St. Francis of Assisi’s Way of Peace

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Abstract
This essay explores Francis of Assisi’s concept of peace and the way in which it worked out in his life. It carries forward work I began in the 1980s in my essay on Francis in Damietta. For him, peace meant primarily interior and spiritual tranquility. In my opinion, this view guided his life and his actions. Profoundly influenced by monastic ideas as well as contemporary confraternities, he drew inspiration from them for his writings and sermons. His visit to Damietta was a mission of peace directed to both crusaders and the Egyptian sultan, but his message was one of conversion. That same approach was evident in his discussion of missions to Muslims in the rule he wrote in 1221 and in his Bolognese sermon in 1222 or 1223; in both cases, we can understand better his effort if we recognize that his stress was on conversion. In Damietta, his ideas seem to have been rejected more by the crusaders than by the Muslims.

Keywords
Albertanus of Brescia, Bergamo, Bologna, Brescia, Damietta, Fifth Crusade, Francis of Assisi, Franciscans, Homobonus of Cremona, Honorius III (pope), James of Vitry, Louis IX (France), Melibeus, Muslims, peace, Prudence, Seneca, Thomas of Celano, Thomas of Spalato

In its January 1983 issue, Schede Medievali, the organ of the Officina di Studi Medievali, published a paper entitled “Francesco d’Assisi e la Quinta Crociata: Una missione di pace,” which I had delivered in May 1982 at the Franciscan Library in Palermo.1 At the time, I was engaged in research for Anatomy of a Crusade. The present article is not a revision of that article so much as it is an effort to place the events at Damietta in late summer 1219 in a broader context. The great scholars who have devoted themselves to this topic, beginning with Girolamo Golubovich and including such recent


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biographers as Chiara Frugoni, have been interested in Francis as the founder of the Franciscan Order or have treated it as part of works devoted to other topics. Most, indeed, like Martino Roncaglia, see the episode at Damietta as the introduction of the order into the Middle East. My concern, however, is with the way in which that event fits into the development of Francis’s view of peace.

Almost immediately, we find ourselves caught up in the complexities of Franciscan hagiography, which began while Francis was still alive. While we ignore the problems raised by the various aspects of this tradition at our peril, it is obvious that this is not the place for a revisiting of these issues.

But it is important to recognize that the milieu within which historians have placed Francis has changed very significantly since the work of the Protestant biographer of St. Francis, Paul Sabatier. It was Herbert Grundmann who put Francis into the context of contemporary religious changes. Grundmann changed the discussion on St. Francis, setting scholarship on the course that would regard Francis not merely as the founder of an important religious order but also as one whose key insights had a profound impact on the thirteenth-century church. Scholars like Marvin Becker and, above all, Giles Constable, have helped us to understand better the nature of the religious culture of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Now we can say with confidence that Francis stood in the midst of a swirl of religious ideas that were profoundly influenced by the monastic reform movement of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. What is relevant to this essay is the fact that concern over peace formed a major theme in those groups that were

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3 Roncaglia, St. Francis of Assisi and the Middle East (Cairo: Franciscan Center of Oriental Studies, 1957).
