The Spirituality of St. Francis: Going Among Non-Believers

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Because Christ had commanded his Apostles to preach the Gospel to all nations, Francis could not limit his apostolate to Christian lands alone. His desire to be a witness to the Kingdom proclaimed by Christ made him look beyond the Church to the non-believers and led him to go among them, offering to share his faith with them.

Francis was born and grew up during the period of the Crusades, not the best period of history in which to form a true picture of the "infidels," the non-believers, especially the Saracens. In order to find out what these feared and hated "infidels" were really like, he overcame his prejudices and went to meet and speak with them face to face.

Using the knowledge he gained from this encounter, he prepared those friars who wished to go among the Saracens, teaching them to respect the strangers' beliefs and to remember that only God can change hearts and bring them to believe in the Christian faith. He taught the friars that, when the opportune moment came, they could do little beyond preaching the faith more by deeds than by words and dispose their listeners to be baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Francis, therefore, sent the friars among non-believers to bear witness to their Franciscan way of Gospel life. Instead of becoming embroiled in disputes and controversy, they were to remain peacefully among the non-believers to show them the faith which was the Rule and sole aim of the Fraternity. In a word, the friars were to be there as Christians among Moslems.

It was not easy for Francis to reach this level of understanding. At that time, the Holy Land was occupied by the infidel Moslems, a situation which outraged the Christian world and made it difficult to approach the problem calmly and rationally. Again, political considerations were so mixed in with religious interests that the apostolic mission of preaching the Gospel to the ends of the earth was reduced to sheer proselytism, which, when persuasion did not work, turned into a murderous onslaught that was sanctified and promoted under the guise of a holy Crusade.

I. Christianity and the Non-believers

In the Middle Ages, it was taken for granted that, by and large, everyone in Christian territory should belong to the Church. And what territory was more Christian than the Holy Land, then occupied by the so-called "infidels," that is, by those who were not prepared to reject their own faith and become Christians? The distinction between "believers" and "infidels" or "non-believers" was clear-cut, and the Church's mission, therefore, was to try to follow Christ's command by conquering the non-believers until Christianity was spread all over the world.

In itself, the desire to win converts was good since it was simply the wish to continue the missionary work of the early Church. But the means that came to be used were not at all in harmony with the spirit of the Gospel. The sweeping conquests made by the Moslems in their "holy wars" provoked the Christian world into responding in kind with the war-like Crusades.

After Mohammed's death in 632, the Moslem religion spread rapidly outside Arabia, where it had originated. But the Christan West was especially shaken by the rapidity with which Islamism had conquered North Africa, Sicily, and a large part of Spain.

In the eleventh century, the Church, inspired more by the instinct for self-preservation than by any desire to spread the Gospel, reacted to the mounting threat of Moslem invasion. The Christian world organized the Crusades as an armed defense to protect itself against an armed attack by Islam.

Although the Moslem occupation of the Holy Land and the threat of invasion were the principal reasons for mounting the Crusades, there were other motives as well. The cult of chivalry had resulted in a great increase in the number of Christian knights and warriors who no longer had any battles to fight because the barbarian invaders had settled down and had ceased to be a menace. In addition, the safety of pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land was being threatened by some fanatical Moslem overlords who were engaged in a power struggle among themselves. These considerations, religious and other-

wise, led the Pope to approve Christianity's war-like venture in the form of the Crusades.

Besides these political and spiritual motives, the Crusades needed to have a spiritual appeal in order to create a favorable atmosphere and to persuade the main body of the faithful to support the endeavor by joining the Christian armies or by giving them financial assistance.

The capture of Jerusalem by Saladin's troops in 1187 was the shock that really awakened Christianity to the danger that threatened it. The West could not remain indifferent to the severing of the pilgrimage route to the Holy Places. Accordingly, the faithful throughout the Christian world were urged by preaching and by the written word to take part in the Third Crusade.

The troubadors composed songs describing how the Moslems massacred the Christians. They wrote elegies mourning the loss of Jerusalem similar to the laments of the ancient biblical prophets on the same theme, and in this way they roused the peoples' zeal to free the city.

The clergy had tableaux made which were especially designed to catch the imagination of even the most illiterate people and paraded them in procession through the market-places. For example, one of these tableaux showed Christ streaming with blood as he was flogged by the Saracens, and the inscription read: "This is Christ, whom Mohammed, the prophet of the Moslems, has struck, wounded and killed."

The fervor aroused by the prospect of the Crusades led to the founding of the military Orders. The medieval Church was so involved in the affairs of state that it could not distance itself from the threat of war nor could it avoid responding to that threat. That is, the idea of doing battle for God was not exclusive to Islam.

The ideals which inspired the military Orders were simply a further development of the early Christians' grim struggle to preserve and spread the faith. Later, St. Bernard provided the new Orders with theological support in his *De laudibus novae militiae* ("In Praise of the New Military Order"). And the combination of the holy war waged in the Crusades and the decline of an important social class, the warriors, favored the founding and spread of these military Orders.

Some of these Orders had originally been established as hospitallers or as defenders of the pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land. But when the Crusades began, many of them were turned into real armies to fight the "Saracen infidels."

Their unusual status of "half monk, half soldier" made them invaluable in the Crusades and among the pilgrims. They regarded war as an apostolate and dedicated themselves to protecting the pilgrim routes and defending frontiers against Moslem incursions. They built their monasteries where they could provide the pilgrims with protection as they travelled and help if they fell ill.

The similarity between these military Orders and the Moslem *ribat* or fortresses of warrior-mystics erected on Christian frontiers, has led some historians to regard the Orders as being derived from these Islamic institutions. But there is no foundation for this assertion. Although each side influenced the other, the Orders arose, partly from the new community spirit that had begun to emerge among the laity from the eleventh century onwards, and partly from the need to defend and help the pilgrims on their way to the Holy Places, as we have seen.

1. Innocent III and the Moslem World

From the very beginning, one of the concerns of the Church had been the evangelization of the pagan world. Yet this task was not organized systematically until the time of St. John Chrysostom (†407), who promoted missionary activity among the Persians and Goths; St. Gregory the Great (†604), who sent Benedictine monks from Rome to evangelize the Anglo-Saxons in Great Britain; and especially St. Columbanus (†615) and the Irish monks; and St. Boniface (†754), who evangelized Germany.

