

Courteous Encounter-Mutual Enrichment

Saint Francis of Assisi as a model for interreligious dialogue

I am honoured to speak to you today about Saint Francis of Assisi as a model for interreligious dialogue for two reasons: firstly, because it is a privilege to meet you who are engaged in interreligious dialogue in this country, and secondly because I am convinced that the teaching and example of St Francis have relevance for our multi-cultural and multi-faith society and the issues that arise from trying to live together in harmony, justice and peace. I am not involved in interreligious dialogue in this country. I speak from eighteen years experience of living and working in Jordan – 1971-1989, and from my study of the writings of Saints Francis and Bonaventure in recent years.

Let me begin with a couple of images from Jordan in the 1980s, a predominantly Muslim country with a Christian population then of between 5 and 7%. Ayatollah Khomeini had returned to Iran and Islamic fundamentalism was spreading throughout the Middle East. Mamdouh, a Muslim man in his early 40s had been to Mecca and was becoming very religious, reciting the Koran, preaching in the Mosque, and he was becoming a respected Sheik in the neighbourhood. He had worked with a community of sisters since he was 24 as driver, translator, registration clerk in the clinics, and much more. His faith was strong and uncomplicated but he is having a crisis of conscience. Since 1971 his life had been entwined with that of the sisters. He has worked with, laughed and cried with, grown up with, and shared in the ups and downs of life with them through the Yom Kippur war, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and the regular upheavals of life in the Middle East. Individual sisters came and went, they learned Arabic, he learned English, his 8 children were born and looked on the sisters as extended family. As he became more serious about his religion Mamdouh had a real problem with the teaching of the Koran that, as he understood it, says that all who are not Muslims are infidels and will go to hell. He loved the sisters and knew that he could never condemn them to hell, so how could God be less merciful than a man? He struggled with this for some time until he gradually came to a deeper understanding of the prayer he recited so fervently and frequently – Allahu Akbar – God is great.

Prayer for Mamdouh, as for millions of Muslims, consisted in reciting the Koran, praying five times a day, going to Mosque on Fridays and where possible, making the pilgrimage to Mecca. Through this prayer and its lived expression as a faithful Muslim, Mamdouh came to understand that God is merciful, that God's judgement is just and may differ from human judgements. After that he was at peace.

Another scene, in Zarqa, a desert army barracks town. A poorly built sprawling house on the edge of a 1948 refugee camp had five apartments rented by Muslim and Christian families. A divorced Muslim mother and her two young children rented one apartment, and a Christian husband and wife with teenage boys and girls another. While the Muslim woman was in hospital with a broken leg her flat had a burst water pipe and she could return to it with her leg in plaster until the pipes are fixed. The Christian family took her and her children into their already crowded flat and looked after them until the Muslim family's flat was repaired. When I expressed admiration for what they did the Christian woman said "Aren't they human like us?"

I was assigned to Jordan as a newly professed Franciscan sister and recently qualified nurse and midwife. These scenes are typical of the experiences that formed me in an understanding of Islam through sharing the daily life of ordinary Muslim people. Mamdouh in the first story was like a brother to me, and I lived, with three other sisters, in a flat in that sprawling house on the edge of a refugee camp in Zarqa. When I was assigned to Jordan I knew very little about Islam and, although I am a Franciscan, I did not know of Francis's encounter with Muslims nor what he wrote about mission to them. Ideally, I should have known my Franciscan tradition and then gone to work with

Muslims, but now having studied the Franciscan sources and recent writings about Francis and Islam, I do not regret having the encounter first out of which grew theological reflection on the experience.

Saint Francis of Assisi (1180-1226) lived at the height of the Crusades when the Pope and Christian Rulers called men to fight to free the Holy Places from the Saracens¹. Indulgences were applied to all who took part or gave money to provide ships and equipment. Priests and monks were called upon to preach the Crusades and to act as chaplains to the soldiers. But Francis, in all other respects obedient to the Pope, did not preach the Crusades nor send Brothers to accompany the Crusaders as other Orders did. He longed to preach the Gospel to the Saracens or to obtain martyrdom, and three times he tried to reach the Saracens to preach the Gospel to them in the confident expectation of being martyred for Christ. The third time he managed to reach the Sultan, al-Malek al-Kamil, but he was not martyred.

