Opinion
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A fresco in the Shrine of La Verna in Italy depicts St. Francis of Assisi's meeting with the sultan of Egypt. (CNS/Octavio Duran)



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In keeping with my intention to explore the continued relevance, inspiration and challenge of St. Francis of Assisi to mark the 800th anniversary of his death, this week's column is dedicated to a dimension of his legacy that is often overlooked or ignored. While it may sound surprising to some, Francis occasionally practiced what I have come to call "ecclesiastical disobedience," which is the intentional refusal to obey instructions, rules or conventions from church authorities that conflict with his well-formed conscience.

The concept of ecclesiastical disobedience follows from the more widely known practice of "civil disobedience," a term that was coined by Henry David Thoreau in an 1849 essay by the same name. The immediate context was his refusal to pay a state tax established to fund a war he viewed as unjust and to financially support the enforcement of fugitive slave laws.

In the decades since its coinage, the concept of civil disobedience has been invoked to describe a range of actions seeking social change in protest of unjust laws, customs or practices. Such has been the case in demonstrations and protests in support of the right of women to vote in the United States, the civil rights movements of the mid-20th century, and nonviolent protests of conflicts like the wars in Vietnam, Iraq and now Iran.

When the unjust circumstances that are protested through intentional disobedience are a matter of church rather than state, then we have an instance of ecclesiastical disobedience.

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In the case of Francis of Assisi, his practice of ecclesiastical disobedience was grounded in his radical commitment to life the Gospel. In his Rule (1223), he states

from the outset: "The Rule and Life of the Lesser Brothers is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ by living in obedience, without anything of one's own, and in chastity. Brother Francis promises obedience and reverence to our Lord Pope Honorius and his successors canonically elected and to the Roman Church. Let the other brothers be bound to obey Brother Francis and his successors."

What's notable here is that while he and his followers pledge obedience to the pope and the minister general of the Franciscan Order, this vow follows a more primordial and essential commitment: "to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ."

It is true that Francis and his followers strove to be loyal and obedient to legitimate church authorities and religious superiors, but not when there was a tension or outright conflict with what the Gospel of Jesus Christ commands. In such cases, presumably after prayer and discernment, Francis did what he felt was more in keeping with the teachings of Christ over whatever was commanded of him by church leaders, custom or statute, for the Gospel was always the highest authority.

Two examples from Francis' life are good illustrations of what ecclesiastical disobedience looked like in practice for him.

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The first took place in April 1219 outside Damietta, Egypt, during the height of the Fifth Crusade. Six years earlier, Pope Innocent III had issued a papal letter titled *Quia Maior*, which decreed the launch of the crusade. This exercise of ordinary magisterium on the part of the pope established this war as a key priority for the Roman Catholic Church, and Innocent called upon "archbishops and bishops, abbots and priors and chapters ... and all clergy" as well as "cities, villages and castles, according to their own means" to support the crusade financially and with manpower.

This meant that support for and even participation in the crusade was a moral obligation for Christians at the time. It also meant that, according to this papal instruction, Muslims were viewed as an enemy and were to be treated as such. In fact, Innocent explicitly prohibited Christians from engaging in business with Muslims. Failure to support the crusade financially, with prayer, or in person was seen as a sinful act that could jeopardize one's eternal life.

With this as the backdrop, Francis famously journeyed from Assisi, Italy, to Egypt in 1219 and approached the crusader camp. His intention was to bring a message of peace to Sultan Malik Al-Kamil, the leader of the Muslim army, which required him to enter the fray. Medieval accounts of the event recall that Cardinal Pelagius of Albano, Italy, the papal legate and leader of the Christian army, forbade Francis from crossing over into enemy territory out of fear for Francis' safety.

Even though some accounts suggest that Pelagius may have eventually changed his mind after washing his hands of responsibility for Francis, thereby letting the Poverello go off into the Muslim camp, the combination of the churchwide mandate to support the crusade and the explicit order from the papal legate signal that Francis was clearly out of step with church leadership.

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Francis refused to submit to the commands of church authorities that designated Muslims as enemies and demanded all Christians support what Francis believed was an unjust war. That refusal was occasioned by the saint's commitment to the Gospel and recognition that all women and men were his siblings, regardless of their religious identity, national affiliation or any other status.

Francis' peaceful and constructive encounter with the Sultan was an action that directly opposed the teachings of the church at the time, but it was fully in keeping with the Gospel of Jesus Christ that exhorts all Christians to "love one's enemies," "do good to those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44) and "love one another as God has loved us" (John 13:34-35).

A similar dynamic unfolded earlier in Francis' life with his shifting relationship to the lepers of his time. Many people assume that the disgust directed at lepers was merely a social or cultural phenomenon, but there were also church laws governing the lives of lepers and their relationship to the rest of the community.



St. Francis of Assisi and the leper, depicted in mosaic at the General Curia of the Franciscan order in Rome (Wikimedia Commons/Jim McIntosh)

The canons of the Third Lateran Council (1179) included specific rules about the segregation of those deemed lepers from the rest of the faithful. They were not permitted free passage in society as a matter of civil norms nor were they able to access the sacraments or full participation in the life of the church like other baptized. Instead, they were to have their own chapels and ministers set apart from the rest of society.

Lepers had to announce themselves in the presence of non-lepers and keep their distance. In some regions, they were even treated as "legally dead," without rights or recourse. Perhaps this might help explain why artistic depictions of lepers look so similar to modern pop cultural presentations of zombies, the "living dead." While some ecclesiastical authorities encouraged pastoral care for lepers, this community was undoubtedly outcast, feared and despised.

Francis recounts in his Testament that "when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers," but that the Lord eventually led him among them and he "showed mercy to them." While perhaps somewhat more ambiguous than his ecclesiastical disobedience in the face of the Fifth Crusade, he nevertheless prioritized the mission and ministry of Jesus when considering what steps he would take to engage with socially and ecclesially marginalized people.

His first obedience was always to the Gospel, and that call would occasionally conflict with church laws and culture. As a result, Francis willfully transgressed what he saw as unjust social and ecclesial boundaries in order to embrace and live in solidarity with his marginalized siblings.

Like Francis in his time, there may be instances when church authorities set policies, give commands or establish a culture that present a tension or outright conflict with the Gospel. Ecclesiastical disobedience is not to be taken lightly nor used as justification for selfish interest. But as Francis' life bears witness, there may be times when one has to choose the Gospel above all else. As we continue to remember the exceptional example of holiness that Francis provides the church and world, we should not forget his courage in following his conscience, too.