When the Moslems began to spread westwards, the Church negotiated with them in the interests of self-defense and in an endeavor to convert them by preaching the Gospel to them. From the beginning of his pontificate, Innocent III had started a program of reform in the Church which included the liberation of the Holy Land. In his eyes, these two objectives, reform and liberation, were inseparable. Furthermore, his idea of reform was shaped by Pope St. Gregory the Great's concept of the relationship between the Church and the Empire, which presupposed the supremacy of the Pope, the Vicar of Christ, over the Emperor and all other political rulers on earth.

Innocent III's attitude towards the Moslems had two quite different facets, the diplomatic and the religious. He initiated diplomatic relationships with several Moslem rulers. In a letter to the Sultan of Morocco, he informed him of the foundation of the Trinitarian Order and concluded by saying: "...with the wish that He who is the way, the truth and the life will inspire the Sultan so that, when he has come to know the truth who is Jesus Christ, he will at once hasten to embrace that truth."

He also wrote to the Sultan of Egypt in a similar vein, reminding him of the moral obligation he had to do everything possible to have the Holy Land returned to Christian hands. Appealing to the Sultan's sense of justice, Innocent urged him to restore what did not belong to him and declared that, if this request was denied, the Christian world would be obliged to resort to arms to regain the land that belonged to it.

In 1213, Innocent III wrote another letter to the Sultan of Egypt in an effort to convince him that, by handing back Jerusalem and freeing the Christian prisoners taken there, he would avoid unnecessary complications and would improve relations between Christians and Moslems.

Despite these diplomatic approaches, Innocent III was convinced that Islam was essentially evil. He condemned it as being "a diabolical force and the irreconcilable enemy of Christianity," and he saw it as "the great enemy of the Cross of Christ" which could be destroyed only by the swords of the crusaders.

The victory at Las Navas de Tolosas in 1212 revived the enthusiasm of the Pope and the whole Christian world and convinced them that Islam could be conquered in battle. The Fourth Lateran Council began in the autumn of 1215, and in his inaugural address, Innocent III used as his text a scriptural passage on the Passover and applied the words "passing over" to three events — passing overseas on the Crusade, passing over from sin to reform in the Church, and passing over into eternity.

About going overseas, he said:

All the holy places have been profaned and the Lord's tomb, which used to be resplendent in glory, now lies with no one to venerate it. Where God's only-begotten Son was adored, now homage is paid to Mohammed, that son of perdition.... Oh, what shame, what confusion, what a disgrace that the sons of the slave-girl, the vile Moslems, should hold our mother captive, should enslave the mother of all the faithful...! Here I am, dear brothers, I offer myself to you, I surrender myself completely into your hands, ready, if you judge it fitting, to embrace any toil whatsoever, to go to kings, princes, peoples and nations and even farther afield, in order to awaken them with resounding voice and make them rise up to fight the Lord's battles, to avenge the insult to the Crucified.

Among the decrees issued by the Council was one concerning the "Expedition to recover the Holy Land," which laid down the norms for mounting the Crusade:

On the first day of June next year (1217), all those who have taken the cross, that is, who have committed themselves to going forth as crusaders and have chosen the sea-route must gather in Sicily, where we ourselves shall be present to gather the army and bless it.... Let the prelates never tire of admonishing those who have committed themselves to going as crusaders, threatening them, if need be, with excommunication and interdict....

All patriarchs, archbishops, etc. and all those who have the care of souls must preach the Crusade to their subjects and persistently beg kings, princes, lords, cities and towns so that those who cannot actively take part in the Crusade will supply a sufficient number of soldiers whom they will guarantee to support for three years....

Moreover, we excommunicate those false Christians who supply the Saracens, the enemies of Christ and His people, with arms, iron and wood for building ships; those who sell them galleys or place themselves at their service.... For a period of four years, no Christian shall send ships to the countries of the East occupied by Saracens so that the infidels may gain no advantage....

Finally, we grant to all those who take part personally in the Crusade at their own expense; to all those who take part personally but whose expenses are paid by others; to those who offer part of their income for the Holy Land, the complete remission of all their sins, provided that they repent and go to confession.

These quotations from the decree show the views of the Pope and the bishops present at the Council on the relationship between Christianity and Islam, as well as the war-like conclusions they reached.

2. Honorius III and the Crusade

Innocent III died suddenly in 1216 with his great hope of seeing the Holy Land conquered for the Church still unfulfilled. Honorius III took up the cause and continued the preparations for the Crusade which the Council had decided upon. He wrote to the Christian rulers asking them to make peace among themselves, to take part in the Crusade and to provide financial help to support it.

He decreed that the Crusade was to begin in June, 1217. As was customary in preparation for a great undertaking of this kind, many preachers spread through the Christian world, urging the faithful to assist in the endeavor. In France, Jacques de Vitry was commissioned to preach the Crusade, but with little success, according to some authors.

The Pope was very active in the preparation for the Crusade. He nominated Cardinal Hugolino and gave him plenary powers to lift the apathy that prevailed in certain regions towards taking part in the Crusade. For this purpose, the Cardinal wrote to all the bishops and faithful of Lombardy and Tuscany:

It is truly a cause of shame to the Christian people that the King of Kings, Creator of all things in heaven and earth, should have been expelled from His own place and, because of our sins, should have lost the land which He had purchased, not with gold or silver, but with His precious blood. It is a great humiliation for all those who glory in being under the leadership of Christ that our Prince should have lost the glory of His earthly reign and the land of His birth where He was seen in flesh and blood living among men, while the sons of the slave-girl, Hagar, who are not the heirs, unlawfully occupy it alongside the son of the free woman....

Where is the indignation of Moses when he said: 'Let everyone who belongs to the Lord come with me and raise his sword against the idolatrous people'...? Prepare yourselves, therefore, you faithful ones, and be powerful sons, for the

moment has arrived to wreak vengeance on the nations that occupy and profane the Holy Land, on those who regard the glory of the cross of Christ as folly and who mock at the ignominy of the Lord's Passion. To receive the reward of great happiness, let every one of the faithful hasten to take up his cross and follow the standard of the glory of the Supreme King and not excuse himself from the service of Christ.