Thomas Celano, his earliest biographer, tells of Francis' burning desire for martyrdom. We read: "Now in the thirteenth year of his conversion, he journeyed to the region of Syria, while bitter and long battles were being waged daily between Christians and pagans. Taking a companion with him, he was not afraid to present himself to the sight of the Sultan of the Saracens. Before he reached the Sultan, he was captured by soldiers, insulted and beaten, but was not afraid. He did not flinch at threats of torture nor was he shaken by death threats. Although he was ill-treated by many with a hostile spirit and a harsh attitude, he was received very graciously by the Sultan. The Sultan honoured him as much as he could, offering him many gifts, trying to turn his mind to worldly riches. But when he saw that he resolutely scorned all these things like dung, the Sultan was overflowing with admiration and recognized him as a man unlike any other. He was moved by his words and listened to him very willingly. In all this however, the Lord did not fulfil Francis's desire, reserving for him the prerogative of a unique grace."² This unique grace is understood to be the stigmata.

Bonaventure, (1217-1274) Minister General of the Franciscan Order writing between 1260 and 1263 is more explicit about Francis's intention, either to convert the Sultan or be martyred, and he makes a direct link between martyrdom at the hands of the Muslims that Francis was denied and the stigmata that he received two years before his death. Bonaventure writes: "O truly blessed man, whose flesh, although not cut down by a tyrant's steel, was not yet deprived of bearing a likeness of the Lamb that was slain!. O truly and fully blessed man, I say, whose life the persecutor's sword did not take away, and who yet did not lose the palm of martyrdom."³ It is clear from the sources that Francis went with the intention of converting the Muslims but with the expectation of being martyred. What is interesting is how he reacted to being welcomed courteously by the Sultan. Other brothers who went to convert other Muslims were martyred so one must ask why Francis was not. We must take into account the hagiography of the time that portrays Francis as a saint, but what is also implied is that the Sultan was also a man of God. How else would he have recognised Francis as a holy man – a man unlike any other to whom he was willing to listen.

After this aborted search for martyrdom Francis returned to Assisi and about 1220-21 wrote what is known as the *Regula non Bullata*, a version of the Rule that was not approved by the Pope but superseded by a shorter, legalistic Rule. In this *Regula non Bullata* a whole chapter is dedicated to *Those Going Among the Saracens and Other Nonbelievers*. We read: "as for the brothers who go, they can live spiritually among the Saracens and non-believers 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 and to

¹ The Sources refer to Muslims variously as Saracens, Unbelievers and Pagans. I use *Saracens* here when referring to the Sources.

² 1 Celano 20.57

³ *Legenda Major* Ch 9.9

acknowledge that they are Christians. The other way is to announce the Word of God, when they see it pleases the Lord, in order that unbelievers may believe in almighty God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the creator of all, the Son, the Redeemer and Saviour, and be baptised and become Christians because no one can enter the kingdom of God without being reborn of water and the Holy Spirit. Wherever they may be, let all my brothers remember that they have given themselves and abandoned their bodies to the Lord Jesus Christ. For love of him, they must make themselves vulnerable to their enemies, both visible and invisible, because the Lord says *whoever loses his life because of me will save it in eternal life*.⁴

Saint Francis anticipated by 750 years the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on respect for people of other faiths, but even among his own followers his teaching was largely, though not entirely lost. Franciscans have been the custodians of the Holy Places throughout the Crusades, the Turkish and British occupations of Palestine and are there still, though many would argue that they care for the shrines rather than engage with the local population.

What can we learn from St Francis? From the sources that, once one allows for the flowery language of hagiography, are fairly skimpy, we see that

1. Francis went against the tide of seeing aggression as the answer to the problem. He did not respond to the Pope's call for a new military Crusade, but he was not unconcerned about the Holy Places and the reality of the spread of Islam..
2. He was changed by his encounter with the Sultan, recognised goodness in some Muslim practice, and learned from them.
3. He saw that there was no point in preaching the Gospel until the Lord had prepared the way, so he advocated living peacefully among the Muslims and discerning when it pleased the Lord to preach.
4. Finally he says: wherever they may be, let all my brothers remember that they have given themselves and abandoned their bodies to the Lord Jesus Christ. For love of him, they must make themselves vulnerable to their enemies, both visible and invisible, because the Lord says *whoever loses his life because of me will save it in eternal life*. This surely is the antithesis of aggression and violence of any kind against those who differ from us.

