

Sharing Cheese Stuffed Dates with Saint Francis & Sultan Malik al-Kamil
Fasting & Eating in Solidarity
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It was to be my first Iftar, the Muslim meal at sunset that breaks the fast during Ramadan. Some of us Franciscans had fasted that day in solidarity, all of us were hungry as the summer sunlight lingered outside the window. At precisely 8:32 p.m. Alex Kronemer, our host for the evening and the co-producer of the award-winning docudrama *The Sultan and The Saint*, emerged from the kitchen with a platter of dates stuffed with goat cheese. We all politely took one and Alex disappeared back into the kitchen.

Immediately I popped the delicacy into my mouth and started to chew. Then one of the sisters, held her date in the air said, “Mike, what are you doing? There has to be some kind of a prayer before eating, to officially break the fast.” I found myself mortified and panic stricken, as my Franciscan sisters and brothers were rolling their eyes at me and stifling laughs. Meanwhile I was trying to decide how best to get a half chewed stuffed date out of my mouth, and have it look presentable in my hand for the pending “ritual of the date”. Thankfully Alex returned to the room, noticed the uneaten appetizers being held in the air by the others and asked, “What’s wrong? The night has come: Eat!”

Alex’s connection to the Franciscans began when he was a young adult on a tour of Italy. In the Basilica of Saint Francis, in Assisi, he had decided that he had seen enough churches to last him a lifetime. Slowly distancing himself from his group, he turned to look for the closest exit when his eyes fell on the fresco of Saint Francis and the Sultan Malik al-Kamil. He saw something familiar to him, a Muslim, and he was drawn to it. Alex often shares how that experience planted a desire in him to tell this story of friendship and the peaceful debate of religious ideas in the middle of a war.



In 1999 Alex co-founded Unity Productions Foundation (UPF). Its mission, “is to counter bigotry and create peace through the media. UPF produces films that tell compelling stories (as) part of long-term educational campaigns aimed at increasing religious and cultural pluralism, especially among Muslims and other faiths”.¹ A number of Franciscans collaborated with UPF in the recent making of the film, *The Sultan and The Saint*. Alex’s dream to tell the story of Malik al-Kamil and Francis had come to fruition.

¹Unity Production Foundation. <https://www.upf.tv/about-upf/> (accessed August 30, 2019).

Alex talks a lot about the importance of moral storytelling. As a film maker he recognizes that, in the past, good stories need a compelling hero and villain. When this was held up against reality, however, the product tended to be flat or too clean cut with the good guy vs. bad guy paradigm. These kinds of binary stories are not helpful as they often create a false, alternative, truth upon which prejudice and hatred take root and spread.² Even our Franciscan storytelling over the centuries falls prey to this, especially in the story of Francis and Malik al-Kamil. What is needed today is moral storytelling that shows characters to be real, multidimensional persons. The popular television series, *Once Upon a Time*³ does an excellent job of this recasting the old flat fairytales of years past, in a manner that resembles the complicated messed-up lives and choices of everyday people.

Consider for a moment, how many books and films have portrayed the Sultan as an evil leader who experiences the grace of transformation through the intercession of St. Francis?⁴ Some sources even go so far as to tell of the Sultan's later conversion to Christianity, just to be sure that, in the end, we Christians (the good guys) win and the Muslims (bad guys) lose. This one-dimensional story telling is supported by the fact that: to this day most everyone commonly refers to the encounter as "The Meeting of St. Francis and the Sultan". The "bad guy" doesn't even have a name, because a name would risk allowing him being seen as a multidimensional person.

For me the most compelling part of the film, *The Sultan and The Saint*, was getting to know Malik al-Kamil. "The western portrait of the Sultan was skewed by Crusader propaganda and lack of



basic knowledge by Christian writers of Muslim society and faith. In Egypt, he was known for his tolerance toward the Christian minority. He was a cultured man who loved learned conversations with scholars in his court. He preferred to negotiate with enemies rather than engage them in combat."⁵ It took a Muslim filmmaker, with some Franciscan friends, to risk telling the story again, as a moral story, so as to re-introduce to the world the Sultan of Egypt, with a name, Malik al-Kamil (the perfect prince).

Alex tells it like this, "A simple Christian friar named Francis and a beleaguered Muslim ruler, al-Kamil, in the midst of the Crusades chose to ignore the immoral stories each side was telling about the other. They met and told different stories of multidimensional people of faith, whose

² Interview with Alex Kronemer. Unity Productions Foundation, August 16, 2019.

³ Once Upon a Time. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Once_Upon_a_Time_\(TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Once_Upon_a_Time_(TV_series)) (accessed August 30, 2019).

⁴ *St. Francis of Assisi and Sultan Malik al-Kamil: The Legend in History and Art* by Thomas B. Lenihan, December 14, 2009, page 11. https://www.academia.edu/7384455/St._Francis_of_Assisi_and_Sultan_Malik_al-Kamil_The_Legend_in_History_and_Art (accessed August 30, 2019).

⁵ Law at the Margins. *The Saint and the Sultan: Compassion and Courage in Social Justice Work* by Shukry Cattar and Victor Narro. <https://lawatthemargins.com/the-saint-and-the-sultan-compassion-and-courage-in-social-justice-work/> (accessed August 30, 2019).

stories began long before battle lines were drawn and would continue after the fighting ended. Francis and al-Kamil met each other with the virtue of compassion”.⁶

At the center of moral storytelling is personal virtue, also foundational for authentic friendship. Such virtue rests not only in the characters of the story itself, such as al-Kamil and Francis, but even more importantly in the tellers of the story and the listeners. In Catholic Social Teaching, it is personal virtue that forms the foundation of our work in social justice.⁷ Personal virtue is the catalyst for friendship in solidarity, which compels us to acts of justice through the breaking down of the walls of racism and prejudice constructed with the words of false stories in our past and present.

On the day of the summer Iftar, some in our small group of Franciscans decided to show solidarity by spending the day fasting like our Muslim sisters and brothers. This was not done as a vague gesture, but rather we are assured that such actions are “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good (*in this case inter-religious dialogue and friendship*)...because we are all really responsible for all.”⁸ It was a way of bringing the act of fasting, found in both of our traditions, to the forefront of a shared friendship through a respectful act of solidarity. This happens when, like Francis and al-Kamil, we encounter one another with the virtue of compassion, the desire to “suffer with another”, not only in hunger but also in the conversations and acts of faith, justice and peace.

After my initial moment of Iftar culinary vindication, with the cheese stuffed date, we soon after gathered at the table for the meal. Settled into our places, Alex invited us to hold hands and bow our heads. Anticipating the Iftar table prayer, I heard Alex continue by saying, “Friar Mike, would you please offer the prayer?”

I looked up and all heads were bowed except for Alex’s. Feeling myself very ill-prepared, I noticed Alex smile at me and trustingly lowered his head, in the same way I imagine al-Kamil might have done to Francis when they broke bread together, 800 years ago. As I looked at those gathered around the table in friendship, my eyes moved from person to person as I brought to mind a virtue that each one personifies in their multidimensional lives. Seeing in each person/virtue a reflection of the Divine, I prayed aloud by giving praise to God: the good, the wise, the patient one, the just, the humble, the gentle one, the persistent, the merciful, the one full of hope.

⁶ Interview with Alex Kronemer. Unity Productions Foundation, August 16, 2019.

⁷ Catholic Education Resource Center, *The Virtue of Social Justice* by Donald Demarco. <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/religion-and-philosophy/social-justice/the-virtue-of-social-justice.html> (accessed August 30, 2019).

⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, no. 38. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html (accessed August 30, 2019).

