

# St Francis and the Sufi

Spiritual Meeting

800 years later

1211-2011

In 1219 St. Francis and Brother Illuminato accompanied the armies of western Europe to Damietta, Egypt, during the Fifth Crusade. His desire was to speak peacefully with Muslim people about Christianity, even if it meant dying as a martyr. He tried to stop the Crusaders from attacking the Muslims at the Battle of Damietta, but failed. After the defeat of the western armies, he crossed the battle line with Brother Illuminato, was arrested and beaten by Arab soldiers, and eventually was taken to the sultan, Malek al-Kamil.

Al-Kamil was known as a kind, generous, fair ruler. He was nephew to the great Salah al-Din. At Damietta alone he offered peace to the Crusaders five times, and, according to western accounts, treated defeated Crusaders humanely. His goal was to establish a peaceful coexistence with Christians.

After an initial attempt by Francis and the sultan to convert the other, both quickly realized that the other already knew and loved God. Francis and Illuminato remained with al-Kamil and his Sufi teacher Fakhr ad-din al-Farisi for as many as twenty days, discussing prayer and the mystical life. When Francis left, al-Kamil gave him an ivory trumpet, which is still preserved in the crypt of the Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi.

This encounter, which occurred between September 1 and 26, is a paradigm for interfaith dialog in our time. Despite differences in religion, people of prayer can find common ground in their experiences of God. Dialog demands that we truly listen to the other; but, before we can listen, we must see the other as a precious human being, loved by God. There is no other path to peace in this bloody 21st century.

The flames behind Francis and the sultan have a dual symbolism. In Islamic art, holy persons are shown with balls of flame behind their heads. The second purpose of these flames is to disarm a later medieval legend in which Francis challenged the Sufis to step into a raging fire to prove whose faith was correct. In this icon, the flames represent love. The text at the bottom is from the beginning of the Koran: "Praise to God, Lord of the worlds!"

On this left-hand panel of the Peace Triptych sits Fakhr ad-Din al-Farisi, a Persian Sufi who advised Sultan Malik al-Kamil throughout his life. He was a scholar of astronomy and theology, as well as a statesman. He holds the Koran in his hand. Next to him is a falcon, tethered to a roost. It was Fakhr ad-Din who taught Frederick II how to hunt with falcons when he visited his court in Sicily--thus introducing falconry into medieval Europe. In this icon, the falcon represents restrained violence and refers to the teachings of the Koran that all Muslims must follow when they engage in warfare. While modern Muslim terrorists dishonor the Koran, Fakhr ad-Din and his sultan were exemplary men of peace who showed mercy to captives and spared non-combatants. They dreamed of peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East, even turning Jerusalem over to Frederick II, to avoid further bloodshed.

Islamic prayers fill the dark blue squares at the top and bottom of the icon. The prayer at top reads, "In the name of God, the compassionate and merciful." At the bottom of the icon are three praises of God from the al-Jawshan al-Kabir, reflecting specific divine attributes that Fakhr ad-Din, a holy statesman, reflected in a special way:

O He before whose honor and might all things bow and obey.

O He before whose majesty all things are abased.

O our Lord, the owner of sovereignty whose subjects are safe from cruelty.

Like Christians, Muslims believe that humans mirror the glory of God--that we are images of God. Saints have cleansed the mirror of their soul so that they reflect God very brightly in our midst. The ball of flames behind the head of Fakhr ad-Din is an Islamic symbol of this reflection.

On this right-hand panel of the Peace Triptych, the fabled wolf of Gubbio represents all the frightening darkness Francis learned to embrace during his life of penance--darkness both inside and outside his heart. He is said once to have picked up two sticks to play like a violin, in a moment of ecstatic joy. The tamed wolf--still very much a wolf--is singing at his side. Francis' face has a haunted look, rather than a more theatrical expression of joy, because we do not embrace darkness without paying a price. This expression is called joyful sorrow by Russian Christians, a joy that has not forgotten sin and all of which sin is capable.

Islamic prayers fill the dark blue squares at the top and bottom of the icon. The prayer at top reads, "In the name of God, the compassionate and merciful." At the bottom of the icon are three praises of God from the al-Jawshan al-Kabir, reflecting specific divine attributes that Francis, the great lover, reflected in a special way:

O He who is nearer than the nearest.

O He who is more lovable than all the beloved.

O He who is more affectionate than all the affectionate.

