

## Third Week of Advent (December 14- December 20)

For the last full week of Advent, we are invited to explore, reflect, and act as instruments of peace at the societal level of peacemaking. What roles can each of us play, as individuals, small groups, communities... to more actively be *Peace Made Flesh* in our large social settings, including the entire world and creation?



### Opening Prayer for Week 3:

#### Prayer Before the Crucifix—ponder our invitation to be peacemaker

Most high, glorious God,  
enlighten the darkness  
of my heart and give me Lord,  
a correct faith, a certain hope,  
a perfect charity, sense and knowledge,  
so that I may carry out  
Your holy and true command.

AMEN

### Closing Prayer for Week 3:

#### Blessing (Given to Brother Leo at LaVerna)

May the Lord bless you  
and keep you;  
may the Lord show his face to you  
and have compassion on you!  
May he turn his face to you  
and give you peace!

Amen.

### Personal Peacefulness Practice Items for Each Day of Week 3:

- Go to [www.franciscanaction.org](http://www.franciscanaction.org). (Action alert on Homepage). On this page, you will be given instructions on how to write and send a message to President-elect Barack Obama. You will have the opportunity to invite the President-elect to take action that will create the conditions to better enable the U.S. to play a larger peacemaking role in our world. Letter writing forces us to clarify our thinking and to take a stand for peacemaking. When done in a coordinated manner, the action can help change social policy. (*Please note: to participate in this action, you will need to register with Franciscan Action Network (FAN), if you are not yet a member; registration is free.*)



- Make an effort everyday this week to read (or view online) at least part of the national and international news. Choose one example of violence and pray for the person(s) on all sides of the issue.
- If your health allows, lower the thermostat in your house 2 degrees. Doing so will enable you to use less energy and reduce your impact on creation. If this action is not possible, think of another simple practice to reduce your impact on creation. By being in better balance with creation, we can be more peaceable.
- Try fasting one day this week with the intention of being more peaceful on your fasting day. Fasting creates emptiness in a physical sense, but it also creates an opportunity for peacemaking. In this emptiness, attempt to connect in solidarity to an experience of global or national violence.

## Sunday, December 14 (Third Sunday of Advent)

### Scripture Reading (for Sunday and Monday of Advent Week 3)

#### A Reading from the Gospel of John

A man named John was sent from God.  
He came for testimony, to testify to the light,  
so that all might believe through him.  
He was not the light,  
but came to testify to the light.

And this is the testimony of John.  
When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests  
and Levites to him  
to ask him, “Who are you?”  
He admitted and did not deny it,  
but admitted, “I am not the Christ.”  
So they asked him,  
“What are you then? Are you Elijah?”  
And he said, “I am not.”  
“Are you the Prophet?”  
He answered, “No.”  
So they said to him,  
“Who are you, so we can give an answer to those  
who sent us?  
What do you have to say for yourself?”

He said:  
“I am *the voice of one crying out in the desert, ‘make straight the way of the Lord,’*”  
as Isaiah the prophet said.”  
Some Pharisees were also sent.  
They asked him,  
“Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?”  
John answered them,  
“I baptize with water;  
but there is one among you whom you do not recognize,  
the one who is coming after me,  
whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie.”  
This happened in Bethany across the Jordan,  
where John was baptizing. (Jn 1: 6-8, 19-28)



**Sunday Reflection Question:** What does “make straight the way of the Lord” mean to you? How might this apply to bringing peace to our world?

## Monday, December 15

**Reading:** Reflect again on the Sunday Scripture Passage from the Gospel of John.

**Monday Reflection Question:** Who has made straight the way of the Lord for you? For whom have you made straight the way of the Lord? What obstacles or turns have been put in your life by persons in the world that make your path “curvy?”

## Tuesday, December 16

**Reading for Tuesday and Wednesday Reflections: *Processes of Reconciliation: The Bishop and the Mayor***

*At that same time when [Francis] lay sick, the bishop of the city of Assisi at the time excommunicated the podestá [the mayor]. In return, the man who was then podestá was enraged, and had this proclamation announced, loud and clear, throughout the city of Assisi: no one was to sell or*

*buy anything from the bishop, or to draw up any legal document with him. And so they thoroughly hated each other.*

*Although very ill, blessed Francis was moved to pity for them, especially since there was no one, religious or secular, who was intervening*

for peace and harmony between them. He said to his companions: “It is a great shame for you, servants of God, that the bishop and the podestá hate one another in this way, and that there is no one intervening for peace and harmony between them.” And so, for that reason, he composed one verse for the Praises:

Praised be you, my Lord, through those who give pardon for your love, and bear infirmity and tribulation.

Blessed are those who endure in peace for by you, Most High, they shall be crowned.