The first point – Holding a different view that led to different experiences and conclusions. Francis did not respond to the Fourth Lateran Council's (1215) call to support another Crusade. It is clear from the sources that he responded to the recommendations of the Council in regard to respect for the Eucharist and better formation of the men who joined the Order, so we know that he was familiar with the decrees of the Council. He had great regard for obedience to Church authorities, and Pope Gregory IX, the former Cardinal Hugolino, was his close friend, but in this Francis took a different view and taught that his brothers were to go through the world in a spirit of non-violence and as peacemakers. When it is not a question of faith or doctrine, the prophetic voice of those who see things differently needs to be heard.

The second point – Francis was changed by his encounter with the Sultan. He expected to be harshly treated but what he met was a man of integrity acting according to his conscience and faith, albeit different from Francis's faith. Francis was deeply impressed by the public call to prayer from the mosque and the people's public commitment to prayer. It is widely believed that this was the

⁴ Earlier Rule (*Regula non Bullata*) Ch 16

inspiration for the Angelus introduced by Francis on his return from the Middle East. Francis and the Sultan recognised in each other a deep faith and integrity that, though different, had a common source – God/Allah. This was in sharp contrast to others of his time who referred to Muslims as devils and to Mohamed as the Beast of the Apocalypse.⁵ There are records of Western Christians living in the Holy Land in the 11th and 12th centuries who had befriended and respected Muslims,⁶ but the encyclicals and letters of the Popes of Francis’s time, demonise Islam and use doubtful scriptural exegesis to justify the call to Crusade against them, as did St Bernard of Clairvaux a century earlier. I do not intend to simplify the complexity of the Crusades nor the consequences of the spread of Islam. I am pointing out how St Francis, acting out of his own deeply held convictions, took a different path, the Road Less Travelled, one could say, against the prevailing tide.

Today also, Christians who live alongside and share the ordinary lives of Muslims, Buddhists or whoever, see in them the same humanity, people searching for meaning and transcendence, trying to live according to their conscience, making mistakes, forgiving and moving on, and finding strength and meaning in a different faith. And this works both ways: the story of Mamdouh being changed at a very deep level by his long association with a group of Catholic sisters is a clear example. Followers of other faiths are no different from us and we find among them saints and sinners. It is often the saints among them that challenge us most.

Many of you will be familiar with the controversies surrounding the works of Jacque Dupuis, the Jesuit whose book *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*⁷ was investigated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the 1990s. Dupuis, who died recently, lived and taught in India for 36 years and his experience led him to question how in God’s plan non-Christian faiths mediate salvation to their members. His work was not condemned, but a “Notification” was added by the Sacred Congregation to prevent it being misinterpreted and so mislead the faithful.⁸ Dupuis articulated in a learned and lucid way what others experience, particularly those living in the Far East that is, the goodness and profound spirituality of peoples of other faiths, and he asked how in God’s plan do the different religions mediate salvation for their members.

Another Jesuit, William Johnson, the well-known writer on prayer, who has lived and taught in Japan for more than 50 years, addresses the same question through the mystical traditions of Christianity and Buddhism. I once attended a lecture given by Fr Johnson where the distinctiveness of Christianity in relation to Buddhism seemed vague and unclear, and what he said could have been interpreted as convergence in a way that I’m sure was not his intention. Islam does not lead so easily to such convergence. It sees itself as superseding Christianity in much the same way that Christianity understood itself as superseding Judaism. This is one reason why Muslims are less open to dialogue. They see Islam as restoring the purity of monotheism that they believe Christians abandoned, and their mission is to convert all to belief in one God.

The “Notification” on Dupuis’s book says

It must be emphasised that this text is an introductory reflection on a Christian theology of religious pluralism. It is not simply a theology of religions but a theology of religious pluralism, which seeks to investigate, in the light of Christian faith, the significance of the plurality of religious traditions in God’s plan for humanity.

⁵ Examples in J. Hoerberichts *Francis and Islam* (Franciscan Press, Quincy IL 62301. 1997)

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Jacques Dupuis *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Orbis Books Maryknoll 2002)

⁸ *ibid* page 434

The Sacred Congregation warned against the undermining of the uniqueness of Christ as universal saviour and the “Notification” spells out the Church’s teaching on the Sole and Universal Salvific Mediation of Christ. I imagine the “Notification” is addressed to others who have similar experiences and questions as Dupuis, in particular those in Asia who live among the ancient Eastern Religions.

