

Learning a Way of Peace from St. Francis on His Feastday

October 4, 1226 is the day of St. Francis of Assisi's death. Considered by many to be the world's most popular saint, he founded my Order of Lesser Brothers in 1209. He did so in the midst of wars involving his city of Assisi and Perugia, the Pope (Innocent III) and the Emperor (Otto IV) as well as Christianity and Islam. In his acclaimed biography of Francis, Arnaldo Fortini, the former mayor of Assisi, described the mind set of his day: "War was a condition of life." In another place he writes: "Revenge...became a fixed idea." Although Francis was immersed in his worldview, something happened to Francis the more he opened himself to a truly evangelical way of thinking. This created, for him and some of his fellow citizens of Assisi, Fortini notes, a "spiritual crisis."

In response to his society's pervasive militarism and its seductive mentality, Francis began to envision another approach to conflicts: the non-violent message of peace proclaimed by Jesus as he went about his world (see Mt. 10:11-14). In his Rule, which we brothers have vowed to make our way of life, Francis asked us to go everywhere proclaiming to all: "The Lord give you peace."

In our nation it seems increasingly difficult to proclaim a truly evangelical peace based on justice for all, for so many seem to equate our Pax Americana with issues related to control of property and markets along with a kind of militarism that seems essential to protect our access to resources. As with the people at Francis' time, it seems our society cannot "imagine a faith...not sustained by military skill."

As we face increasing terrorism and conflict, much due to some in the Islamic world who object to "our way of life," I believe more and more citizens of this country are growing through our own "spiritual crisis." We see it eroding our nation's moral soul. Consequently, inspired by Francis, it seems opportune to envision another way of thinking, especially since we find decreasing support for continuing the militaristic approach that has come to define our nation's way of dealing with the crises we face. Far from stemming terrorism in Iraq, experts in Israel and Saudi Arabia now tell us our government's invasion and continued presence in Iraq actually has spawned yet more violence.

This invites us to return to the message of Francis of Assisi. While Pope Innocent III and other rulers were obsessed in responding to Islam's challenge through crusades, Francis chose another way: through quiet, faithful witness and respectful dialogue. This is evident in his writings and in his personal example. Although history shows he was not able to successfully challenge the dominant mindset, I believe we need to try again even though our own efforts may evoke similar epithets of being "unpatriotic" and "treasonous" as Fortini says happened to Francis when he tried.

Increasingly convinced that another approach was necessary to deal with Christianity's "enemy," Francis went to visit one of Islam's most powerful and feared leaders, Sultan Malik-al-Kamil. At their meeting the two respectfully talked about their differences. Though neither converted the other, in the process something happened to Francis. He decided it was time, *at least for us, his followers*, to relate to Islam in another, non-violent way. This approach, which he called a "gospel or *evangelical way*," he enshrined in the Rule of Life we follow.

As a contemporary Franciscan, I believe the time has come to offer anew his evangelical vision to our world. I don't know exactly how this can be done, but I invite other Christians, fellow-citizens and all those inspired by Francis to rethink our present nationalistic and militaristic approach to resolve our conflicts, to violence, and to dealing with our "enemies" in a way that will bring about greater reverence and, hopefully, a non-violent resolution of our differences. I ask those who may be experiencing a spiritual crisis regarding the way we have become psychically numbed to violence to imagine alternative ways of relating to our "enemies" than the current militaristic (non) solutions. Finally, I hope we all find a new way, based on respect, for any Jews, Moslems, or Christians who still believe *their God* sanctions the kind of militarism and violence we have experienced, to naught. Instead I invite all of us to consider the value of making our own the prayer attributed to Francis: "Yahweh/Allah/Lord, make *us* instruments of *your* peace."