Afterwards he called one of his companions and told him: “Go to the podestá and on my behalf, tell him to go to the bishop's residence together with the city's magistrates and bring with him as many others as he can.”



And when the brother had gone, he said to two of his other companions: “Go and sing the *Canticle of Brother Sun* before the bishop, the podestá, and the others who are with them. I trust in the Lord that he will humble their hearts and they will make peace with each other and return to their earlier friendship and love.”

When they had all gathered in the piazza inside the cloister of the bishop's residence, the two brothers rose and one of them said:

“In his illness, blessed Francis wrote the Praises of the Lord for His creatures, for His praise and the edification of his neighbor. He asks you, then, to listen to them with great devotion.” And so, they began to sing and recite to them. And immediately the podestá stood up and folding his arms and hands with great devotion, he listened intently, even with tears, as if to the gospel of the Lord. For he had a great faith and devotion toward blessed Francis.

When the Praises of the Lord were ended, the podestá said to everyone: “I tell you the truth, not only do I forgive the lord bishop, whom I must have as my lord, but I would even forgive one who killed my brother or my son.” And so he cast himself at the lord bishop's feet, telling him: “Look, I am ready to make amends to you for everything, as it pleases you, for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ and of his servant Francis.”

Taking him by the hands, the bishop stood up and said to him: “Because of my office humility is expected of me, but because I am naturally prone to anger, you must forgive me.” And so, with a great kindness and love they embraced and kissed each other.

...All the others who were present and heard it took it for a great miracle, crediting it to the merits of blessed Francis.

*Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*<sup>i</sup>

### **Reflection in the Reading**

Despite the physical suffering he experienced toward the end of his life, Francis was happy after composing the *Canticle of Creation*. But, as Arnaldo Fortini reports, this feeling soon dissipated: “He was shaken out of that ecstatic mood by a new war...Assisi went to war with Perugia again.”<sup>ii</sup> The Pope had tried to stop the war by threatening anyone with excommunication who entered into alliances compelling them to go to war with another city or party. But the battle went forward. “Everyone rose up ferociously against his neighbor. The walls oozed fraternal blood. Those inside the city were subjected to hunger, and those outside, to never-ending slaughter...the podestá [mayor] of Assisi swore on his part to observe the new agreements [alliances]. It was an open challenge to the pope and the Papal State. Bishop Guido excommunicated the Podestá.”<sup>iii</sup> Guido's

sentence of excommunication made the mayor rise up in fury. To his eyes and those of the other city people, the imperious bishop was the eternal adversary of the commune, the enemy in the house.”<sup>iv</sup> Fortini describes the violent responses: “Murderous deeds forming a strange contrast to the canticle of love that was coming from San Damiano... In [Mayor] Oportulo’s proclamations we know their bloody terroristic acts...And the same bitter feeling that drove these violent men was shared...by the bishop.”<sup>v</sup>

We are aware from these citations that we are not dealing with a misunderstanding or argument between the Bishop and the Mayor. There are serious structural challenges involving the nobility, the new merchant class, the commune and the Church. Basically, in the language of theologian and biblical scholar Walter Wink in *Engaging the Powers*, we are dealing with struggles within the domination system. Who will be in control: the powerful factions of the commune or the people allied with the pope? Wink insists that there are Powers that belong to these institutions that enforce domination and preclude peaceful resolution. “What people in the world of the Bible experienced and called ‘Principalities and Powers’ was in fact real,” Wink writes. “They were discerning the actual spirituality at the center of the political, economic and cultural institutions of their day.”<sup>vi</sup> “I use the expression ‘the Domination System’,” Wink explains, “to indicate what happens when an entire network of Powers becomes integrated around idolatrous values.”<sup>vii</sup>

Wink continues: “Any attempt to transform a social system without addressing both its spirituality and its outer forms is doomed to failure.” Francis seemed to have an intuitive understanding of this. While fully aware of the demonic nature of the institutions of his times that caused such bloodshed, poverty and suffering, he also addressed the deeper spiritual disease, the thirst for violence, the lack of a sense of reverence for God’s creatures, and the failure to appreciate the gift of creation.

Wink holds that “The Powers are good [created by God]. The Powers are fallen. The Powers must be redeemed.” While recognizing the demonic in each of the institutions involved, Francis also acknowledged the source of their creation and

sought to restore them to the God-given purpose for which they were created. He did this through example, through intervention and through bestowing God’s grace and peace. Francis lived in a world of violence, sometimes referred to as “redemptive violence,” which claimed that order over chaos was brought about by violence. Into this world of enormous violence, Francis introduces a culture of nonviolence and helps bring about a state of peace. Wink sees the gospel as the alternative power to the Domination System.<sup>viii</sup> Francis brings this gospel alternative to new life in the world.