The third point From his encounter with the Muslims, Francis knew that to preach the Gospel to people unreceptive to it can be counter-productive. (as the Church acknowledged in Post-Conciliar documents eg *Nostra Aetate* 1965, and *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 1977 that speaks about pre-evangelisation.) Instead the brothers should proclaim the Gospel by the witness of their lives by living peacefully among the Muslims, not engaging in arguments or disputes but being subject to every human creature for God’s sake and acknowledging that they are Christians. This, I believe, is the core of Francis’s teaching and emerges out of his Christocentric understanding of creation and his fundamental stance of humility and peace. I will return to this later. The other way, Francis says, is to announce the Word of God, when they see it pleases the Lord. This apparently simple statement is actually profound. Discerning when to preach the Gospel to people of other faiths requires sensitivity, respect and humility.

The fourth point Francis teaches that if the brothers, having come in humility and peace, are persecuted for Christ’s sake, they should make themselves vulnerable to their enemies, both visible and invisible, because the Lord says *whoever loses his life because of me will save it in eternal life*. In other words, they should rejoice in suffering and martyrdom for Christ’s sake if this comes their way without provocation or violence on their part. The Algerian martyrs of the 1990s are examples of just such an occurrence. The Archbishop of Algiers, Henri Teissier, said that what was peculiar to those 19 men and women, all members of religious orders, was that they sacrificed their lives, not so as to avoid renouncing directly their faith, nor to defend a Christian community, but through fidelity to a Muslim people.⁹ As far as I know none of these martyrs were Franciscans, but their commitment to preaching the Gospel through presence and humble service resonates with what St Francis wrote in his *Regula non Bullata* in 1220. Humanity is the same. The Gospel message is the same. As the Christian woman in the flat in Zarqa said “Aren’t they human like us”.

I now want to consider briefly what I believe is the essence of Francis’s teaching that informed and permeated his whole life of which mission to Muslims was one part. Francis had a basic education but he was not a theologian in the classical sense. His writings are few and uncomplicated but I believe, profound. It was Bonaventure, born a few years before Francis’s death, and later Minister General of the Order, who systematised and theologised the teaching and writings of Francis. (Franciscan scholars among you will know the questions that surround Bonaventure’s influence on the Order.)

Three short texts from the Early Franciscan Sources throw light on Francis’s life and teaching. The first is the Prayer before the Crucifix (1205/06) that we are told he prayed at the beginning of his conversion when he was trying to discern what God was calling him to do. It reads

Most High, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart, and give me true faith, certain hope and perfect charity, sense and knowledge Lord, that I may carry out your true and holy command.¹⁰

⁹ Martin McGee OSB ‘Christian Martyrs for a Muslim People’ Spirituality Vol 10 (November/December 2004)

¹⁰ Francis of Assisi. Early Documents Vol 1 page 40

The young Francis spent hours in prayer, sometimes in a cave, sometimes before a crucifix in the little church of San Damiano below Assisi. One day as he was praying fervently the figure on the cross seemed to speak to him and, his biographers tell us “*from that hour, therefore, his heart was wounded and it melted when remembering the Lord’s passion. While he lived, he always carried the wounds of the Lord Jesus in his heart. This was brilliantly shown afterwards in the renewal of those wounds that were miraculously impressed on and most clearly revealed in his body.*” (The stigmata)

And, the Sources go on, “*from then on he was always conformed to the passion of Christ until his death.*”¹¹

The second text is from Francis’s last extant writing, The Testament, thought to be written soon before he died though probably containing earlier material, where he says “*And after the Lord gave me some brothers, no one showed me what I had to do, but the Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel.*” And later on he says: *The Lord revealed a greeting to me that we should say “May the Lord give you peace.”*¹²

And the third, taken from his biographers, is related to this. As Francis lay dying surrounded by the brothers, he placed his hand over the wound in his side and said “*I have finished what was mine to do. May the Lord show you what is yours to do.*”¹³

A close reading of the Early Franciscan Documents reveals Francis as utterly obedient to Church authority, and for him religious obedience is an aspect of poverty for which he is noted, yet he was convinced that God revealed to him the way of life he was to follow which was to live the Holy Gospel as literally as was humanly possible. Popes and bishops tried to direct him to an established Order or to a gentler way of life but he adamantly refused. Yet he did not expect others to follow his example literally as is clear from his deathbed statement: “I have done what was mine to do. May the Lord show you what is yours to do”. This seems to imply that The Most High will reveal to each one what is uniquely theirs to do, always within obedience but sometimes with the prophetic voice that takes the road less travelled.