Like Christians, Muslims believe that humans mirror the glory of God--that we are images of God. Saints have cleansed the mirror of their soul so that they reflect God very brightly in our midst. The halo around Francis' head is a Christian symbol of this reflection.

### ***Francis, Sultan, Wolf - Peace Triptych*** The Francis-and-Islam Connection

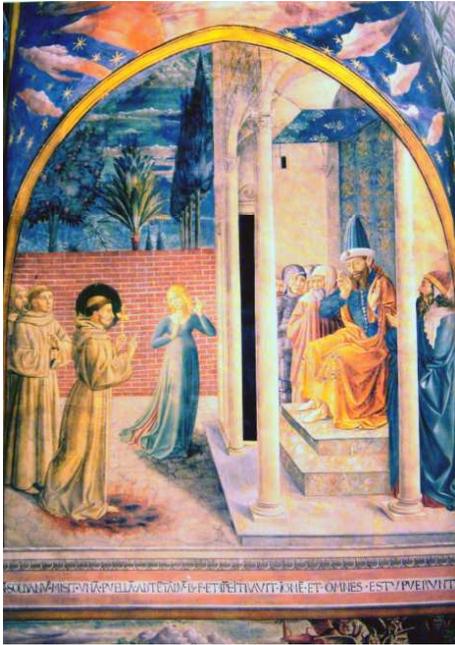
What is the connection between St. Francis of Assisi and Islam? In 1219, St. Francis traveled to what is now northern Egypt and paid a visit to the Muslim Sultan al-Malek al-Kamil. This was at the beginning of the Fifth Crusade, but Francis and his brothers did not make this trip as part of the battle to regain the Holy Land. Rather, they went in opposition to the mainstream theological and political orthodoxies of the time, to meet the Muslim people, and to live among them as "lesser brothers." Francis and his brothers went to be present among this people who were being portrayed as evil enemies of Christ, and, in his evangelism of presence, Francis found the spirit of God to be alive and at work within the Muslim people, then called "the Saracens". Francis admired their public, repeated acknowledgment of God and call to prayer, and he appreciated the deep reverence they showed to their holy book, the Qur'an.

While the main trend of the time was for Christian preachers to deliver strident, inflammatory sermons against Islam, Francis forbade his brothers to take part in these exercises. He demanded that his brothers be present first and foremost, living with and among the Saracens. They were to preach only if they felt that it would "please the Lord." Francis worked to prevent the brotherhood from becoming embroiled in the grasp for civil and ecclesiastical offices and power, and kept the community's focus on serving their neighbors for the glory of God only.

Based on Francis and Islam by J. Hoeberichts (Franciscan Press, 1997) Prepared for the Episcopal-Muslim Relations Committee of the Diocese of New York Ecumenical Commission by Mary O'Shaughnessy

## - St Francis and the Sultan

*A Sufi Perspective on the Meeting 800 years later :*



### - Sultan Al Malik Al Kamil:

Al-Kamil (Arabic: الكامل) (full name: al-Malik al-Kamel Naser al-Din Abu al-Ma'ali Muhammed) (1180–1238) was an Ayyubid sultan of Kurdish descent that ruled Egypt. During his tenure as sultan, the Ayyubids defeated two crusades. In a temporary agreement with the Crusaders, he ceded Jerusalem to the Christians.

He was the son of sultan al-Adil, a brother of Saladin. In 1218 al-Kamil led the defense during the Siege of Damietta against the Fifth Crusade, and later that year became sultan when his father died. In 1219 he was almost overthrown by a conspiracy among Coptic Christians, and considered fleeing to Yemen until the conspiracy was put down by his brother al-Mu'azzam, governor of Damascus.

Al-Kamil made many offers of peace to the Crusaders, all of which were rejected, due to the

influence of the papal legate Pelagius. He offered to return Jerusalem and rebuild its walls (which his brother had torn down earlier in the year), and to return the True Cross (which he probably did not have). At one point he even negotiated with Francis of Assisi, who had accompanied the crusade, and who apparently tried to convert the sultan.

