

REMARKS OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
800TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN
FRANCIS OF ASSISI AND SULTAN MALIK AL-KAMIL
CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA, PRZYBYLA CENTER
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My Dear Friends,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, I greet you in the name of Pope Francis. I thank Dr. John Garvey, President of the Catholic University of America, as well as His Excellency Bishop Joseph Bambera of Scranton, for their kind invitation to join you. I welcome all of you, as well as my dialogue partners. We have gathered to commemorate the 800th anniversary of the encounter of Saint Francis of Assisi with Sultan Malik Al-Kamil at Damietta. This afternoon, I would simply like to recall the historic encounter and its value for inter-religious dialogue and then to trace a few elements of the Pontificate of Pope Francis that direct us along the way of promoting human fraternity.

Much of what we know of the encounter comes to us from Saint Bonaventure's biography of Saint Francis. Bonaventure presents Francis as a man of peace, filled with a desire to make Christ known and with the desire to fulfill the evangelical mandate to make disciples of all the nations. Francis is not a man who approaches the Sultan with force, nor is his encounter with the Sultan resolved in violence. Violence had been the prevailing environment at the time of the Crusades.

Francis and Brother Illuminatus crossed the battle lines and were quickly captured. Their lives were spared and when they were brought to the Sultan and asked by whom and why they were sent, Francis replied, according to Bonaventure, that they were sent by God, not by men, to show him and his subjects the way of salvation and proclaim the truth of the Gospel message. Francis came as a missionary. He came with the disarmed beauty of his faith and the integrity of his life to propose Jesus as the Truth and the Way of Salvation. The Sultan was so moved by Francis' sincerity and enthusiasm for the faith that he asked Francis to remain with him and willingly listened to him. Rather than end Francis' life for blasphemy, the Sultan treated him kindly and wished him peace. He offered Francis lavish gifts, but due to his love of poverty the saint refused, offering evangelical witness once more. Finally, the Sultan released Francis, wishing him peace. Although the Sultan did not convert to the Christian faith, he was changed by his encounter. He improved his treatment of Christian prisoners and attempted peace negotiations with the Crusaders.

We can learn a lot about inter-religious dialogue from this encounter. First, Francis is clear about who he is and what his mission is. He does not hide it. This is essential for inter-religious dialogue to be of genuine worth. Each party must be sincere and clear about his identity and beliefs, for any real dialogue must be rooted in the truth. Second, Francis came, not as an ideologue, but as a missionary with a message of peace. He did not try to force the Sultan to believe (nor could he); rather, his approach was to propose Jesus. The Church must recognize that the faith can only be proposed; it can never be imposed. There was a respect for conscience between Francis and the Sultan. Third, his proposal of Jesus also involved being a person of integrity, committed to poverty and peace. Francis' personal conviction earned him the respect of the Sultan. Fourth, Francis demonstrates that encountering another person, even someone who is of a different faith, can bear fruit and be at the service of peace.

If we fast-forward 800 years, we have a Pope named Francis, who also labors for peace, and who, with the Great Imam of Al-Azhar, recently signed “A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together.” That Pope Francis emphasizes human fraternity should not surprise us. When he first appeared as Pope on the balcony above Saint Peter’s Square in March 2013, he said: “And now, we take up this journey: Bishop and People. The journey of the Church of Rome which presides in charity over all the Churches. A journey of **fraternity**, of love, of trust among us. Let us always pray for one another. Let us pray for the whole world, that there may be a great spirit of **fraternity**.” (FIRST GREETING OF THE HOLY FATHER POPE FRANCIS, 13 MARCH 2013)

Fraternity is the point of departure for his entire Pontificate. In his first encyclical letter *Lumen Fidei*, Pope Francis addressed the issue of faith and its value. Engaging others in dialogue goes hand in hand with proclamation, but this should in no way be threatening. He writes, “Those who have opened their hearts to God’s love, heard his voice and received his light, cannot keep this gift to themselves.” (POPE FRANCIS, ENCYCLICAL LETTER *LUMEN FIDEI*, 29 JUNE 2013, 37)

Faith is a gift to be shared. The Holy Father notes that faith cannot be lived on its own; rather, there is a “We” involved in the life of faith. He continues: “Those who receive faith discover that their horizons expand as new and enriching relationships come to life.” (*LF*, 39)

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, which was issued in November 2013, Pope Francis stated clearly that he dreamed of a “missionary option” for the Church and spoke again of the new relationships brought about through faith, relationships which heal the brokenness of isolation: “There indeed we find true healing, since the way to relate to others which truly heals instead of debilitating us, is a **mystical fraternity**, a **contemplative fraternity**. It is a fraternal love capable of seeing the sacred grandeur of our neighbor, of finding God in every human being, of tolerating the nuisances of life in common by clinging to the love of God, of opening the heart to divine love and seeking the happiness of others just as the heavenly Father does.” (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, 24 NOVEMBER 2013, 92)

