

HOMILY FOR TRANSITUS OF ST. FRANCIS

October 3, 2007 – Franciscan Monastery – Washington, DC

Joseph Nangle, OFM Homilist

INTRODUCTION

In April of the year 1213 Pope Innocent III announced the Fourth Lateran Council. He set out two objectives for this once-a-century historic gathering: the reform of the Church and the recapture of the Holy Land from its Moslem “occupiers”.

That same month – April, 1213 – Innocent wrote the encyclical “Quia Maior”, in which he laid out concrete, elaborate steps in preparation for the Fifth Crusade. The same pope had sponsored the Fourth Crusade, which ended in total failure for a variety of reasons. Now, it seems, he was determined to execute a successful recapture of the holy places.

Thus, four years before the Fifth Crusade actually began the encyclical instructed the faithful as to how they were to prepare for it:

- they were to give spiritual and material support – prayers and money – to this undertaking.
- once every month a procession was to be held for the men, and where possible the women, to pray for the liberation of the Holy Land.
- these and other prayers were to be accompanied by fasting and almsgiving.
- every day during the celebration of the Eucharist all were to prostrate themselves on the ground after the sign of peace as an act of petition for the success of this crusade.
- Psalm 79 was required to be sung loudly by the clergy, a psalm which says, “God, the pagans have invaded your inheritance” and which ended with the antiphon, “Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered, let those who hate him flee before his face”.
- Chests were to be placed in each church so that clergy and laity could make their donations to the crusade.

Two years after this encyclical the Fourth Lateran Council officially confirmed the extension of a “crusade indulgence”, giving remission of sin to virtually all Christians who in whatever way supported the crusade.

These preparations and the crusade itself were early and powerful and frightening examples of the Holy Roman Empire at its worst.

I

In spite of the enormous pressure from the papacy to endorse and support this military action, some scholars hold that St. Francis took no part in these preparations. They see no evidence in his writings that he took notice of the extensive and detailed measures which Pope Innocent set out for all Christians of the world on behalf of his crusade. Francis’ “Regula non bullata”, his “Letter to the Clergy” and letters to the custodians do reflect other aspects of Innocent’s encyclical: orthodoxy, penance and the reception of the

Eucharist. Yet these scholars encounter no mention of the pope's avid pursuit of the crusade.

This is striking. After all, Francis knew Pope Innocent III. It was this pope who gave Francis permission to form his Order when it became clear that he was not to live the life of a hermit as men and women began to join him. In giving permission, Innocent did Francis a great favor at a time when the papacy was very reluctant to permit new congregations and many were refused papal recognition.

Yet according to this historical interpretation, the saint seemingly ignored Pope Innocent's insistent calls over a four year period for all Christians to get behind this latest attempt to "liberate" the Holy Land by military force.

What is even more striking, as every one knows, is the fact that Francis actually journeyed to the place where this Fifth Crusade was being fought – to Damaieta in Egypt – in order to dialogue with the Christian soldiers. There he warned them of the futility of a decisive battle about to be fought. And when that intervention failed, Francis crossed the Nile River and engaged in his historic encounter and lengthy dialogue with the Sultan, Melekalkamil in the Moslem camp.

This trip and this encounter seems to fly in the face of the pope's words, declaring those who did not give their names to take part in the crusade guilty of "the vice of ingratitude and the crime of infidelity".

II

All of this of course happened nearly 800 years ago and it would be wrong for us to judge these matters and these two men with the clear hindsight which eight centuries gives us. They are but a distant mirror, a mirror which can distort what really took place at that long ago time. Pope Innocent was a man of his time. From his perspective the places where Jesus lived, died and rose were no longer in the hands of His followers, but in the hands of His enemies. They needed to be recovered and the papacy at that time was the most powerful institution in the Christian, European world. From that point of view Innocent's crusades have their historical logic.

Francis, also a man of his time, had utterly failed as a military person. He also desired martyrdom. So his attitude toward the crusade could simply have been the combination of those two realities in his life, and not the courageous attitude which some historians place on them today.

III

What is absolutely clear, however, is the undeniable fact that today we who call ourselves Franciscans and those who find inspiration in his life find ourselves in the heart of another empire. It is not the Holy Roman Empire but the American Empire, and it is engaged even as we speak this evening in a modern crusade, ironically against the same

religious and secular culture which the Holy Roman Empire attacked in the 11th, 12th and 13th Centuries.

This modern empire has collected and spent some \$800 billion to date of this crusade. It has sacrificed the lives of nearly 4000 of its own young people and tens of thousands of Iraqi lives.

It has lost its moral standing in the world in pursuit of this crusade under false pretenses.

It tells its citizens that we sin by infidelity if we do not support its crusade.

It offers indulgences – citizenship to immigrant youths who join its army.

It punishes any whom it feels might undermine its crusade, herding them into places like Guantanamo and Abu Ghreib.

In the same way as some historians interpret Francis and the choice he faced in the 13th Century, we too face the same choice in the 21st – compliance or opposition. Can we, the declared family of Francis in this time and place, do less than make the right choice? Can we who bear the name Franciscan do less than join the thousands of good-willed people – people of faith, people of other faiths and people of no faith – in opposing as strongly as we can this modern crusade?

As you know the Franciscan family has begun to institutionalize our actions to bring about a more peaceful and just world. Soon the Franciscan Advocacy Network and the Franciscan Center for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation will become a reality here in Washington. But before that day and thereafter can we not do as Francis did in opposing the militarism of this empire?

CONCLUSION

Let me close with a wonderful and dramatic suggestion which a woman of the Catholic Worker Movement made to me just a few days ago. She asked if Franciscan could not imitate the Buddhist monks in Burma, whom we have seen so recently on our television screens, and take to the streets of the United States in a peaceful protest of this country's crusade in Iraq. What a witness it would be for brown-clad women and men by the thousands to be seen walking in prayerful silence and truly humble penitence before the centers of power in our land, asking for an end to this crusade!

The great French philosopher, Albert Camus, once said: “the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to remain silent”.

And so tonight, sisters and brothers, let us ask:

If not here, where

If not now, when

If not us, who.