### - Sultan Al malik al Kamil and the Sufi Ibn Al Farid:

One time al-Malik [al-Kamil](#), who was the Ayubbid sultan at that time, liked some of his odes so much that he sent the poet an exorbitant amount of money and offered to build a shrine for him. Ibn al-Farid denied both the money and the offer of the shrine, choosing to trust in God to supply for his needs. His position as a teacher at the [Azhar](#) mosque allowed him to provide for his family, which included three children

## - Shaykh Umar Ibn al-Farid



The poetry of Shaykh Umar Ibn al-Farid is considered by many to be the pinnacle of Arabic mystical verse, though surprisingly he is not widely known in the West. (Rumi and Hafiz, probably the best known in the West among the great Sufi poets, both wrote primarily in Persian, not Arabic.) Ibn al-Farid's two masterpieces are *The Wine Ode*, a beautiful meditation on the "wine" of divine bliss, and *The Poem of the Sufi Way*, a profound exploration of spiritual experience along the Sufi Path and perhaps the longest mystical poem composed in Arabic. Both poems have inspired in-depth spiritual commentaries throughout the centuries, and they are still reverently memorized by Sufis and other devout Muslims today.

(When he was a young man Ibn al-Farid would go on extended spiritual retreats among the oases outside of Cairo, but he eventually felt that he was not making deep enough spiritual progress. He abandoned his spiritual wanderings and entered law school.

One day Ibn al-Farid saw a greengrocer performing the ritual Muslim ablutions outside the door of the law school, but the man was doing them out of the prescribed order. When Ibn al-Farid tried to correct him, the man looked at him and said, "Umar! You will not be enlightened in Egypt. You will be enlightened only in Mecca..."

Umar Ibn al-Farid was stunned by this statement, seeing that this simple greengrocer was no ordinary man. But he argued that he couldn't possibly make the trip to Mecca right away. Then the man gave Ibn al-Farid a vision, in that very moment, of Mecca. Ibn al-Farid was so transfixed by this experience that he left immediately for Mecca and, in his own words, "Then as I entered it, enlightenment came to me wave after wave and never left."



Shaykh Umar Ibn al-Farid stayed many years in Mecca, but eventually returned to Cairo. He became a scholar of Muslim law, a teacher of the hadith (the traditions surrounding the sayings and life of the prophet Muhammed), and a teacher of poetry. Unlike many other respected poets of the age, Ibn al-Farid refused the patronage of wealthy governmental figures which would have required him to produce poetry for propaganda, preferring the relatively humble life of a teacher that allowed him to compose his poetry of enlightenment unhampered.)

### -Ecstasies:

During the later part of his life, Ibn al-farid was known to enter into spiritual raptures known as *jadhabat* in Arabic, a common practice in sufism.

Normally described as being handsome, his son wrote that when a mystical state overcame him, his face would increase in beauty and brightness. Sweat would pour from his body and collect at the ground beneath his feet, which was a result of jumping and dancing. He would also take forty-day fasts, during which he would neither eat, drink nor sleep.

During one particular ecstasy, the Shaykh screamed out and danced in the middle of the market bazaar. Others in the market began to join in and dance with them, causing a commotion with some of them falling on the ground. Ibn al-Farid threw off all of his clothes, an act which members of the crowd repeated. The crowd carried the Shaykh in his underwear to the Azhar mosque where he remained in this state for some days afterward.

Ibn al-Farid claimed to see many things happen that could be considered to be out of this world. He wrote of a lion kneeling down to him and asking him to ride. He also wrote of seeing a man descending a mountain, floating without using his feet. He claimed that a "great green bird" came down at the funeral of the greengrocer and "gobbled up his corpse." He also claimed to have conversed with Mohammad in a dream.

Ibn al-Farid's son Kamal al-Din Muhammad described his ecstasies or trances as sometimes lasting ten consecutive days without eating, drinking, moving, speaking or hearing outside noises. He would alternately stand, sit, lie on his side and "throw himself down on his side." When he came to, his first words would be a dictation of the verse God had given him.

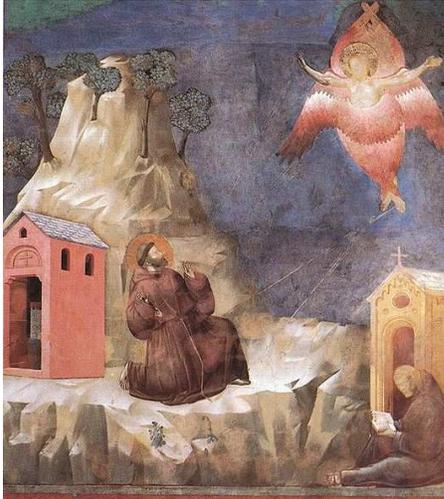
### **St Francis:**



Saint Francis of Assisi (born Giovanni Francesco di Bernardone; 1181/1182 – October 3, 1226)[2] was an Italian Catholic friar and preacher. He founded the Franciscan Order, assisted in founding the woman's Order of St. Clare, and the lay Third Order of Saint Francis.[3] St. Francis is one of the most venerated religious figures in history.[3]

