would like to approach this theme by looking at two outstanding figures, Francis of Assisi and Pope John XXIII. I will say a few words about their lives and draw some conclusions.

**St Francis of Assisi**

The slaughter had been terrible, on 29th August 1219 when the Christian and Muslim armies had clashed at near Damietta on the eastern branch of the Nile. The Sultan al-Malik al-Kâmil proposed a truce which was gladly accepted. Francis of Assisi, perhaps the best known and the best loved of all Christian saints, saw his opportunity and, accompanied by Brother Illuminatus, crossed the no-man’s land separating the warring armies.

It was his third great transition. The first had been when, as a young man in the full flower of his youth, he chanced upon a leper. Impelled by an immense outpouring of compassion, Francis dismounted, embraced the unfortunate man and kissed him. Francis had effectively chosen to enter the company of the living dead. In the second great transition, Francis stood in the main square of Assisi and stripped himself of all his clothes, putting aside all the pretensions and materialism of the burgeoning Middle Ages. Henceforth, married to Lady Poverty, he would be free, living only as the Spirit of God inspired him.

This Poor Man of Assisi now advanced towards the Muslim lines, to the followers of Muhammad who in those days was considered to be the father of lies, the Antichrist, the blasphemer, the Beast. When challenged by the Muslim soldiers he replied simply that he was a Christian and wished to speak with the Sultan.

The Sultan al-Malik al-Kâmil graciously received Francis and for the ten days of the truce they conversed. Francis spoke passionately about Jesus and
the Blessed Trinity,\textsuperscript{13} while the Sultan listened attentively, intrigued by this strange holy man, who seemed comparable to a Sufi. Francis for his part observed the Sultan praying five times a day and heard the call to prayer that rang out over the camp, and was amazed. After Francis had refused all manner of gifts, the Sultan provided Francis and Illuminatus with a safe escort back to the Christian lines.

In 1220 Francis returned to Italy and wrote the rule which was approved at the General Chapter of the Mats in 1221. The momentous chapter sixteen reads:

Indeed the friars, who go, can conduct themselves spiritually among [the Muslims] in two manners. One manner is, that they cause no arguments nor strife, but be subject "to every human creature for God's sake" (1 Pt 2:13) and confess themselves to be Christians. The other manner is, that, when they have seen that it pleases God, they announce the word of God, so that they may believe in God the Omnipotent, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, the Creator of all things, (and) in the Redeemer and Savior, the Son, and that they may be baptized and become Christians, because "he who has" not "been reborn of water and the Holy Spirit cannot enter the Kingdom of God" (cf. Jn 3:5).\textsuperscript{14}

I would like to make a few comments on this extraordinary paragraph, never seen before in the history of the Church.

The rule commands: "let them they cause no arguments nor strife".

In these few words Francis rejects the whole manner of the Crusades which aimed to reconquer the former Christian territories of the Middle East by force of arms. Indeed, at the Fourth Lateran Council, Innocent III, whose jurisdiction extended from Scotland to the Black Sea, from Spain to Scandinavia, had called for a fifth crusade and had committed immense resources to this task. Francis


\textsuperscript{14} Fratres vero, qui vadunt, duobus modis inter eos possunt spiritualiter conversari. Unus modus est, quod non faciant lites neque contentiones, sed sint subditi omni humanae creaturae propter Deum (1 Petr 2,13) et confiteantur se esse christianos. Alius modus est, quod, cum viderint placere Domino, annuntient verbum Dei, ut credant Deum omnipotentem Patrem et Filium et Spiritum Sanctum, creatorem omnium, redemptorem et salvatorem Filium, et ut baptizentur et efficiantur christiani, quia quis renatus non fuerit ex aqua et Spiritu Sancto, non potest intrare in regnum Dei. http://www.francescanitor.org/letters/non_bullata.pdf
simply commands that there should be ‘no strife’. Peter the Venerable, the great abbot of Cluny, the first to have the Qur’an translated into Latin, argued that if war could not be won with the sword it should be won with words. To this Francis states in his unauthorised rule that there should be “no arguments”.

