer, to coordinate their strengths and form an alliance. Had they been able to do so, the phrase "clash of civilizations" might be unknown to our world.

Francis went back to the Crusader camp on the Egyptian shore and desperately tried to convince

Cardinal Pelagius Galvani, whom Pope Honorius III had put in charge of the Crusade, that he should make peace with the sultan, who, despite far greater force on his side, was all too ready to do so. But the cardinal had dreams of military glory and would not listen. His eventual failure, amid terrible loss of life, brought the age of the crusades to its inglorious end.

Donald Spoto, one of Francis of Assisi's most recent biographers, rightly calls Francis "the first person from the West to travel to another continent with the revolutionary idea of peacemaking." As a result of his inability to convince Cardinal Pelagius, however, Francis saw himself as a failure. Like his model, Jesus of Nazareth, Francis was an extremist. But his failure is still capable of bearing new fruit.

Islamic society and Christian society have been generally bad neighbors now for nearly 14 centuries, eager to misunderstand each other, often borrowing culturally and intellectually from each other without ever bestowing proper credit. But as Sir Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of the British Commonwealth, has written, almost as if he was thinking of Kamil and Francis, "Those who are confident of their faith are not threatened but enlarged by the different faiths of others. There are, surely, many ways of arriving at this generosity of spirit and each faith may need to find its own." We stand in desperate need of contemporary figures like Kamil and Francis of Assisi to create an innovative dialogue. To build a future better than our past, we need, as Rabbi Sacks has put it, "the confidence to recognize the irreducible, glorious dignity of difference."

May the Lord give you peace.

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The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, Who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, Who has also spoken to men. They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. Although not acknowledging Him as God, they venerate Jesus as prophet, His virgin Mother they also honor, and even at times devoutly invoke. Further, they await the day of judgement and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason, they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms-deeds and fasting. Over the centuries, many quarrels and dissensions, have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred Council... urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values.

-From Nostra Aetate, the Vatican II Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, paragraph 3, 1965