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Pope Francis evokes memories of St. Francis' Muslim outreach

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NCR Today

Dr. Akbar Ahmed was named by the BBC as the world's foremost Islamic scholar a few years ago. Although I'm sure there are other contenders for that honor in the Muslim world, he is surely one of the best. He is also an internationally recognized leader in interfaith relations.

Dr. Ahmed is on the board of "Interfaith Voices." I've known and respected him for years. This spring, after Pope Francis was elected and spent a couple months in office, I asked Dr. Ahmed what he thought of the new pope.

"Oh, Maureen," he said, "I knew I would like him from the first because he chose the name Francis, after Francis of Assisi. You see, Francis befriended a sultan in the medieval Muslim world at the time of the Crusades."

"Not an easy thing to do," I responded.

"No, not at all," he said, "but Francis of Assisi can be numbered among the world's early interfaith leaders."

Recently, Dr. Ahmed co-authored an op-ed column for *The Washington Post* praising Pope Francis' outreach to Muslims. Among other things, he recounted this story about St. Francis. I suspect it's a story not widely known among Catholics and worth the retelling:

Saint Francis of Assisi in the 13th century left the camp of the Christian Crusaders besieging Damietta, the walled Egyptian city, to seek out Malik al-Kamil, the Sultan of Egypt, then the most powerful ruler in the entire region. He did not seek confrontation, and instead encouraged his followers to "not engage in arguments or disputes, but to be subject to (serve) every human creature for God's sake.

The meeting between Catholic priest and Muslim Sultan is one of those remarkable encounters in history which has reverberations over time. It is not fully clear as to what Saint Francis was doing in the holy land. There are accounts that claim he had set out to convert the Muslim leader to Christianity. Whatever the intentions of Saint Francis, the meeting changed him. The Sultan was hospitable to his guest, allowing him to remain in his court for several days and saw that he was escorted back safely by his armed guard to the Christian army. Saint Francis saw a ruler already patronizing serious Muslim-Christian dialogue and he saw large Christian communities living amidst Muslims. Saint Francis returned to Italy fully committed to promoting better relations and dialogue with Muslims.

Here is the link to the entire op-ed.

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