

Substitutionary Prayer and the Stigmata of Saint Francis of Assisi

by Dorothy C. Buck

There is a fresco by the renowned artist known as Giotto (1266-1327) that is magnificently displayed amidst a series of frescoes depicting scenes in the life of St. Francis on the walls in the upper hall of the Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi, Italy. The scene of the saint's visit to the Muslim Sultan in Damietta, Egypt in 1219 shows us St. Francis standing before the throne of Sultan Malik-el-Kamil ready to withstand a "trial by fire" to prove the truth of his Christian faith in Jesus Christ, while those witnesses to the scene huddle aside in awe. Giotto's source for this scene was taken from the "Major Legend of St. Francis" by St. Bonaventure who was the minister general of the Franciscan Order from 1257 to 1274, and was writing his account years after Francis' death in 1224. The earlier chroniclers of the saint's encounter do not mention Francis as having challenged the Sultan in this way but there was in fact an authentic historical meeting with the Sultan in the midst of armed conflict during the fifth crusade.

This encounter in the life of St. Francis and the Franciscan movement is a story whose time has come. Recent scholarship exploring this event and its

meaning bring to light its implications for our contemporary efforts at dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Indeed it speaks to our need to heal the wounds among all three Abrahamic faith traditions and to see all people everywhere as our brothers and sisters, as did Francis.

Placing this event in the context of the on-going conversion, or spiritual journey, of Francis as well as in the historical reality of his time, allows us to fully appreciate the magnitude of the vision of this great mystic. It will lead us to La Verna, the place of his mystical meditation on the Passion of Jesus Christ, raised on a Cross and crucified for the healing and salvation of humanity, that led to the five wounds of Christ becoming visible on the body of Francis. This stigmata and its meaning has inspired hundreds of years of scholarship and many thousands to join religious communities dedicated to the vision and charism of their "Seraphic" father, Saint Francis of Assisi.

Mystical Substitution

Deep within the heart of Catholic mystical experience, and a central part of the most ancient spiritual tradition of compassion in the church, is a calling to substitutionary prayer. We used to call those men and women

called to this prayer, “victim souls”, those who were so spiritually identified with the suffering of the crucified Christ for the salvation of humanity that they took the sufferings of others onto themselves both mentally and physically, healing them by suffering in their place, as did Jesus. This form of love and compassion for others begins with loving God in Christ passionately. Those called to it recognize their own face and Christ’s face in the faces of every other human being and see the struggles and suffering in life as intrinsically connected to His. Their tears for the violence we human beings inflict upon one another and their imploring prayers for healing and peaceful resolutions are offered equally for both those who cause suffering and those who are their victims.

J-K Huysmans, the 19th century spiritual writer once said that in every generation there are such souls, called to quietly suffer in compassionate love for a world fraught with natural disasters and human weakness. Christ said, “there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for another”, and a very human example of this is of a mother who does not hesitate to put herself in danger in order to save her child who is running out into the street. Compassionate lovers of God are those who

love all others as a mother loves her child and who experience all those of different faith traditions, races and nationalities as brothers and sisters.

A movement that was dedicated to substitutionary prayer was initiated in Cairo, Egypt in 1934 by Louis Massignon, a French Catholic mystic, and scholar of Islamic religion and culture. In 1934 Christians who had lived in Egypt for generations were leaving as Islam became the dominant religious and political power. Massignon’s knowledge of Islamic culture and respect for his Muslim colleagues and friends, along with his love for Eastern forms of Christian worship inspired him to encourage them to stay.

On February 9, 1934 Louis Massignon and an Egyptian Melkite Christian woman named Mary Kahil made a vow together to dedicate their prayer and their lives to their Muslim neighbors. Massignon chose an ancient Franciscan chapel in Damietta, Egypt to make their vow. They gathered other Egyptian Christians together in this prayer of spiritual substitution which gave them support and courage to stay there. They sought ways to engage with their Muslim neighbors, praying for them while working with them, sharing life and “crossing over to the other” as Massignon would say, discovering friendship and common human

values. They called their prayer movement the *Badaliya*, an Arabic word meaning to exchange one thing for another, or substitution.

