

THE SULTAN AND THE SAINT

800 Years Later, an Inter-Faith Dialog Continues

In 1219, during the worst days of the Fifth Crusade, across a grim battlefield groaning with death and horror, Malek Al-Kamil, nephew of Saladin and Sultan of Egypt, welcomed an odd looking Christian into his well-appointed tent. A humble friar, from a small mendicant religious order, pledged to poverty and nonviolence, dressed in rough woolen robes and bare feet. At great personal risk, the friar had chanced everything to cross the battle lines. That friar, was named Francis of Assisi. He had modeled his life in the imitation of Jesus, and was seeking to bring an end to the decades-long war between Christians and Muslims.

The story of Francis of Assisi and Al-Kamil reinforces how true dialogue requires courage, humility, and faith. Paul Moses' forensic scholarship brought the story of Francis of Assisi and Sultan Malek Al-Kamil out of the old hagiography and makes it accessible to a contemporary book audience. Unity Productions Foundation (UPF), with cooperation from the Franciscan Action Network (FAN) produced a vivid rendition of the story in the form of *The Sultan and the Saint* docudrama. Additional follow-up content was developed by George Dardness, Marvin Krier, and Kathleen Warren. All-in-all, a wealth of information.

Yet, as beautiful and as inspirational as the story of Francis and Malek Al-Kamil is, it is just history depicted in a movie, played by actors. The real story is our contemporary witness and the way in which we reach access the the climate of hate and fear in our own search for love, peace, and reconciliation. Certainly there are many different ways of engaging a discussion around the events of the Francis/Al-Kamil story and its many parallels to today.

My name is Neal Dunnigan and I am a professed member of the Order of Ecumenical Franciscans (OEF). Certainly, as a Franciscan, the retelling of this historical story was of great interest to me. Even more so was the thought that the high production quality docudrama could be a springboard for starting new ecumenical and inter-faith dialogs.

However, I felt that even the work of discernment on something like this was bigger than me alone. Living in Oklahoma, I was able to leverage our local TSSF (Episcopal) and OFS (Catholic) Franciscan siblings. I enjoy fellowship as an Associate member of the OFS St Francis of Assisi fraternity (Moore, OK). Through the OFS, we worked with the JPIC committee at the local and regional (Juan de Padilla: OK, KS, MS) and at the national level with the OFS-USA Ecumenical / Interfaith Committee.

At the start of this adventure, three notions were evolving in our minds.

The first notion was to have a program that could reach people who might not generally go out of their way to participate in an inter-faith program. My own experience in the Oklahoma City area is that I see a lot of the same faces at our inter-faith and ecumenical events. These are people whom I dearly love and enjoy seeing, but we would not define our goal as reaching them, we would be looking to go further out with our message.

The second notion was that while there had been some very good discussion guides available, we wanted to make this more than a viewing party or a simple group discussion experience. We came up with a format that we call our *Interfaith Co-Facilitator Model*. The idea is that we train local Christian / Muslim pairs of facilitators as peace ambassadors for local showings of the docudrama. Their role is to be the contemporary living presence of Francis and Malek Al-Kamil; sharing how they keep the dialog alive today - as individuals, as citizens in their

THE SULTAN AND THE SAINT

community, and as members of their faith group. At the conclusion of the discussion, the attendees would be presented with a link to various interfaith opportunities in their local communities.

The third notion was that if we did all of this planning and preparation well enough, perhaps it could be adapted and used, in a decentralized way, by other communities. The message and approach would be largely the same, but the networks and partnership would need to be rebuilt across the faith communities in each local area. Considering the large number of US cities where the Franciscans (i.e. OFS-Catholic, OEF-Ecumenical, TSSF-Episcopal, OLF-Lutheran, etc.) have presences, this could potentially be pretty impressive. It even gives these groups the opportunity to work together in areas where they have co-location.

Our next step was to reach out to the local interfaith community here in Oklahoma. There is really little work that can be done on an interfaith program that is not, from the onset, interfaith. Our initial germ of an idea got support from Imam Sabeeh Alasalihi from the Grand Mosque of Oklahoma City. From there we went on to get support from such local groups as Interfaith Alliance of Oklahoma, the Raindrop Foundation, the Oklahoma Council of Churches, the Respect Diversity Foundation, and the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), and the Islamic Society of Greater Oklahoma City (ISGOC). We also worked directly with the ecumenical and interfaith ministries at the larger Christian denominations. Gradually expanding our network and building our team.

To make certain that we were on the right track, we also reached out to the producers of the docudrama at UPF to discuss and validate our approach and material. In this way, all of our material will have been cross checked from multiple constituent perspectives.

At this point, the preparation of our materials is pretty solid (see: <http://www.globalthinkinginc.com/OEF/Inventory.html>) and we are looking forward to doing our facilitator training for Oklahoma City in January 2018. After that, we will pilot one or two sessions, make the necessary adjustments, and then we will be off and running.

At the conclusion of our presentations, our co-facilitators will be encouraging the audience to reach out in one or another interfaith project. The co-facilitators will also be sharing our Peacemaker's Affirmation, which I would like to share with you now:

- *I believe that I can be an instrument of peace.*
- *I pray to become more aware of my own ignorance and fear of others.*
- *I will take positive steps to deepen my understanding of the differences and similarities I have with others.*
- *I will not serve as an "innocent bystander" to oppression, but will take a stand for peace and justice.*
- *I will, always and everywhere, and privately and publicly, support those who are targets of prejudice and hate.*
- *I will stand by these principles even when I appear to be standing alone.*

Peace and blessings
Neal Dunnigan, OEF