The rule also commands that the friars should “be subject ‘to every human creature for God’s sake’ (1 Pt 2:13)”. This contradicts the Third Council of the Lateran, whose canon 26 reads:

Jews and Saracens are not to be allowed to have Christian servants in their houses, either under pretence of nourishing their children or for service or any other reason. Let those be excommunicated who presume to live with them.\(^\text{15}\)

Francis stresses that the friars should “confess themselves to be Christians”. They should not hide the fact of who they are, but nothing more needs yet to be done. The Christian message may of course be proclaimed, but only at the appropriate moment, “when they have seen that it pleases God”. This attitude, too, is remarkable and contrasts so vividly with the approach of some other Franciscans who travelled to Morocco at this time and denigrated all things Muslim. They were martyred and became the ideal to be followed by other Franciscans.

The rule approved at the so-called General Chapter of the Mats in 1221 did not obtain papal approval and so is called the *Regula non-bullata*. The *Regula bullata*, officially approved by Pope Honorius III on 29 November 1223, reduces the extraordinary paragraph to just a couple of bland sentences:

Let whoever of the friars who by divine inspiration wants to go among the saracens and other infidels seek permission for that reason from their minister provincial. Indeed the ministers are to grant permission to go to none, except those who seem to be fit to be sent.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{15}\) [http://www.piar.hu/councils/ecum11.htm](http://www.piar.hu/councils/ecum11.htm)

\(^{16}\) Quicumque *fratrum* divina inspiratione *voluerint* *ire* inter *saracenos* et alios *infideles* *petant* inde *licentiam* a suis *ministris provincialibus*. *Ministri* vero nullis eundi *licentiam* tribuant, nisi eis quos *viderint* esse idoneos ad mittendum. *Regula Bullata*, *chapter* XII.
The *regula non-bullata* was incomprehensible to Francis’ contemporaries. It lay dormant for 750 years.

In what way is Francis’ experience a signpost for interreligious relations? I would like to make four points.

1. Participants in dialogue can honestly draw near to each other only in poverty and powerlessness. Francis crosses the no-man’s land and declares simply that he is a Christian. He does not claim to be a legate or ambassador. He has no authority, no title, no education and makes no reference to his fame. He comes empty-handed, without escort, without weapons, without gifts, in utter poverty.

2. Participants on dialogue approach each other best on the presumption that they each live in the truth. Francis approaches the Sultan who in general estimation among Christians was considered to be the devil incarnate. But Francis is amazed when he sees the spiritual depths of those whom all the crusaders considered to be minions of Satan. He will never speak ill of the Muslims or Islam.

3. The dialogical relationship can develop only on the basis of a sense of mutual service. Francis advocates service and subjection; he seeks neither power nor influence. He seeks only to imitate Christ Jesus who declares that those who wish to be first must make themselves last of all and servants of all. (Mark 9.35)

4. Dialogue can proceed only on the basis of openness and candour. Neither party should conceal who they are. When invited by the Sultan, Francis proclaims his faith but does not enter into a battle of words.

**John XXIII**

During his years as apostolic delegate in Turkey during the Second World War, Archbishop Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII, witnessed the persecution of
the Jews but could do virtually nothing. This sense of powerlessness had an immense impact on him. Thus, after he had been elected pope in 1959 and had summoned the Second Vatican Council, before even there was talk of a draft document on relations with the other Christian Churches, he gave Cardinal Bea, Prefect of the Secretariat for Unity, on 18 September 1960 the oral mandate to develop a statement concerning the Jews.