Francis understood the brothers as a spiritual presence in the world, living in peace among themselves and bringing that peace to all they met. In a sense, their mission to the Saracens was not exceptional but a living among them in peace and harmony as they tried to live among themselves and in whatever environment obedience placed them. As he heard all around him the call to take up the cross as a Crusader or as a supporter of the Crusades, Francis, convinced of his call to live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel, knew that Crusading was not for him. Jesus did not take up arms to preach the Good News, and the Lord had revealed to Francis that he should use the greeting *May the Lord give you Peace*. He therefore chose to go in peace to the Saracens in the hope of fulfilling in his body that which was already begun in his heart while praying before the crucifix in San Damiano.

Throughout his life Francis longed to experience in his body, as far as was possible, what Jesus experienced during his passion. Desire for union with Christ crucified was his motivation for martyrdom.

Another aspect of Francis’s spiritual understanding that influenced his approach to Muslims was his devotion to the humanity of Christ – his Christocentric anthropology. Others before him, particularly Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), had promoted devotion to the humanity of Christ, but it was Francis who developed this in his own life and prayer and expressed it symbolically in

¹¹ Sayings of the three Companions Ch 5

¹² Francis of Assisi. Early Documents Vol 1 page 124

¹³ Legenda Major Ch 14.3

the Christmas crib, the Stations of the Cross and, from a different angle, in his love for all creation. He used to weep at the thought of the Son of God taking on frail human nature – as he put it, *the Son of God hanging on a human breast*, and the humility of Jesus and his blessed mother never ceased to amaze and inspire him. He understood that in Jesus of Nazareth the Word of God had taken human flesh - created matter in which human beings, earthworms, and skylarks, mountains and tiny flowers share. Human beings, whatever their religious beliefs, share human nature with the human nature of Jesus, the Incarnate Word. This, I believe, is the source of Francis's love of all creation and his openness to all peoples including the Saracens whom others set out to destroy. I think the current debate about the salvific nature of non-Christian religions would not have been an issue for Francis whose cosmic vision of reality was entirely centred on Christ.

As I indicated earlier, Saint Bonaventure systematised and theologised the life and teaching of Francis, particularly in the *Legenda Major* (The Major Legend of Francis) and the *Itinerarium* (The Soul's Journey into God). While Bonaventure was a student in the University of Paris his teacher, the renowned Alexander of Hales, joined the Franciscan Order. Bonaventure later joined the Order and continued to teach in Paris but St Francis is rarely mentioned in his writings until he is elected Minister General.

Bonaventure's entire theological system, and after him Franciscan spirituality, is often termed Christocentric. Following St Francis and the earlier Bernard of Clairvaux, he came to understand in a profound way the Word Incarnate, Jesus of Nazareth, as central to theology and to prayer. Centring and circles are common symbols and metaphors in Bonaventure who was the last great medievalist. He says that God is like a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere, and that Christ, the incarnate Word is the centre of the Trinity as the Word, and of creation as the Word Incarnate, therefore all creation is, in Christ, already in the centre of the Trinity.

To spell this out a little: Bonaventure gives special emphasis to the Father as the mystery of primacy within the Trinity:

The Father is properly the One without an originator, the Unbegotten One; the Principle who proceeds from no other; the Father as such.¹⁴

The Son is the Image, the Word to whom the Father communicates everything that He, the Father, is; and the Spirit is properly the Gift, the mutual bond of Love.¹⁵ The Father is source and goal of the immanent emanations within the Trinity, and the Logos is the immanence of the Father. Created reality includes the human nature of Jesus with whom the Logos unites, hence for Bonaventure and later for Duns Scotus, the Son, the Incarnate Word, is at the centre of the Trinity, and in Him is all that God has conceived and could conceive. Since the Father eternally communicates all that He is to the Son, therefore, all of creation, represented in the human nature of Jesus, exists eternally in the heart of the Trinity.

For Bonaventure, history consists of two corresponding movements from the very beginning – *egressus* and *regressus*, that is, everything emanates from God and, through and in Christ, returns to God. Among the many images that Bonaventure uses to express the creative richness of the Godhead is that of a vast and living fountain of water from which flows the immense river of creation.¹⁶ Like a river that, according to *Ecclesiastes 1:7*, returns to its source, so creation returns to its place of origin.

¹⁴ Bonaventure *Breviloquium* Part 1 Ch 3.7

¹⁵ *ibid* cf P 39-40

¹⁶ Zachary Hayes *The Hidden Centre* P 13

As the Father is source and goal of immanent emanations within the Godhead, so He is also source and goal of all created reality. This is the basis for Bonaventure's doctrine of *egressus and regressus* in the centre of which stands Christ: the circle of time from God, through Christ, to God.