While the Pope's envoys were thus exhorting the whole of Christendom, Melek-el-Kamel succeeded his father as Sultan of Egypt in 1218. With his brother's help, he had defended Damietta against the siege of the Crusaders, who, even after a year of skirmishes, had achieved nothing worthwhile. In 1219, the new Sultan offered to make peace with the Crusaders and to give them Jerusalem and the Holy Cross in exchange for their withdrawal from Egypt. The King of Jerusalem and some of the leading crusaders were disposed to negotiate with the Sultan, but Cardinal Pelayo, the papal official in charge of the Crusade, refused the offer of peace because he was sure of a military victory. The crusaders then attacked Damietta, but the Moslems not only resisted the onslaught but counter-attacked the Christian army, causing numerous casualties and putting the Christians to flight.

Although enthusiasm for fighting the Crusade had spread throughout Christendom, not everyone shared the lust for battle, and some voices were raised against the very idea of a Crusade. Thus Raoul Niger, in a book dedicated to the bishop of Rheims, asked:

Must we decapitate the Saracens because God has not given them Palestine or, at least, because they are occupying it without His permission...? It is true that we should eject them from our lands but not in such a way that the remedy for the violence is worse than the disease itself. Let the sword of the word of God strike them on all sides so that they may come willingly to the faith and not be brought by force. For God hates torture and the homage obtained by fear.... I do not see by what right armies can be assembled to kill the Saracens. The Pope can do no more than common sense and equity permit.

In the *Annals of Wurzburg*, the author attacked the preachers of the Crusade, and he regarded the popular enthusiasm for killing Moslems as sheer madness:

These false prophets, these sons of Belial, these supporters of the antichrist deceive Christians with their sermons inciting them to throw themselves on the Saracens. Not only the ordinary people, but also the kings, dukes and marquises rush to the general slaughter believing that they are paying homage to God; and this is the same error that the bishops, archbishops and abbots are committing when they hasten to follow them, with danger to their souls and bodies.

Even Joachim of Fiore was in favor of fighting "the wild beast of Islam," but he added: "If the Christians are to reach their goal, it will be more by preaching than by fighting so much." He predicted the failure of the Third Crusade and saw the defeat as a lesson given by God to the whole Church, "because victory is given to those who achieve it, not by the number of their soldiers, but by their faith." In this, he was proclaiming a new way of viewing the relationships between the Christians and the Moslems.

II. Francis and Islam

The medieval chroniclers and biographers give differing account of Francis's "going among infidels," specifically among the Saracens, accounts which vary according as they are written by the friars themselves or by those outside the Order. The outsiders view Francis's purpose in the politico-ecclesiastical context of the Crusade, while the friars, on the other hand, see it in a spiritual light, as inspired by Francis's fervent desire for martyrdom.

Francis's meeting with the Saracens is so surrounded by ambiguity that it has practically become a legend. The simple truth was that he believed that a new kind of relationship could be established between Islam and Christianity. Hitherto, their mutual lack of understanding had made any dialogue between them impossible and had led them to become embroiled in a bitter, long-

drawn-out struggle.

This encounter of Francis with the "infidel" was interpreted by the chroniclers and biographers in accordance with their particular social and religious outlook. Jacques de Vitry describes the incident as a triumph of advocacy by Francis, but one which failed because the non-believers remained obdurate. Ernoult the chronicler reports the encounter from a clerical standpoint. According to him, Francis had to overcome the mistrust of the papal legate before he was allowed to meet the Sultan and dispute with Moslem theologians in his presence. The poet, Henri d'Avranches, in his Legenda versificata, represents Francis as a defender of the faith who expounded Christian teaching to the Sultan's philosophers, beginning with the Unity of God and condemning the perverse polytheism of Mohammed.

These documents have several elements in common — Francis's magnetic presence as a defender of the faith, the way he held the Sultan's attention and defeated his theologians, and his final failure to convert them because of their

blindness of heart.

The accounts written by members of the Order see Francis's presence among the non-believers from quite another perspective. In his *First Life*, Thomas of Celano views Francis's encounter with Islam as a part of his life-long desire for martyrdom. After several attempts at winning the martyr's crown, Francis concluded that his expectations were false because the Mos-

lems, especially the Sultan, proved not to be as bloodthirsty as they were reputed to be.

In St. Bonaventure's *Major Life*, Francis's motive is seen as the desire for martyrdom but in a completely different sense from that in Celano. St. Bonaventure regarded Francis's desire for martyrdom as a gesture of love for his enemies: therefore, he "longed to offer to the Lord his own life as a loving sacrifice in the flames of martrydom so that he might repay Christ, who died for us, and inspire others to divine love" (LM 9:5).

Finally, according to Jordan of Giano's *Chronicle*, Francis's objective in going to Egypt was to achieve martyrdom, but circumstances showed him that such a desire was impossible to realize.

1. Pilgrimage and Martyrdom

The ideal of seeking martyrdom as a gradual drawing near to Christ crucified was clearly connected with pilgrimage, especially to the Holy Places where Christ was born, suffered and died for us.

The pilgrim spirit, so characteristic of medieval Christianity, had its roots in monastic spirituality. Already, from the sixth and seventh centuries, the Celtic monks, both Irish and Scottish, had seen their monastic vocation as that of the pilgrim. They regarded exile, going far from one's native land, as an essential element of that vocation and drew a strict analogy between monasticism, martyrdom, exile and pilgrimage.

The Christian faithful inherited this ideal and eagerly set out along the highways to visit holy places, confident that by doing so they would advance their salvation. One of their destinations was the Holy Land, the place which Christ had sanctified with His presence. About the year 1033, the millennial of Christ's death, a vast multitude started on the road to Jerusalem.