Massignon's scholarship involved researching the life and writings of a tenth century Sufi mystic called al-Hallaj. He discovered that in the Muslim mystical tradition there were also those called substitutes, or *abdal* in Arabic, which is the root of his term *Badaliya*.¹ Massignon saw al-Hallaj as a true *badal* (singular of *abdal*) since this great lover of Allah was martyred in the year 922 in Baghdad, dying for the sake of the Muslim community because his efforts to bring them closer to God threatened the political establishment. The prayer of the *abdal* is less about consolation and peace in one's heart than it is about entering so deeply into the immensity of God's love for all human beings that one begins to love as God loves, willingly sacrificing oneself if necessary out of compassion for others. Those called want everyone to experience God's love as they experience it, because they know that only this kind of love can heal the broken hearted and set the prisoners free. In 1931

Massignon became a secular Franciscan

¹ *Abdal* is the plural of *Bâdal* in Arabic which means to replace one thing with another, or to take the place of, or exchange, or substitute. It also means a good or religious person, or saint. In Persia it means a religious devotee or dervish. For a standard definition in Sufi literature see J.Nurbakhsh: *Sufi Symbolism*:vol.6.

inspired by Franciscan spirituality that experiences all of creation as sacred and every human being as a brother or sister. The inspiration of St. Francis' visit to the Muslim Sultan that took place in Damietta, Egypt in the year 1219 was especially compelling for Massignon.

Saint Francis and his Dialogue of Hearts

In his lifetime St. Francis was to witness two Crusades instigated by the popes to eradicate Islam and recover Jerusalem from the Muslims. He had grown up with the glitter of shining armor and valiant knights fighting for the glory of Christendom filling his imagination and he longed to join them. He did try, but after a painful imprisonment and a long recuperation he had a transforming conversion experience that shaped the remainder of his life. Francis would have heard the call to arms preached in all the French and Italian churches promising salvation to all those who lost their lives in Christ's name. The Holy Land, they preached, belongs to Christ and should therefore be recovered. The people were told that participation in the Crusades was a way to imitate Christ and that all believers were expected to take up arms and their families to donate funds.

Francis not only heard the pope's call but he also wanted to be a knight battling for

the sake of the kingdom of God and he wanted to be a martyr, to give his life for his love of Christ. However he had a very different vision of God. The 5th Crusade took place from 1217 to 1221. By then Francis was instructing his brothers in a radical departure from the Christian cultural norms of his time and guiding them toward his understanding of the meaning of life as a follower of Jesus. The guiding light for Francis came from the Gospel of Matthew, "Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you". (Mt.5:44) His life was informed by these words of Jesus that he took to heart to the point of telling his brothers that the Muslims, who the Church insisted were the enemies of Christ, were not only friends but brothers. In fact Francis had come to recognize the universal brotherhood of all human beings because they were all created by the love of God and he extended his understanding to all of creation. The sacredness of all of created life and especially all men and women led him to experience everything that violated this sacred unity as sinful. (Cusato 2006, p.70)

The Christian crusaders captured the city of Damietta, Egypt in November of the year 1219. That June Francis decided to take a few of his brothers to the crusading army encamped there hoping to turn them away

from violence. His greatest desire was to visit the Sultan encamped just south of the city. His weapon was a message of peace and his hope was for the conversion of hearts. The Franciscan priest Gulio Basetti-Sani, who was a disciple of Louis Massignon, called St. Francis the first Catholic to initiate dialogue with Islam. He understood that to fully grasp the importance of Francis' actions we have to begin with a story out of the life of the Prophet of Islam.

There is an episode in the life of Muhammad (PBUH)² that is recorded in the teachings and traditional history of Islam that took place in the 10th year of the Hijra (631 of the Common Era). With the increase of Islam in Arabia there was a need for local tribal communities to establish relations with the new power in the area. A delegation from a predominantly Christian city state called Najran,³ came to see the Prophet. According to Islamic tradition they were impressed with the passage from the Qur'an explaining the true understanding of Christ but were unable to accept this teaching and adopt the new religion. In order to know the truth about Christ, the Prophet then suggested that they

² Peace Be Upon Him.

³ Currently in northern Yemen and part of Saudi Arabia.

agree to undergo the “*Mubahala*”,⁴ where both the Christians and the Muslims would gather their men, women and children to pray to Allah. Those who were lying would be cursed. Anyone with genuine faith would accept this challenge. The various accounts of this episode from very early sources all agree that the Christians preferred not to accept this challenge and agreed to pay tribute in return for protection from the State. According to Basetti-Sani and Louis Massignon something similar to this scene was interestingly repeated in the thirteenth century as an important event in the life of St. Francis.

Francis’ Visit to the Muslim Sultan

In June of the year 1219 Francis and a few of his brothers went to the camp of the crusading army and stayed with them for some weeks hoping to dissuade them from attacking the Muslims. South of the city the Muslim Sultan, Malik el-Kamil was encamped in a place called al-Marsurra. Francis finally received permission from the army Commander to approach the Muslim camp being warned that he would likely be killed. He took Brother Illuminato with him

⁴ Some traditions suggest that the *Mubahala* was an explanation of Surah 3:61 in the Qur’an, “ If any one disputes in this matter with thee, now after (full) knowledge Hath come to thee, say: "Come! let us gather together,- our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves: Then let us earnestly pray, and invoke the curse of Allah on those who lie! “

and once over the line they were picked up by the Muslim guards and after some difficulties were taken to the Sultan’s tent.