The huge impetus which John XXIII gave to developing relations with the Jews had already a certain history. As this is not the place to give a full account of the background to the declaration Nostra Aetate, a couple of quotations must suffice. In his address to the pilgrimage from Belgian Catholic Radio Pius XI made the memorable statement: “We are all spiritually semites.” And before this, the Holy Office in its Decree of 25 March 1928 stated:

"The Apostolic See utterly condemns the hatred held towards the people whom God had chosen long ago, namely that hatred which is now generally called ‘anti-Semitism’.”

This statement concerning the Jews went through various stages. In November 1964 it had been broadened into a separate Declaration on the

19 Decretum pro judaeis. Laurentin, René Bilan du concile, pp. 128-129.
21 “Apostolica sedes .... maxime damnat odium adversus populum olim a Deo collectum, odium nempe illud, quod vulgo antisemitismi nomine nunc significari solet.” AAS 36 (1928), p.103. The italics are from the original.
22 In November 1963 it constituted chapter four of the draft called ‘On Ecumenism’ (De ecumenismo), a short text of 42 lines. In September 1964 it had expanded into a declaration on Jews and non-Christians, as an appendix of the same schema, 70 lines in length.

“It was obvious to all that there had been a threefold reaction to the chapter. One was, “Why treat of the Jews at all?” The second was, “Why treat of the Jews in a schema on ecumenism, which deals with Christian unity?” And the third was, “Why not include other non-Christians religions as well?” The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and the Council as a whole realized that the only solution was to have a document, distinct from the schema on ecumenism, in which the Jewish and
relation of the Church to non-Christian religions\textsuperscript{23} which was one of the most innovative texts of the highly innovative Council.

In fact, throughout most of Christian history, non-Christian religions were generally seen as the work of Satan, ‘the Father of lies’. A major shift had occurred in 1951 with the encyclical \textit{Evangelii Praecones}\textsuperscript{24} of Pius XII who states “The Catholic Church does not despise or reject the teachings of other peoples (\textit{ethnicorum})”.\textsuperscript{25} In an official letter to Cardinal Biondi in 1950 he had earlier stated that:

“...The Church has no intention of dominating other peoples, or of having any control in worldly matters, since it burns with the simple desire to give the supernal light of faith to all nations, to promote human and civic values and brotherly concord between peoples.”\textsuperscript{26}

All this is to find its supreme development in the watershed statement of Vatican II which reads:

“The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. ... Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture.”\textsuperscript{27}

\textbf{Conclusion:}

also other non-Christian religions would be mentioned, especially Islam ...” Ralph M. Wiltgen svd \textit{The Rhine Flows into the Tiber}, p. 170.

\textsuperscript{23} 177 lines in length.

\textsuperscript{24} AAS 1951 p.497-528.

\textsuperscript{25} “... Catholica Ecclesia ethnicorum doctrinas neque despexit neque respuit...” AAS 1951 p.522.

\textsuperscript{26} “Ecclesia equidem nullum habet propositum in populos dominandi, aut imperio in res modo temporales potiundi, uno cum flagret studio omnibus gentibus supernum fidei lumen afferendi, humanis civilisque cultus incrementum fovendi fraternamque populorum concordiam”. Quote from letter ‘Perlibenti equidem’ to Cardinal F. Biondi. AAS 1950 p.727.

From this discussion of St Francis and John XXIII, four salient points can be made:

1. Interreligious dialogue depends on an experience of powerlessness: chosen by Francis during the Crusades, and imposed on Archbishop Roncalli during World War II.

2. Like St Francis who witnesses the piety of the Sultan, the Second Vatican Council states that ‘the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions’.

3. Like St Francis who identifies himself as a Christian and proclaims to the Sultan the central teachings of the faith, the Council speaks of ‘Christians ... witnessing to their own faith and way of life’.

4. Like St Francis who sought to serve, Christians are to ‘acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture.’

In short both Francis of Assisi and John XXIII are happy to be powerless, perceptive, servant and faithful. Those involved in interreligious dialogue might do well to follow their example.

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