But this enthusiasm for going on pilgrimage had an unhappy consequence, the Crusades. The crusaders believed that they, too, were pilgrims, and the faithful regarded them as such. The obsession with salvation which had drawn Christians to the customary places of pilgrimage now attracted them to the Holy Land in order to free it from the infidels. As a result, the Crusades became part of the mysticism of martyrdom, and it was popularly believed that those crusaders who died in the "holy war" were asssured of salvation.

It was not sheer coincidence that the desire for martyrdom was revived and spread from the eleventh century on. For one thing, the persecutions of the early Church had not been forgotten in the intervening centuries, although martyrdom was much less frequent in medieval times and, because of the historical circumstances, much less possible then. Moreover, there was the enduring tendency to regard the monastic life as a daily martyrdom, through

penance and mortification, and in some way a substitute for the martrydom of blood.

The Irish monastic traditon, as we have indicated, had elaborated a theory that the monastic life was a form of progressive martyrdom, going from asceticism to accepting death as a consequence of preaching the Gospel. This theory did not remain just a theory, as is evident from the courage and audacity which these and other monks showed in confronting the pagans and in dying as martyrs, like the Irish monk, St. Kilian, the patron of Wurzburg, and the Anglo-Saxon St. Boniface, the patron of Germany.

This mysticism of martyrdom did not remain confined to the monastic life but spread throughout Christendom, as we can see from the example of Sts. Adalbert of Prague, Stanislaus in Poland, and Gerard in Hungary. These martyrs represented the ideals of their various peoples, who were uniting into

communities and were seeking their own identities.

In fact, the ideal of martyrdom had so impregnated Western Christianity that even the heretics, in their extreme rigorism, came to believe that martrydom was the only guarantee of salvation, a belief from which arose the Cathari's practice of preaching the Endura, the ritual of suicide-martyrdom, as

the supreme form of expiation.

Since Francis was born and bred in this atmosphere, he must have been aware of the mystical appeal of dying for the faith. In fact, the desire for martyrdom which his biographers describe so eloquently was part of this popular yearning. There was also another reason for Francis's attitude in this matter. During the eleventh century, the "Legends of the Martyrs" were written in Assisi, giving the lives of the first bishops of the city, Sts. Felician, Victorinus and Sabinus. But there was another legend which greatly influenced the people of Assisi at the time when their commune was being founded. That was the legend which was written about the year 1000, based on the tradition of the martyrdom of St. Rufino. Thus Francis's native city owed so much to its martyrs that it was not surprising that martyrdom should have figured so prominently in his spirituality. Medieval Christianity justified the idea of the Crusades by appealing to these two basic motives, pilgrimage and martyrdom. However, Francis viewed these motives from a different angle, that of the experience he had gained by living the Gospel life.

2. Francis and the Moslems

Only one biographer, Thomas of Celano, in his First Life, tells us that Francis, "in the sixth year of his conversion..., wanted to take ship for the regions of Syria to preach the Christian faith and penance to the Saracens and infidels."

Accordingly, Francis went on board ship and crossed the Adriatic to Dalmatia: but when he did not succeed in reaching Syria, he decided to return to Italy (1Cel 55).

Having failed to reach his objective by sea, he tried again by land, travelling the roads of Italy and France along the Mediterranean coast to Spain, with the intention of crossing to Morocco to convert the Caliph, who had recently been defeated by the Spanish crusaders at the battle of Las Navas de Tolosas in 1212. However, again he failed to realize his dream because he fell ill and once more had to return to Italy (1Cel 56).

It would appear, then, that Francis made two frustrated attempts to go to the land of the infidels in order to preach the Gospel to them and earn the martyr's crown. But some historians doubt the historicity of these events because not all the biographers record them. For example, although *The Legend of the Three Companions* follows Francis's movements closely during the relevant years, it does not refer to these journeys. Yet the doubt that is cast on these attempts is not enough to impugn their historical truth. There is much less doubt, however, about Francis's journey to Egypt, which the majority of biographers and chroniclers report.

Celano tells us that Francis overcame all obstacles and in the thirteenth year of his conversion succeeded in reaching Syria with a companion and continuing on to Egypt

at a time when great and severe battles were raging daily between the Christians and the pagans and he did not fear to present himself before the sultan of the saracens, (Melek-el-Kamel) (1Cel 57).

This episode is central to Francis's relationship with Islam. From among the various medieval authors who record this incident, we shall select only two: Jacques de Vitry and Jordan of Giano.

Jaccques de Vitry reports the event in two of his writings. In one of the letters he sent to his friends at the beginning of 1220, he tells them how Francis, the founder of the Friars Minor,

came into our camp and, burning with zeal for the faith, he was not afraid to go into the very camp of our enemy. For several days, he preached the word of God to the Saracens, but with little success. The sultan sent for him in particular and begged him to pray to the Lord for him, the king of Egypt, so that God might show him what religion He wished him to embrace (Letter IV, 1220, in Habig, *Omnibus*, p. 1609).

In his History of the Orient, he describes the same event, saying that

Spiritual fervor and ecstasy moved (Francis) to such excesses that, having arrived at the army of the Christians before Damietta in Egypt, with no fear whatsovever, fortified solely with 'the shield of faith', he set out for the camp of the sultan of Egypt. The Saracens arrested him on his way. 'I am a Christian,' he said: 'bring me to your master!' And so they brought him to him. On seeing the man of God, the sultan, that cruel beast, became sweetness itself, kept him with him for a few days, and with a great deal of attention listened to him preach the Faith of Christ to him and to his followers. But in the end he was afraid of seeing some of his soldiers whom the effective words of this man would have converted to the Lord go over to the army of the Christians. He, therefore, had Francis led back to our camp with many signs of honor and with security precautions, but not without saying to him: 'Pray for me, that God may reveal to me the law and the faith that is the more pleasing to Him' (Habig, *Omnibus*, p. 1612).

Although the second source, Jordan of Giano's *Chronicle*, was not written until 1262, the author's participation in the events gives his account exceptional value. After telling us that "in the year of our Lord, 1217, the tenth of his conversion, Brother Francis, in the Chapter held near St. Mary of the Portiuncula, sent brothers to France, Germany, Hungary, Spain and the provinces of Italy which the brothers had not yet reached" (n. 3).