Francis' birthname was Giovanni. He was nicknamed 'Francis' because of his father's love of (and great deal of trade in) France. He was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant in Assisi, and he lived the high-spirited life typical of a wealthy young man, even fighting as a soldier for Assisi.[4] While going off to war in 1204, Francis had a vision that directed him back to Assisi, where he lost his taste for his worldly life.[4] On a pilgrimage to Rome, Francis

begged with the beggars at St. Peter's.[4] The experience moved him to live in poverty.[4] Francis returned home, began preaching on the streets, and soon amassed a following. His order was endorsed by the Pope in 1210. He then founded the Order of Poor Ladies, which was an order for old women, as well as the Third Order of Brothers and Sisters of Penance. In 1219, he went to Egypt where crusaders were besieging Damietta, hoping to find martyrdom at the hands of the Muslims. Supposedly, Francis achieved personal rapprochement with the Muslim sultan who declared he would convert if possible. By this point, the Franciscan Order had grown to such an extent that its primitive organizational structure was no longer sufficient. He returned to Italy to organize the order. Once his organization was endorsed by the Pope, he withdrew increasingly from external affairs. In 1223,



Francis arranged for the first Christmas manger scene.[4] In 1224, he received the stigmata,[4] making him the first person to bear the wounds of Christ's Passion.[5] He died in 1226 while singing Psalm 141.

#### **- Nature and the environment**

A garden statue of Francis of Assisi with birds Many of the stories that surround the life of St. Francis deal with his love for animals.[23] Perhaps the most famous incident that illustrates the Saint's humility towards nature is recounted in the "Fioretti" ("Little Flowers"), a collection of legends and folklore that sprang up after the Saint's death. It is said that, one

day, while Francis was traveling with some companions, they happened upon a place in the road where birds filled the trees on either side. Francis told his companions to "wait for me while I go to preach to my sisters the birds".[23] The birds surrounded him, intrigued by the power of his voice, and not one of them flew away. The variety of birds are a metaphor for the nations of the world.

Another legend from the Fioretti tells that in the city of Gubbio, where Francis lived for some time, was a wolf "terrifying and ferocious, who devoured men as well as animals". Francis had compassion upon the townsfolk, and went up into the hills to find the wolf. Soon, fear of the animal had caused all his companions to flee, though the saint pressed on. When he found the wolf, he made the sign of the cross and commanded the wolf to come to him and hurt no one. Miraculously the wolf closed his jaws and lay down at the feet of St. Francis. "Brother Wolf, you do much harm in these parts and you have done great evil...", said Francis. "All these people accuse you and curse you... But brother wolf, I would like to make peace between you and the people". Then Francis led the wolf into the town, and surrounded by startled citizens made a pact between them and the wolf. Because the wolf had "done evil out of hunger", the townsfolk were to feed the wolf regularly, and in return, the wolf would no longer prey upon them or their flocks. In this manner Gubbio was freed from the menace of the predator. Francis even made a pact on behalf of the town dogs, that they would not bother the wolf again. Francis, to show the townspeople that they would not be harmed, blessed the wolf.

Francis preached the teaching of the Catholic Church, that the world was created good and beautiful by God but suffers a need for redemption because of the primordial sin of man. He preached to man and beast the universal ability and duty of all creatures to praise God (a common theme in the Psalms) and the duty of men to protect and enjoy nature as both the stewards of God's creation and as creatures ourselves.[23] Legend has it that St. Francis on his deathbed thanked his donkey for carrying and helping him throughout his life, and his donkey wept.

## **Spirituality:**

Ibn al-Farid married and had at least two sons and a daughter. He died in Cairo in 1235 CE. Ibn al-Farid's diwan (collected poems) is composed of more than a dozen poems, including love poems and odes, together with several dozen quatrains and riddles. The spiritual dimension of this verse is suggested by Ibn al-Farid's frequent allusions to God, the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad, and Sufi doctrines.

His al-Khamriyya (Wine Ode) in particular has been regarded for centuries as one of the finest Muslim allegories about mystical love. However, even more celebrated has been Ibn al-Farid's Nazm al-Suluk (Poem of the Sufi Way), also known as the al-Ta'iyya al-Kubra (Ode Rhyming in T-Major), the longest and most famous Arabic mystical poem. Within this poem's 760 verses, Ibn al-Farid addressed a number of religious and, especially, mystical themes centered on the love between human beings and God. Often taking the role as a guide for the perplexed, the poet offers instruction and advice on such matters as unselfish love, spiritual intoxication and illumination, the pains of separation from the beloved, and the indescribable joy of union.