As the story notes, Francis is pained to see that no one intervened to reestablish peace and concord. So he accepted the call of the Beatitudes to be a “peacemaker.” Francis called upon his enormous political capital (goodwill among the powers) to intervene. Bishop Guido had played a major role in the birth and development of the Franciscan movement. The *podestà* was among Francis’s most devoted supporters. His daughter Agnes had joined Clare at San Damiano at an early age. Oportulo treasured the memory. Both the bishop and the mayor held Francis in the highest esteem.

Francis uses a subtle approach of nonviolence. He adds another strophe to his *Canticle of the Creatures*. He sends one of his brothers to call the *podestà* to go to the bishop’s palace, and another to prepare the bishop. Francis did not go but remained in prayer. He then calls upon the brothers to sing to those assembled his song. “A wish for peace has been his greeting to them. It may be his last affectionate word.”<sup>ix</sup> According to the story, the mayor and the bishop were moved to great repentance and a mutual embrace.

Fortini notes that “In this moment [at least], a centuries-old struggle for power ends... The people...say that Francis has wrought a miracle.”<sup>x</sup> Fortini credits this intervention with



bringing about a true peace. Others credit the lay Franciscans who by their state refused to bear arms. Pope Gregory IX attested that through Francis's influence peace came to this part of the world.

Wink was involved in the nonviolent movement to overcome the vicious apartheid system in South Africa. He has written about the unexpected nonviolent transformation of the former Soviet Union and other places around the world of the past several decades. One key dimension of these changes was prayer and prayerful action. Wink believes that the future belongs to the intercessors.

Wink asserts that prayer is the most important discipline. It is the means by which we engage the Powers and achieve victory. Prayer gives God the openness to enter into the world and

achieve a transformation. Intercession visualizes an alternative future to the one created by the momentum of current forces. History belongs to the intercessors who believe the future into being. And the world changes.

Francis offers us a good example of the intercessor who created a different future. We see this exemplified by Francis, who prayed in his cell while the brothers engaged the opposing powers with the gentleness of Francis's song. He continues to inspire Franciscans to activate a new future through their prayers today. This special role of the Second Order, the Poor Clares, was surely recognized by Clare and her sisters. Their presence in many of the areas of conflict today validate the significance of their prayer.

**Tuesday Reflection Question:** What can you learn from this story about how you can bring peace into situations of conflict?

## Wednesday, December 17

**Reading:** Reflect again on the reading from yesterday, St. Francis and The Bishop and Mayor.

**Wednesday Reflection Questions:** Have you ever brought peace to a conflict between two other people? How did you do it? How might your lessons learned be used in the wider world?

## Thursday, December 18

**Reading for Thursday and Friday:** *St. Francis's Meeting with the Sultan*

*The head of these brothers, who also founded the order, came into our camp. He was so inflamed with zeal for the faith that he did not fear to cross the lines to the army of our enemy. For several days he preached the Word of God to the Saracens and made a little progress. The Sultan, the ruler of Egypt, privately asked him to pray to the Lord for him, so that he might be inspired by God to adhere to that religion which most pleased God.*  
Jacques de Vitry, Letter VI of 1220xi

### **Reflection in the Reading**

In 1212, Francis set out for Syria but was shipwrecked. The next year he headed for Morocco but because of grave illness got only as far as Spain.

In 1219, Francis finally traveled to Egypt and was able to meet people of Islam. On his arrival in Egypt, Francis received permission to go to the front lines and enter Damietta to speak with Malik-al-Kamil, the Sultan of Egypt. Jaques de Vitry, who was the Bishop of Acre [modern-day Israel] at the time, writes that Saracens captured Francis who told them that he was a Christian and asked to be taken to the Sultan. When the Sultan recognized in Francis a man of God, he treated him gently and gave Francis hospitality for several days, listening carefully to all Francis had to say.

De Vitry says that the Sultan sent Francis back to the Christian camp, because he was afraid that Francis's preaching would convert his soldiers.

Two other early accounts say that the Sultan was advised by his spiritual counselors that Francis should be killed. This the sultan refused to do, and so asked Francis to leave for his own safety but first said to him, “Pray for me, that God may deign to reveal to me the law and the faith which is more pleasing to Him.” The Sultan reportedly gave Francis a safe-conduct pass to visit areas in the Holy Land at the time off-limits to Christians.