And he continues with a personal reflection, acknowledging that "that whole mission, perhaps because it had been sent before its time, and since the time for each thing is written in heaven, accomplished nothing" (n. 8).

After referring to this failure, Giano describes Francis's journey to Egypt:

Realizing that he had sent his sons to martyrdom and sacrifice, he did not wish to give the impression that he was seeking his own comfort while others were suffering for Christ. Due to his great courage, and not wanting anyone to outdo him in following Christ but rather to precede everyone, and seeing that his sons had been sent into unknown dangers and among the infidels, then he himself, burning with love for the passion of Christ, in the same year in which he had sent the other brothers, that is, the thirteenth of his conversion (1219), braved the known perils of the sea and, going to the infidels, presented himself before the Sultan. But before he could reach him, he had to suffer many injuries and insults, and, because he did not know the language, when he was suffering many blows, he cried out: 'Sultan! Sultan!' So he was led into his presence and was received by him with much honor and was humanely cared for in his illness. And when he decided to return, because he could do nothing there, the Sultan had him accompanied by an armed escort to the Christian army which was then besieging Damietta (n. 10).

The testimony of these sources is fundamental from several points of view. Although we do not know how Francis travelled to the Holy Land, it is quite probable that he joined the reinforcements from the Italian cities which Honorius III had sent. He must have arrived in Damietta when the siege was at its height because we can deduce from de Vitry's words that the Christian forces were so stretched that, even if he had asked for it, they could not have given him any protection on his dangerous enterprise. And despite all the military activity going on around him, he was intent on his mission: the

Moslems were his brothers to whom he had to show the only way to salvation, which was Christ.

Nevertheless, as de Vitry relates, Francis's preaching had no great results. First of all, Francis would not have had any clear idea of what Islam was: his image of the infidel would no doubt have been tinged with the usual Christian mixture of disdain and fear. In addition, as Giano indicates, Francis did not know any Arabic. The question then naturally arises: how did he make himself understood while he was preaching there? De Vitry notes that "the Saracens gladly listened to the Friars Minor preach as long as they explained faith in Christ and the doctrine of the gospel" (Habig, *Omnibus*, p. 1612). Although Francis did not know the language, perhaps the other brothers did? Or did he and they preach in a kind of sign language that allowed the audience to get the general drift of their message?

Francis's meeting with the Sultan, Melek-el-Kamel, must have been wonderful to see. Unfortunately, we have no reliable witness of what took place. The "Sultan of proud presence," as Dante describes him, was, in reality, one of the wisest, most humane and generous in the whole of Islamic history. His readiness to negotiate peace and his conduct during the different episodes of this war are a proof of his honorable attitude towards the invading crusaders, while his courtesy and generous benevolence towards Francis are recorded in all the Christian sources.

We do not know what passed between Francis and the Sultan, but we can make an educated guess on the basis of our knowledge of contemporary apologetic methods and the Saint's missionary practice. Perhaps their dialogue concerned the main points of divergence and contrast between the Church and Islam — Christ, the Son of God as against Mohammed, the apostle of God; the Christian Trinity as against the absolute monotheism of Islam; the Church and its hierarchy as against the loosely structured, non-clerical Islamic community, etc.

We do not know how much of all this made an impression on the Sultan. However, he did listen attentively, surrounded by his followers — princes, military chiefs, lawyers and theologians. The discussions no doubt outraged the Moslem theologians and caused them to ask the Sultan to take steps against the exasperating "monk."

In an Arabic source of the fifteenth century there appears the name of the priest, "a man full of authority and years," who, according to St. Bonaventure (LM 9:8), slipped away as soon as he heard the ordeal by fire mentioned. The man in question was the Egyptian theologian and lawyer, Fakhr-al Farasi, who died shortly afterwards. According to his biography, he was spiritual director

and adviser to Sultan el-Kamel, and there was "a famous story" concerning him and a certain monk.

The "story" seems to refer to the ordeal that Francis proposed. This ordeal by fire had an illustrious precedent in Islam: it was the proposal of "the judgment of God" which Mohammed had made to the Christians of Nagran and which the Christians had refused. Six centuries later, the same ordeal was suggested, but this time by a Christian who was ready to undergo it to convince the Moslems. The test did not take place because the Sultan's innate humility, and perhaps political considerations, dissuaded Francis from submitting to "the judgment of God." While St. Bonaventure's description does appear to have an apologetic purpose, the incident itself rings true when we remember Francis's tendency to make a dramatic gesture to prove a point.

Francis's attempt at evangelization was a failure in the sense that he did not succeed in converting the Moslems to Christianity. Giano sums the matter up by saying that the Saint decided to leave "because he could do nothing there" (n. 10). We do not know if Francis later pondered on his lack of success with the infidels; but he certainly did not mention it in his writings. Yet, in his Rule of 1221, he made recommendations about the proper attitude and conduct with which the friars were to approach the non-believers; and these prove that he had learned not to trust the accuracy of the popular Christian image of Islam. His contact with the Moslems had convinced him that the faith cannot be imposed on anyone and least of all by force of arms.

3. "Those who go among the Saracens...."

Innocent III had intended to convert the Moslems peacefully, but he nullified this good intention by trying to carry it out by means of a Crusade, a holy war. Trying to evangelize by imposing one's own faith on others and demanding that they renounce their beliefs is completely contrary to the real nature of apostolic mission and is even against common sense because it only alienates the intended converts.

Francis, on the other hand, based his missionary activity on his own experience of following Christ, on Gospel principles, on the Beatitudes. In his History of the Orient, de Vitry gives a description of Francis's meeting with the Sultan. He points out the Moslem ruler's sensitive benevolence, an attitude which the chronicler attributes also to the Sultan's people in general by saying that the Saracens admired the humility and virtue of the Friars Minor and, "when they went without fear to preach to them, received them willingly, and were happy to provide them with whatever they needed." He continues:

The Saracens gladly listened to the Friars Minor preach as long as they explained faith in Christ and the doctrine of the gospel; but as soon as their preaching attacked Mohammed and openly condemned him as a liar and traitor, then these

ungodly men heaped blows upon them and chased them from their cities; they would have killed them if God had not miraculously protected his sons (Habig, *Omnibus*, pp.1612-13).

