



The Sultan and the Saint

SHARING CHEESE STUFFED DATES WITH SAINT FRANCIS & SULTAN MALIK AL-KAMIL
Friar Michael Lasky, OFM Conv.

**“Light dawns in the darkness for the upright; He is gracious,
merciful, and righteous”.**
(Psalm 112:4)

It was to be my first Iftar, the Muslim meal at sunset that breaks the fast during Ramadan. My Franciscan friends and I had fasted that day in solidarity with our Muslim hosts. All of us were feeling the hunger pains as the summer sunlight lingered outside the window. At precisely 8:32 p.m., Alex Kronemer 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, holding 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 friends 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 Assisi. In the Basilica of Saint Francis, 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 during a time of war.



In 1999 Alex co-founded Unity Productions Foundation (UPF). 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.

Alex talks a lot about the importance of moral storytelling. As a film maker he recognizes that, in the past, good stories needed 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.

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. How many books and films have portrayed the Sultan as an evil leader who is transformed through the intercession of Saint Francis? Some even go so far as to assume the Sultan’s conversion to Christianity, just to be sure that we Christians (the good guys) win and the Muslims (bad guys) lose. This binary story telling is supported by the fact that

in these stories, the bad guy sultan doesn't even have a name, because a name would risk allowing him being seen as a multidimensional person.

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 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".



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. 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, we Franciscans decided to show solidarity by spending the day fasting like our Muslim friends. It was a way of bringing the act of fasting, found in both of our traditions, to the forefront of a shared friendship now marked by 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 dates, 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 imminent Iftar table prayer, the room grew silent. Then, I heard Alex say, "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 before. 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. Visualizing in each of my friends a 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.