Ibn al-Farid portrays creation as intimately involved with its divine creator. Thus, when seen aright, everything in life reveals a ray of supernal light. This mystical view is mirrored in the refined and sophisticated beauty of Ibn al-Farid's verse, which strongly influenced later generations of medieval Arab poets and led to his veneration as a saint known as sultan al-'ashiqin ("the sultan of lovers").

### *An example from Farid's Dîwân -*

A sword his eyelids draw against my heart, and I see the  
very languor thereof doth whet its blade;  
All the more sheds he suddenly our blood, picturing them  
that Musawir slew among the Beni Yazdadh.

No wonder is it, that he should have taken the hairs upon  
his cheeks to be the suspender-thongs of his sword, seeing  
that he is ever smiting and slaying therewith...  
The sun's self, yea, and the graceful gazelle submit humbly

before his face as he gazes about him, and take refuge  
and shelter in his beauty... The harshness of his  
heart rivals the tempered steel.

The mole upon his cheek embraces in its conflagration what  
man soever is passionately occupied with him, and scorneth  
to seek deliverance.

Ice-cool are his deep red lips, and sweet his mouth to kiss  
in the morning, yea, even before the toothpick's  
cleansing excelling the musk in fragrance and investing it  
with its own perfume.

Of his mouth and his glances cometh my intoxication; nay,  
but I see a winter in his every limb.

- An example of St Francis Poetry

The Canticle of the Sun, conveys the personal philosophy of life and theology of St. Francis of Assisi, and another view of life and a denying of our civilization and our values. Treating the animals as our brothers and sisters, thanking God for the Brother Sun and the Sister Water, refusing material accumulation and favoring "Lady Poverty" sounds strangely, in a world where humility is no longer a acknowledged virtue...

Most high, omnipotent good Lord!  
All yours is praise, glory, honour  
And all blessing  
To you, alone, Most High, do they belong.  
No human lips are worthy  
To pronounce Your name.  
Be praised, my Lord  
Through all your creatures  
Especially through my lord Brother Sun  
Who brings the day  
And the light that warms us  
He that is beautiful and radiant  
In all his splendor!  
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Be praised, my Lord  
Through Sister Moon and the Stars;  
In the heavens you have made them  
Precious and beautiful.  
Be praised, my Lord  
Through Brothers Wind  
And air, and clouds and storms,  
And all the weather,  
Through which you give your creatures sustenance.  
Be praised, my Lord  
Through Sister Water;  
So very useful, and humble  
And precious, and pure.  
Be praised, my Lord  
Through Brother Fire,  
Through whom you brighten the night.  
He who is beautiful and cheerful  
And powerful and strong.

Be praised, my Lord  
Through our sister Mother Earth  
Who feeds and rules us,  
And produces various fruits  
And colored flowers and plants  
Be praised, my Lord  
Through those who forgive for love of you;  
And endure sickness and trial.  
Happy those who endure in peace  
For by you, Most High, they will be crowned.

Be praised, my Lord  
Through our Sister Bodily Death,  
From whose embrace no living person can escape.  
Woe to those who die in mortal sin!  
Happy those she finds  
Doing your most holy will.  
The second death can do no harm to them!  
Praise and bless my Lord  
And give thanks  
And serve him with great humility.

*St Francis of Assisi, 1181-1226, Hymn to Brother Sun*

[By her, I departed to her \(from The Poem of the Sufi Way\)](#)

[Compared to my dawn \(from The Poem of the Sufi Way\)](#)

[From his light \(from The Poem of the Sufi Way\)](#)

[I sought her from myself \(from The Poem of the Sufi Way\)](#)

[In truth, I led my prayer leader in prayer \(from The Poem of the Sufi Way\)](#)

[No one speaks \(from The Poem of the Sufi Way\)](#)

[Resist the calls of wrangling talk \(from The Poem of the Sufi Way\)](#)

[Unveiling herself revealed \(from The Poem of the Sufi Way\)](#)

[Whispering, then listening close \(from The Poem of the Sufi Way\)](#)

[Yet never qualify me \(from The Poem of the Sufi Way\)](#)

[Be drunk from it \(from The Wine Ode \(al-Khamriyah\)\)](#)

[In memory of the beloved \(from The Wine Ode \(al-Khamriyah\)\)](#)

[They say to me: "Do describe it \(from The Wine Ode \(al-Khamriyah\)\)](#)

By her, I departed to her  
from me, never to return;  
one like me never speaks  
of coming back.