The Moslems, then, listened willingly to the friars when they came peacefully to bring the Good News of the Kingdom. This, of course, was the way Christ instructed his disciples to act when he sent them out to preach. Francis had grasped this essential point in his reasoned approach to the Saracens. As it turned out, he made no converts, which Giano recounts as a failure. But ten years later, when Gregory IX sent other friars on a mission to the Moslems, they were allowed to appear before the court of the same Sultan el-Kamel who had discussed religion with Francis.

Francis proved the validity of his missionary approach by going himself among the Saracens. Convinced that he had to be an example to his brothers, he believed he had to put into practice what he had taught the friars, namely, that their Gospel vocation was to preach Christ to the ends of the earth.

Francis did not have the literary and legal skills necessary to draw up a formal "statute" to legislate for the manner in which he wished his friars to conduct their missionary work. Yet, in chapter 16 of his Rule of 1221, he described clearly what it meant to go "among the Saracens" as a practical way of living up to their Gospel commitment.

The problem with this chapter of the Rule of 1221 is to know whether it was written before or after Francis's journey to the East. If this Rule was composed gradually and was finalized only in 1221, there is some doubt about the time when chapter 16 was written.

Flood maintains that the motive for writing this chapter was a letter of Innocent III in 1213, convoking the Fourth Lateran Council "for the recovery of the Holy Land and the reform of the whole Church." But most authors prefer to assign the chapter to the time after Francis's return from the East. The instructions it contains about the way the missionaries should proceed presuppose some practical experience in the matter, such as that which Francis and his companions had gained among the Moslems. At all events, chapter 16, as it appears in the text of the Rule of 1221, can be read as a kind of "Statute for Missionaries," laying down the principles for Franciscan missions.

a) "Prudent as serpents and simple as doves"

The chapter in question begins with the warnings Christ gave the twelve Apostles when sending them out to preach the Gospel: "The Lord says: 'Behold, I am sending you as lambs in the midst of wolves. Therefore, be prudent as serpents and simple as doves' (Mt 10:16)."

The Word is always the motivating principle of missionary work. The will of God, as shown in the Gospel, is the standard against which we must

measure ourselves to see if we are acting as true Franciscans. That is why all the recommendations in chapter 16 are validated by the Lord's words.

Missionary work is not easy. Being sent out "as lambs in the midst of wolves" applies even when people other than the Saracens are involved. As we said, the propaganda for the Crusades had created an image of the Moslems as bloodthirsty. Because they resisted the Christian attacks on their beliefs, as one would logically expect them to do, they were branded as "enemies of the cross of Christ." But the danger of evangelization does not lie only in confronting the "savage infidel" but in the very act of proposing the Gospel as a rule of life.

Francis and his brothers had experienced this even before going among the non-believers. The Gospel, taken seriously, rocks the foundations of our normal way of life. And when we are faced with the difficult task of changing ourselves, we often choose, instead, to silence the messenger. Therefore, anyone who follows the Lord's call to testify to the faith must be ready to follow Him to the end.

When Francis learned that the brothers who had been sent to Morocco had been martyred, he reacted spontaneously and exclaimed: "Now I can truly say that I have five real Friars Minor!" But, if we are to go by the "legends," these martyrs had not been "subject to every human creature for God's sake" but had persistently provoked the Moslems who finally killed them. In contrast, Francis would appear to have held that martyrdom was truly Christian only when the martyrs had preached Christ peacefully.

Being ready to suffer the consequences of preaching the Gospel should not mean being reckless in putting one's life in danger. Therefore, prudence was needed as well as simple directness; and the five martyrs had not been prudent in the way they confronted the Moslems. While the Saracens were not the meek lambs Giano refers to, Francis's own surprising discovery that they were not as fierce as they were painted led him to adopt a more realistic approach. Prudence and simplicity, then, were to be the two virtues which the brothers should practice in their missionary ventures.

b) "With the permission of his minister and servant."

Preaching the Gospel to non-believers begins with the missionary's being inspired to do so, with his feeling that he is being called to go among the infidels to bring them Christ the Savior of all:

Therefore, any brother who, by divine inspiration, desires to go among the Saracens and other nonbelievers should go with the permission of his minister and servant. And the minister should give (these brothers) permission and not oppose them, if he shall see that they are fit to be sent; for he shall be bound to

give an account to the Lord (cf. Lk 16:2) if he has proceeded without discretion in this or in other matters.

The Rule of 1223 repeats these conditions, although it limits somewhat the part played by inspiration:

Those brothers who, by divine inspiration, desire to go among the Saracens and other nonbelievers should ask permission from their ministers provincial. But the ministers should not grant permission except to those whom they consider fit to be sent.

Although following Christ as professed in the Rule includes accompanying Him even to the cross, not every friar can be asked to proclaim the Gospel to the infidel. Therefore, the vocation to do so must be considered a special charism which has to be discerned; and the person concerned is not the only one who should take part in this discernment. The other friars, too, and, finally, the Provincial Minister must help him in the task of arriving at the conclusion that the Lord is, in fact, calling him to preach to the non-believers.

Nevertheless, we must be clear that going to preach the Good News to the infidels is not an initiative of the Minister but of the Spirit. To be sent out to evangelize the infidel is a true call, a charism.

The same Spirit of the Risen Christ who sent the Apostles to spread the Gospel through the whole world is He who now moves the brothers to "go among the Saracens" to bring them their own Christian faith. The crusaders set out against the Saracens, and the whole ideology of Western Christendom was against the "infidel." But Francis was to send his brothers, not only to them but among them, perhaps "as lambs in the midst of wolves," but surely also as brothers among brothers. This was indeed a new missionary method.

In seeing the Moslems as "infidels," Francis was a prisoner of his times. In his eyes, everyone who was not a Christian, whether Moslem or Jew, was an infidel who had to be converted. The only thing that distinguished his method from that of the contemporary missionaries was his approach. Instead of going out against the Saracens to conquer them, he went among them to show that he loved them and that he was ready, if necessary, to die to prove it.