Another pillar of Bonaventure's theological system is exemplarity. In its most basic sense, the triune God in God's own self-knowledge is Exemplar of all else. The Second Person is Exemplar since, being the full expression of all that the Father is, the Second Person is the expression of all that can be in relation to the finite. The triune structure of God himself is expressed in the Son, therefore all creation bears the imprint of the Trinity.¹⁷ According to the Franciscan scholar Zachary Hayes

It is the Eternal Word, who lies at the centre of the mystery of God Himself, who becomes incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, thus assuming a central place in the created universe and its history. The general contours of Bonaventure's world-view begin to emerge clearly. It is a world that by its very nature as a creation of God is caught up in a history of *egressus* and *regressus*, in the centre of which stands the person of Jesus Christ.¹⁸

The Eternal Word who is at the centre of the Trinity, if one can use such a metaphor, takes on created human flesh thus sharing creatureliness with all created things. Thus, for Bonaventure, all creation, from the lofty heavens to the tiny earthworm, but most of all human beings, through this sharing, is already located in the very heart of the Trinity in the human nature of Jesus with whom the Word unites. This is the Christocentric view of creation and redemption that Bonaventure developed within the Tradition, particularly of Bernard Clairvaux and Alexander of Hales under whom he studied in Paris.

When he really understood the life of St Francis through listening to the early brothers who were his first companions, and the various Legends written about Francis, Bonaventure saw that this almost illiterate man had lived what the Masters of Paris had worked out philosophically. When he comes to reflect theologically on the life of Francis in the *Legenda Maior* and the *Itinerarium*, his theology fits perfectly Francis's understanding of Jesus as our brother, and the unity of all creation.

This rather dense exposition of Bonaventure's understanding of creation in relation to the Trinity might be expressed in the following perhaps oversimplified way: By taking on human nature, the Incarnate Word shares creatureliness with all created reality, most of all human persons, but with all other creation as well. Francis's love of all created things was not a sentimental affection for furry animals, but a profound realisation that in the Incarnation, Jesus our brother shares in our creatureliness and, in his resurrection and ascension, that creatureliness - created matter - is taken into the heart of the Godhead. This is the universal brotherhood of all humankind and of all creation that is central to Franciscan life and spirituality. For Francis, all of creation, whether conscious or not, is centred in Christ, the Incarnate Word, and Francis is content to leave the working out of our salvation to God in God's own time. So he admonished the brothers to avoid arguments and be subject to every human creature for God's sake. But, he says they must acknowledge that they are Christians, and they should preach when they see that it pleases the Lord to do so.

Bonaventure portrayed Francis as an icon of perfection yet he did not share the vision of going among the Muslims with the message of peace as revealed by the Lord to Francis. In the spirit of his time, Bonaventure believed Muslims to be agents of the devil, and over the centuries Franciscans,

¹⁷ Hex 1 (V 373); 3,7 (V,344) (Collation of the Six Days)

¹⁸ Zachary Hayes *The Hidden Centre* P 14

like others, behaved in different ways ranging from the peaceful co-existence advocated by Francis to aggressively preaching the Gospel to people who were not ready to hear the Word.

So, what message can we in Britain learn from St Francis?

Firstly, the evangelical witness of Christian living, like the family in Zarqa who took the Muslim family into their already crowded home.

Secondly, the value of human friendship. Let us try to know and befriend our Muslim neighbours, as the sisters in Jordan did with Mamdouh their employee and friend, and we will find that they, like us, are trying to live according to their conscience with varying degrees of success.

Thirdly, *There is a season for everything, a time for every occupation under heaven (Eccles 3.1)* As Francis says, preach the Gospel to them when it pleases the Lord to do so. This requires sensitivity and humility. The time may not be yet.

Fourthly, be at peace. God's mercy and goodness are great and Christ is universal Saviour. Francis's cosmic vision of reality offers a way to understand the universality of salvation in Christ without preoccupation with time that is also part of created reality.

In all of these we respect our Muslim sisters and brothers without in any way diluting or compromising our Christian faith. St Peter tells us that in the Lord's eyes a thousand years is like a day. I expect there is room for dialogue between Christians and Muslims, but in my experience, it is the dialogue of life, of friendship, of shared joys and sorrows, in other words, of our shared humanity, that touches hearts and minds, rather than intellectual discourse that, between Christians and Muslims, is often of limited value.

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