In *Evangelii Gaudium* (n. 66), Pope Francis spoke of the family as “the fundamental cell of society, where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to belong to one another.” Recognizing the importance of the family and the need to live with others and to belong to each other, Pope Francis convoked two synods on the family in 2014 and 2015, which culminated in his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, which not only took up the wider concept of family but even the subject of inter-religious marriages and their pastoral challenges. Despite the challenges, the Holy Father noted that “Marriages involving disparity of cult represent a privileged place for inter-religious dialogue in everyday life.” (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *AMORIS LAETITIA*, 19 MARCH 2016, 248)

In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis, addressing what it means to be a brother or sister, noted that fraternity within the family radiates to the whole of society: “The family itself introduces **fraternity** into the world. From this initial experience of fraternity, nourished by affection and education at home, the **style of fraternity** radiates like a promise to the whole of society.” (*AL*, 194)

In between the two Apostolic Exhortations, Pope Francis published his encyclical letter *Laudato Si’*, invoking the words of Saint Francis in praise of the Lord of creation. There he emphasized the responsibility of the human family to care for our “common home”, stating that “The majority of people living on our planet profess to be believers. This should spur religions to dialogue among themselves for

the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of respect and **fraternity**.” (POPE FRANCIS, ENCYCLICAL LETTER *LAUDATO SI'*, 24 MAY 2015, 201)

His short exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* also took up the theme of fraternity briefly. Pope Francis wrote: “Contrary to the growing consumerist individualism that tends to isolate us in quest for well-being apart from others, our path to holiness can only make us identify all the more with Jesus’ prayer “that all may be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you” (John 17:21).” (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *GAUDETE ET EXSULATE*, 19 MARCH 2018, 146).

Finally, in his most recent exhortation, following the Synod on Youth, Pope Francis wrote to young people about “Paths of Fraternity” (nn. 163-167), reminding them that true spiritual growth is “expressed above all by your growth in **fraternal, generous, and merciful love**.” (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *CHRISTUS VIVIT*, 25 MARCH 2019, 163)

Recognizing that young people can encounter one another and new cultures through modern social communications and acknowledging how past hurts can sometimes cause young people to shy away from fraternity out of fear of being hurt once more, the Holy Father reminded young people of an African proverb: ““If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of **fraternity**.” (n. 167)

It should come as no surprise then that he signed the document with the Great Imam of Al-Azhar on February 4, 2019 in Abu Dhabi. Time does not allow a fuller discussion of the document, but I simply want to read two passages from it that once more emphasize the value of fraternity.

The first is taken from the introduction. It describes the document in the following way: “It is a document that invites all persons who have faith in God and faith in **human fraternity** to unite and work together so that it may serve as a guide for future generations to advance a culture of mutual respect in the awareness of the great divine grace that makes all human beings brothers and sisters.”

The second is taken from a list of convictions or principles to which both parties are committed. In addition to freedom, dialogue, freedom of worship, the fight against terrorism, the promotion of citizenship, the rights of women, children, and the elderly, the document’s first conviction deals with fraternity: “The firm conviction that authentic teachings of religions invite us to remain rooted in the values of peace; to defend the values of mutual understanding, **human fraternity** and harmonious coexistence; to re-establish wisdom, justice, and love; and to reawaken religious awareness among young people so that future generations may be protected from the realm of materialistic thinking and from dangerous policies of unbridled greed and indifference that are based on the law of force and not on the force of law.” (POPE FRANCIS AND GRAND IMAM OF AL-AZHAR AHMAD AL-TAYYEB, DOCUMENT OF HUMAN FRATERNITY FOR WORLD PEACE AND LIVING TOGETHER, 4 FEBRUARY 2019)

All of this wishes to say, that the concept of human fraternity has been a major theme in the Pontificate of Pope Francis. He sees human fraternity as a path for peace and mutual understanding in our world – a true force for good. As a Catholic and Christian, he is keenly aware of the need for fraternity, for it is on this basis that Catholics believed that they will be judged. The Holy Father himself has said, “The protocol with which we will be judged is based on **fraternity**.” (POPE FRANCIS, MESSAGE TO PROFESSOR MARGARET ARCHER, PRESIDENT OF THE PONTIFICAL ACADEMY FOR SOCIAL SCIENCES, 24 APRIL 2017)

Whether it is the parable of the Good Samaritan in Saint Luke's Gospel (Luke 10) or the twenty-fifth chapter of Saint Matthew's Gospel, which speaks of the Last Judgment, Christians are called to be "neighbors" or "brothers" to others and to treat them with respect and compassion, mindful of Jesus' words, "Whatever you did to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did to me." (Matthew 25,40)