Still, this did not mean that he envisioned an ecumenical dialogue between two religions. He did not regard the Moslem faith as being a real religion: for him, the missionaries were the true believers who had to convert the unbelieving Moslems to the Christian religion.

Despite the limitations of the era, the itinerant following of Christ made it possible to preach both in Christian countries and beyond, in the lands of the non-believers. Therefore, "going among the Saracens" was an integral part of the life of the Friars Minor.

Besides divine inspiration and his own decision to follow that inspiration, the missionary needed the permission of his Provincial Minister. However, the Minister could not send anyone to the mission under obedience or impede him if he were thought suitable. Nor could the needs of the Province, no matter how urgent they were, be cited as valid reasons for preventing or impeding a missionary in following his vocation.

c) Two ways of being present

As for the brothers who go, they can live spiritually among (the Saracens and nonbelievers) in two ways. One way is not to engage in arguments or disputes, but to be subject 'to every human creature for God's sake' (1Pet 2:13) and to acknowledge that they are Christians. Another way is to proclaim the word of God when they see that it pleases the Lord, so that they believe in the all-powerful God — Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit — the Creator of all, in the Son Who is the Redeemer and Savior, and that they be baptized and become Christians; because 'whoever has not been born again of water and the Holy Spirit cannot enter the kingdom of God' (cf. Jn 3:5).

This quotation contains two basic concepts of missionary endeavor: being present among the non-believers, and being open to the Holy Spirit.

- Witnessing to the faith

To the brothers who went among the Saracens, Francis proposed two ways of being present there. The first was by bearing simple Franciscan witness, not engaging in disputes or controversies but submitting themselves, instead, to every human creature in the name of God. They were, of course, to acknowledge openly that they were Christians and were not to try to escape notice for fear of being martyred.

It is curious that Francis did not mention as their first duty preaching or even some social apostolate that would attract the non-Christians to be baptized but simply wished them to live their lives as Friars Minor. Yet we should not be surprised at this since the first and most important way to preach is by the testimony of one's own Gospel life.

The life of mutual service and love led by those who have chosen to follow Christ in the Fraternity is a way of preaching by actual example what the Gospel means and what effects it has on those who commit themselves completely to it.

First comes this living testimony and only then comes preaching as a way of explaining the reasons behind the brothers' Gospel life. Hence, the basic principle of Franciscan missionary work is to live the life of the Fraternity among different peoples, respecting their cultural and religious beliefs but without losing or compromising one's own Christian identity.

This missionary method also involves other values which shape and identify the vocation of the true Friar Minor; for example, always choosing the peaceful approach, having a deep and clear knowledge of one's own faith, being ready to engage in intercultural dialogue without preconditions, the ability to live "the frontier life," etc. All this gives us the picture of the true Franciscan missionary who, because he clings to nothing, is always ready to accompany others in the difficult search for God.

-Preaching the Word

The other way to evangelize is to preach God's message by word of mouth when that seems the best way. This means proclaiming the fundamentals of our faith — that God, Unity and Trinity, has come to us to announce His love for us and to enable us to share in His own life.

Yet this preaching does not have to be dogmatic. It need not be a catechesis properly so called, that is, a direct preparation for the reception of the sacraments but can simply be "Franciscan praise and exhortation." With this type of preaching, which every brother can do, the only intention is to move the listeners to conversion. In this sense, the form is the same for Christians and non-Christians alike; only the contents need be changed.

For Christians, the preaching should be an exhortation to penance and a reminder of their baptismal promises, while for non-Christians it is an invitation to the faith and to baptism. Franciscan initial preaching of the Gospel is not directed primarily towards the reception of the sacraments: it is only later that the listeners should be sent to a priest for confession, if they are Christians, or for baptism if they are not.

d) Proclaiming the Gospel

By their presence, the friars proclaim that they are Christians; and by their preaching the Word they make it clear why they are followers of Christ. An arrogant, provocative approach only turns people away from accepting the Gospel message, as do lack of conviction and an apologetic attitude. Accordingly, when the missionaries see that it is necessary to use word of mouth as well as their mere presence to communicate to people the meaning of the salvation brought by Christ, they should do so humbly but staunchly,

for the Lord says in the Gospel 'Everyone who acknowledges me before men I will also acknowledge before my Father Who is in heaven' (Mt 110:32). And: 'Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in His majesty and that of the Father and the angels' (Lk 9:26).

When the brothers are preaching the Gospel, they can say all these things and more. The missionary must be ready to deal with new situations. The

important thing is that he should testify to his own faith by his actions as well as by his words. By his profession, the Friar Minor has given himself over completely to Christ, and this gift of self must be apparent in this courage and perseverance.

e) Gospel witnesses

He who dares to preach the Gospel may be courting persecution and death. When the brothers profess the Rule and Life, they commit themselves to following Christ even to the cross. Preaching to Christians can being disdain and persecution, as happened to most of the early friars in their missions outside Italy; and preaching the Gospel to infidels can mean death for the preacher.

For that reason, Francis advises

... all the brothers, wherever they may be, should remember that they gave themselves and abandoned their bodies to the Lord Jesus Christ. And for love of Him, they must make themselves vulnerable to their enemies, both visible and invisible, because the Lord says: Whoever loses his life for my sake will save it (cf. Lk 9:24) in eternal life' (Mt 25:46). 'Blessed are those who suffer persecution for the sake of justice, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs' (Mt 5:10). 'If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you' (In 15:20). And: 'If they persecute you in one city, flee to another' (cf. Mt 10:23). 'Blessed are you (Mt 5:11) when people shall hate you (Lk 6:22) and malign' (Mt 5:11) and persecute you and drive you out, abuse you, denounce your name as evil' (Lk 6:22) and 'utter every kind of slander against you because of me' (Mt 5:11). 'Rejoice on that day and be glad (Lk 6:23) because your reward is very great in heaven' (cf. Mt 5:12). And 'I say to you, my friends, do not be frightened by these things (Lk 12:4) and do not fear those who kill the body (Mt 10:28) and after that can do no more' (Lk 12:4). 'Take care not to be disturbed' (Mt 24:6). 'For through your patience, you will possess your souls' (Lk 21:19); and 'whoever perseveres to the end will be saved' (Mt 10:22; 24:13).