Middle Eastern custom receives the guest with hospitality and so the Sultan likewise received Francis. According to early sources the dialogue that took place between the Sultan and Francis went on for several days. Francis’ mandate to his own brothers was to offer the sign of peace to every house they entered. Therefore he would have spoken as a brother to the Sultan rather than as an enemy, true to his spiritual experience of God in Christ, that even an “enemy” is a brother. As a compassionate brother, Francis wanted to save the soul of the Sultan and his companions.

Apparently the Sultan recognized Francis as a holy man, since he was dressed in his simple tunic with a cord at his waist, much like the Sufi Muslims so familiar to the Sultan. Francis was a street preacher and surely used his compelling style to engage the Sultan and convince him of the truth of the Christian understanding of Christ. Massignon suggested that this was a discussion with learned Muslim scholars advising the Sultan. The earliest chronicler of this event, James de Vitry, even suggested that Francis was permitted to preach to the Muslim army. In “The Saint and the Sultan”, Paul Moses

found this possibility remarkable. As the armies on both sides prepared for battle, Francis speaks with both the Sultan and his soldiers as a friend or brother. The risks inherent in this adventure were many for Francis: first there was the danger in crossing the enemy lines, then there was the risk that he could offend easily were he to in any way indicate disrespect for the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad. Francis was indeed risking his life even without challenging anyone to Bonaventure's "trial by fire".

Instead, mutual respect was established, so much so that the Sultan offered Francis lavish gifts of gold as a sign of his respect. Although Francis refused these gifts he did accept two others, an ivory horn and a meal. The horn was used to call the army to battle but Francis used it to call the people to prayer. James de Vitry wrote that the Sultan was moved to privately ask Francis to pray for him that "he might be inspired by God to adhere to the religion that most pleased God". As Tolan points out, there were many miracles in this story. The image of the holy man Francis, who normally ate simply and little, seated at a banquet with the Sultan of Egypt while war was raging around them, is a true example of the Franciscan approach to establishing Christ's peace on earth.

Basetti-Sani suggests that Francis' had taken the place of the 7th century Christians of Najran in Medina who were unwilling to offer their lives to prove the truth of their faith. In fact Francis was not only willing to risk his life as proof of the truth of his faith, but also in order to save the souls of these Muslim brothers out of love for them, Christ's love. His offering was especially for the Sultan who he had come to know and respect. Now in the 13th century, Francis' love for Christ and his recognition of Christ's love for all his human brothers and sisters compelled him to take the risk of crossing enemy lines to bring witness to his Christian faith to the Sultan. His was an act of substitution even if he knew nothing of the 7th century Christians of Najran.

For Louis Massignon this event in the life of St. Francis inspired him to become a secular third order Franciscan in 1931. It also inspired his choice of an obscure Franciscan chapel in Damietta, Egypt in which to make the original vow of *Badaliya*. Francis' visit to the Sultan and willingness to sacrifice himself out of love was an example of the prayer of substitution that is the ground for the *Badaliya* prayer movement that Massignon and Mary Kahil established in 1934. As followers of Jesus we are called to offer our own lives for our friends. We are even asked

to pray for those who persecute us. And doesn't Jesus show His own love of humanity through us and our willingness to love as He did? Even if it means sacrificing our own lives for others, the poor, the refugees, the homeless and even those of other faith traditions?

Basetti-Sani was convinced that Francis stands as the first model for Muslim / Christian dialogue: to have enough love for our brothers and sisters of other faith traditions to offer our lives for them. He understood Francis' call to reach the Muslims with his message of Christ's love for them as his special vocation, and therefore Francis is our model for engagement with them.

Francis' vision on Mt. La Verna

It is in part in the light of Francis' great concern for the major conflict in his time between Muslims and Christians that we are invited to view the events in his life that followed. By the year 1224 the tension between Muslims and Christians had dangerously increased. The Christian army was preparing for yet another violent assault and Francis was particularly concerned for the safety of his brother, Sultan Malik el-Kamil. In fact recent scholars describe him as despairing in heart and spirit as, now back in Tuscany, he traveled to the hermitage at La Verna in August accompanied by

Brothers Illuminato and Leo and some other companions. His deep despair was fueled by the dissenting voices among his growing community of thousands of brothers and his struggle to maintain his original vision of religious community. On his return from Damietta he learned that the first Franciscan friars were martyred in Morocco by using the Gospel message to challenge the Muslim community rather than witnessing to the truth of Christ by the example of their love. Francis' own love for all of God's creation and his increasing identification with the immensity of Jesus' love for humanity, witnessed by His willingness to suffer death on a Cross had become the core of Francis' intense meditation and prayer.