This event is not a “brave pilgrimage” to the Holy Places, nor is it a “success” story in the sense of conversions to Christianity. “Francis set out to meet other believers who did not believe in the Incarnation; [he] he did not

go on a pilgrimage to buildings of stone, but to the hearts of others.”<sup>xii</sup>

Willingness to be changed by the experience of encounter with the other is a necessary aspect of nonviolence. That his encounter with the Sultan had a profound influence on Francis’s spirituality and on his understanding of the mission of those who are called to live among people of Islam can be seen in his instructions to missionaries.<sup>xiii</sup> However, on his return to the brothers Francis was able to share little of what he had learned because the minds of Christians, including his brothers, were so closed to the peoples of Islam. The fiery accounts of the first groups of friars who went to preach to, and convert, followers of Islam in Francis’s day make rather clear the fact that Francis’s instructions were not understood.

The encounter of the Christian and Islamic cultures of that time began and continued in the

bloody clash of medieval warfare. Many Christians assumed that followers of Islam were serving the devil. Soldiers tried to wrest the “Holy Lands” from them; missionaries tried to save them from damnation. The Crusades brought these two quite distinct cultures together in a way that blurred the boundaries of both.

Today, religious traditions that have shaped human experience for centuries are impinging upon one another in ways that easily lead to misunderstandings. As Michael Hadley notes in *The Justice Tree: Multifaith Reflection on Criminal Justice*,<sup>xiv</sup> cultural tensions combined with the failure to foster justice lead to the international conflicts that we face today.

While faith traditions have far more to contribute to harmony than to conflict, fundamentalism provokes conflict among followers of different faith traditions. In our day, believers in these traditions are challenged to rethink bedrock assumptions about key values, such as: the nature of humanity, the uses of power and of violence, the resolution of human conflict. In this regard Francis’s encounter with the Sultan has much to offer for a reflection on nonviolence. The recognition that truth is not the property of a single person or tradition—but can be found at the core of each person—is basic to nonviolence. The ability to listen respectfully, and to be willing to be changed by an aspect of truth expressed by another, is necessary to the practice of nonviolence. Francis and the Sultan witness to a willingness to search together for aspects of truth found in different traditions.

Practicing the disciplines of openness and reverence is part of active nonviolence. Entering into this kind of search calls us to move beyond simplistic and literal understandings of the teachings that ground our religious traditions. It calls for discerning study and dialogue, as well as contemplation and prayerful attention to Wisdom—the source of Life and of Truth. It calls, as well, for the courtesy that we see in both Francis and the Sultan in their encounter.

**Thursday Reflection Question:** When have you dialogued with a person of a different faith tradition and deepened your understanding and appreciation of that faith tradition? If you have not had this opportunity, what do you think this dialog could do to help make the world more peace-filled?

## Friday, December 19

**Reading:** Reflect again on the reading from yesterday, St. Francis and the Sultan.

**Friday Reflection Question:** Religion is often cited as reason for conflict that can lead to violence. What insight can we take from the experience of St. Francis and the Sultan to insure that religion can lead to peacemaking and not conflict?

## Saturday, December 20

**Reading:** None.

**Reflection Question:** Reflect on the week as a whole -- prayers, readings, reflections, and actions. As you integrate this week, what insights do you have?

The prospect of being a peacemaker in our world can seem like an overwhelming prospect. Through this week's Advent journey, do you have any insights or thoughts on how each of us or larger groups can be instruments of peace for our world?

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<sup>i</sup> Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., Wayne Hellman, O.F.M. Conv., and William Short, O.F.M., eds., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, Vol. II, The Founder* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000), pp. 187-8.

<sup>ii</sup> Arnaldo Fortini, *Francis of Assisi* translated by Helen Moak (New York: Crossroad, 1981) p. 569.

<sup>iii</sup> Fortini, p. 574.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 575.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 576.

<sup>vi</sup> Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, p. 6.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>ix</sup> Fortini, p. 580.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xi</sup> Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., Wayne Hellman, O.F.M. Conv., and William Short, O.F.M., eds., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, Vol. I, The Saint* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999), p. 581. The story of a pilgrimage to the Holy Lands is mentioned in most of the accounts of Francis's life. However, the earliest reference to this pilgrimage is found only in 1321 in the writings of Angelo Clareno. As Friar Gwenole Jeusset O.F.M. points out, the accounts of this event in Francis's life were heavily influenced by the anti-Muslim stance of thirteenth century hagiographers. For this reason, rather than presenting this story from any of those early accounts of Francis, we have quoted from the contemporary version by Jacques de Vitry.

<sup>xii</sup> Gwenole Jeusset, O.F.M., "The Incarnation in Relation to Other Religions, specifically Islam," address to the General Assembly of the International Conference of Third Order Regular Franciscans held in Assisi, May 2001.

<sup>xiii</sup> Chapter 16 of Francis's Early Rule.

<sup>xiv</sup> Michael Hadley, *The Justice Tree: Multifaith Reflection on Criminal Justice* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2001). This book is a synopsis of "The Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice Project," of the Center for Studies in Religion and Society, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.