Francis addresses this long exhortation to all the brothers and not to missionaries alone. He reminds them that they have given themselves to Christ and His cause, and he uses the image of the feudal lord, who owned his people, body and soul and all their possessions, to describe the brothers' relationship with Christ. They have given themselves to Him, and so, like the vassals of the feudal lord, they cannot claim ownership even over their own bodies.

However, the feudal lord, who could make or break his vassals at a whim, was quite different from the Lord Jesus, who died on the cross for his subjects, to whom he gives himself every day in the Eucharist (Adm 1:117-119). Therefore, we should not retain anything of ourselves so that we can welcome unreservedly him who gives himself unreservedly to us (EpOrd 29).

Belonging to a feudal lord meant defending him and fighting against his enemies. Similarly, the brothers must stand up to Christ's enemies, visible and invisible, that it, not merely to the Saracens but to all those forces which are opposed to the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

Defending the Kingdom means facing the same dangers as did Christ, who lived and died for others. The same fate may await those who sincerely try to follow Christ: they may suffer persecution, hatred, insults, ill-treatment and death. When Francis selected these quotations of our Lord's words, he was utterly sincere and did not try to conceal anything from his brothers. Since they had taken Christ as their model, they had to be ready to suffer as he did, even unto death as martyrs.

But despite the conflict, pain and danger that following Christ could bring, the brothers were to remain joyful and at peace. The Friar Minor's joy, patience and steadfastness in the trials encountered in preaching the Gospel do not come from blind optimism but from his firm belief that the same Spirit who raised Christ from the dead and made him triumphant over evil, will also raise us and bring us to eternal salvation.

The joy of which Francis speaks should not spring from any success of ours in words or deeds, for even missionary work well done can be a source of pride. As Francis said to Brother Leo: "Even if a Friar Minor could preach so well that he should convert all infidels to the faith of Christ, write that perfect joy is not there" (Flor 8: Habig, *Omnibus*, p.1319).

If we are to follow Christ, our lives must be patterned on his, as Francis points out:

Let all of us, brothers, look to the Good Shepherd Who suffered the passion of the cross to save His sheep. The sheep of the Lord followed Him in tribulation and persecution, in insult and hunger, in infirmity and temptation, and in everything else, and they have received everlasting life from the Lord because of these things (Adm 6:1-2).

The friars' missions to the infidels were carried out in the Gospel spirit of the Beatitudes and resulted in the Church's being present in a permanent form, first among the Saracens and later among the Mongols. The missions among the non-believers, which always offered the possibility of gaining the martyr's crown, were followed by others which were organized and co-ordinated by the Holy See with more practical ends in view. But bringing the faith to the ends of the earth as a way of expressing the friars' own faith in God has always been and still remains the principal motivation of all Franciscan missionary undertakings.

Conclusion

Today "the Church" is no longer identical with "Christendom," and the terms "believer" and "non-believer" do not refer to people's location on the map but rather to their state of mind. It follows that our modern missionary approach must be different from that of the early friars. For us, missionary activity is aimed at evangelizing the non-Christian world and establishing the Church in those territories where it is not yet fully organized.

In the young churches of the Third World, traditionally called "missions," evangelization must continue to be accompanied by humanitarian assistance. But this is not the case, of course, in more developed areas, which do not need material help and in which the Gospel must be preached with few, if any, signs of the Church's concern for the body as well as for the soul. Moreover, in many of these developed countries, the missionaries will face the almost impossible task of trying to introduce Christianity into cultures that already have their own centuries-old traditions.

These difficulties are to be found in other cultures besides non-Christian ones; they arise also in cultures, such as our own Western world, which were traditionally Christian but in which many people no longer believe in Christ. Closing our eyes and believing that Europe is still Christian just because it has its cultural roots deep in Christianity, is a mistake for which we are paying dearly. The majority of those who have been baptized retain a vague, social sense of religion, while their everyday lives are no longer guided by the Gospel or Christian values but by other ideologies and motivations.

In these circumstances, the Franciscan missionary effort must take on a new form. It will not be what we normally call an apostolate, that is, strengthening and celebrating the faith of the Church community. Instead, our missionary endeavor must be an approach to those sections of society in which most people no longer look to the Christian faith to give meaning to their lives — the intellectuals, the working classes, the young, etc. And our aim should be to present Christ's message of salvation in a way that is both attractive and relevant.

Nevertheless, in our Gospel dialogue with the modern world, we must be aware that society has changed and does not regard religion as unquestionably central to life. Christianity is now just one ideology or set of values among many, something marginal that merits no special attention. Contemporary culture is simply indifferent to the Christian experience, and we, as Christians, have ceased to be of any interest to the culture of our day. And "culture" here refers, not simply to the intelligentsia but also to the general population who unconsciously imbibe from the communication media the current value system.

Since we Christians and our beliefs are of no special interest to modern society, we must try to find methods of evangelization which will make it possible to communicate the Gospel message in the world of today. These methods will have to be completely free of any hint of self-complacency or of being "holier than thou" on our part because we are not better than anyone else nor do we have the solution to every human problem.

If we are to evangelize Christian agnostics who have cast off their faith to prove how "modern" they are, we require a new language as well as new symbols that will mean something to people nowadays. Proclaiming our faith in the Risen Christ is today a task that demands new ways of living and celebrating our beliefs. Obviously, we ourselves are not all we should be, but we cannot compensate for our inadequacies by taking refuge in a fanatical "fundamentalism." Despite our shortcomings, we must have the courage to stand up and be counted, to dare to preach Christ to a society that has its own very different scale of values, a fact that we must accept if our message is to be understood.

This type of mission is perhaps more demanding than preaching the Gospel in less developed countries because it requires more preparation and a less dogmatic and paternalistic approach. Our attitude to the modern world must be our traditional Franciscan one of service and minority. We must share our vision of this world and the next but with no attempt at aggressive proselytism. Instead, we must allow time for the Gospel to penetrate the lives of our listeners and to bring them to spiritual maturity so that each can proclaim freely and joyfully: "I believe in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who, with his silent presence, gives meaning to my life."