We can not know for certain what Francis held in his heart about his first martyred brothers, nor how he would have understood the insistence of his church on violent military solutions to conflict rather than his own vision of Christ's witness to non-violence and universal brotherhood. But we do know that his pain and confusion led him to enter into an extreme time of 40 days of fasting and prayer called the "Lent of St. Michael". Was this an act of penance for the iniquities of his brothers in Christ, or an act of supplication for the safety and salvation of his Muslim friend, the Sultan Malik el-Kamil

who was faced with another violent onslaught by the crusading armies? (Cusato 2006, p. 71)

At the end of the forty days of prayer in September in the year 1224, Francis went alone to a solitary place on Mt. La Verna to offer himself in prayer. Recent scholars suggest that this took place on or around the Feast of the Exultation of the Cross in the Roman religious calendar. In the intensity of Francis' mystical prayer, presumably meditating on the bloody and beaten body of the crucified Christ with whom he himself was so personally identified, the very wounds of the Crucified One began to appear on his own body. Cusato calls Francis' experience of the stigmata the "deepest and most authentic form of a psychosomatic event." He writes, "...profound, intense, even mystical prayer can begin to literally explode out of one's psyche (one's soul) into and through one's very flesh". He points to the theological insight of Bonaventure who understood that from the time of Francis' conversion he began to internalize the Cross of Christ that gradually permeated his very being until it appeared on his own flesh as the stigmata on Mt. La Verna.

(ibid., pp.52-53)

Francis was silent about his mystical experience and did not speak of the stigmata to his brothers who only saw the wounds on

his body when Francis died. One of the earliest attempts by his first biographer, Thomas of Celano, to explain the mystical experience followed by the appearance of the stigmata of St. Francis at La Verna, describes a vision of Christ appearing to Francis in the form of a Seraph. Recent scholarship relates this image to several biblical texts notably John 3:13-17 verse 14 that states. "For just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so too must the Son of Man be lifted up". The reference to Moses is to the story in the Hebrew Scriptures (Numbers 21:4-9) of a snake whose poisonous bite caused a feeling of fiery burning and ultimate death to its Hebrew victims who had escaped with Moses into the Egyptian desert. God instructed Moses to raise up a bronze image of the seraphic, or fiery serpent, in order that those who looked upon it be healed. Was Francis meditating on the Gospel of John's reference to Moses and the serpent in relation to the crucified Christ? We don't know, but from Celano's early description Francis became known as the Seraphic father of the Franciscan movement. (ibid., pp.36-44)

Filled with joy after receiving the stigmata that assured him of Christ's healing and salvation for all of humanity Francis wrote a prayer of thanksgiving called The Praises of God on a small piece of parchment

known as the *chartula*. Cusato's current detailed research describes both sides of the *chartula*, including a drawing that can be seen as a bearded head wearing a turban, and the writing that could indicate his own tearful prayer for the Sultan's recognition of the fullness of Christ, along with a blessing. These highlight even more definitively the connection of Francis' visit to the Sultan in Damietta to his experience at La Verna. His fervent prayer for his Muslim brother who he had come to know and respect was a direct response to the new invasion being organized by the crusader's army now reinforced by the Holy Roman Emperor himself.

Cusato notes that "The Praises of God" have an interesting resemblance in style to the Islamic litany of the Ninety-nine Names of Allah and surely arose out of Francis' experience in Egypt and heartfelt concern for the salvation of his brother, as well as out of joy at the answer to his prayer, God's mysterious gift of the stigmata. (ibid., pp.53- 68). Here was the verification of Francis' vision of what is necessary for the healing of humanity, not violence, but love, even unto death. Francis' prayer was a true *Badaliya*, or substitutionary prayer, as it came out of the depth of a broken heart torn apart by the reality of human weakness and

false solutions to human conflict. The answer for Francis is the Cross of Jesus Christ which is the epitome of a non-violent response to the abuses of power and injustice in the world.

One could say that the stigmata was a sign of Francis' great love, not only for his brothers in Christ but also for the Muslims who he had tried to bring to recognize the fullness of Christ within their own tradition, at Damietta. For Basetti-Sani the stigmata is a new proof of the truth of the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ. He writes "These wounds made Francis suffer and bleed in order that he could witness to humanity and the Church, through the centuries, how much he loved the Muslims, and how for them especially the passion and death of Christ was renewed in Francis himself". He writes, "In the blood of the five wounds of Francis Islam received a new proof of the love of God for all the descendents of Abraham in the line of Ishmael.... If even into our time Christians have paid little attention to the meaning of this manifestation of Christ and the stigmata of the Seraphic Father as a sign of the mercy of God for Islam, today they should see to it that this call reaches all Muslims invited to dialogue". (Basetti-Sani 1987, p. 248)

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