Kindly I secluded my soul  
away from my departure;  
never again did I allow it  
to be my companion.

Then I was made to disappear  
from where my soul stood apart,  
that no attribute could appear  
to crowd me in my presence,

And I was made to witness  
my absence when she appeared,  
so I found me, her there,  
in the bridal chamber of my seclusion.

In my witnessing, my existence  
was cast off, and I was far  
from the existence of my witnessing,  
effacing, not transfixing.

I embraced what I witnessed  
by bearing witness to it  
in the effacement of my witness,  
now sober after my drunkenness.

In the sobriety after effacement,  
I was none other than her,  
my essence adorned my essence  
when she removed her veil.

The Sufi of Assisi

Idries Shah presents Francis as a novice mystic who learnt Sufism in al-Kamil's tent. Shah's books, in particular *The Sufis*, published in 1964 with a preface by Robert Graves, introduced Sufism to a wide Anglophone readership.<sup>51</sup> The book and its author were the object of criticism and polemics: Shah was criticized for usurping the title of Sufi shaykh, for

claiming to be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, and for presenting a brand of Sufism which reflected his own idiosyncratic mystical ideas rather than those of traditional Sufism. For Shah, Sufism was not a purely Muslim phenomenon: it existed before the Qur'an and is found well beyond the Muslim world. To demonstrate Sufism's universal nature, Shah devotes several chapters to its occult European forms, from the foundation of the Order of the Garter to traditional English morris dancing to the obscure rites of the Templars.

Shah devotes a chapter to Francis, a veritable European Sufi who discovers in Damietta the profound sources of spirituality. Francis was

exposed young to Sufism, without realizing it: before his conversion, the songs which he had on his lips came from a venerable troubadour tradition which bore the marks of Arabic poetry. Francis's poetry strangely resembles that of the Sufi poet Rumi. Shah briefly narrates the poverello's life, noting various parallels with Sufi traditions.

Why then did Francis want to go to the Orient, or to Spain and Morocco? No doubt because he sought to establish contacts with dervishes in Asia Minor or Sufi poets in Andalusia. He is a 'troubadour looking for his roots'.<sup>52</sup> Little does it matter that the contemporary sources speak of his desires to convert or obtain martyrdom: his companions could not understand him; they were puzzled. There is no doubt, Shah continues, that in the court and the army of the sultan Francis found what he sought: Sufi adepts who could speak with him of their discipline and their wisdom. Francis did not try to convert anyone; on the contrary, when he returned to the Christian camp he tried to dissuade the crusaders from fighting. Shah does not go into the details of the conversations between the Italian novice and his Muslim hosts, but for him Francis's subsequent life shows how much he learnt from them. Upon returning from Damietta, he established the rule of his order: 'The atmosphere and setting of the Franciscan Order is closer to a dervish organization than anything else.'<sup>53</sup> Everything in the order recalls Sufism, for Shah, from the way of praying to the symbolism of the six-winged seraph. The Franciscan habit is a copy of the robes of Sufi dervishes. The Franciscan salutation, invoking peace, is nothing more than the translation of salam aleykum, which he heard on the lips of his Arab hosts. But alas, mixed with these Sufi elements are Christian ones: this awkward amalgam explains the problems that perturbed the order as soon as the saint died.



[Prayer Of St Francis](#)

[The Tree of Love](#)

[Canticle of The Sun](#)

[What Wonderful Majesty](#)

[Not To Hurt](#)

[He asked for Charity](#)

[God would kneel down](#)

### **GOD WOULD KNEEL DOWN**

I think God might be a little prejudiced.  
For once He asked me to join Him on a walk  
through this world,

and we gazed into every heart on this earth,  
and I noticed He lingered a bit longer  
before any face that was  
weeping,

and before any eyes that were  
laughing.

And sometimes when we passed  
a soul in worship

God too would kneel  
down.

I have come to learn: God  
adores His  
creation.

The tree of love its roots hath spread  
Deep in my heart, and rears its head;  
Rich are its fruits: they joy dispense;  
Transport the heart, and ravish sense.

In love's sweet swoon to thee I cleave,  
Bless'd source of love