

# Mercy, compassion, fraternity vital in times of conflict, Christian-Muslim gathering told

A long time ago, during the Fifth Crusade, St. Francis of Assisi travelled through a raging war zone to meet an enemy: the Muslim Sultan of Palestine, Syria, and Egypt, al-Malik al-Kamil. In an age of violent conflict, the unprecedented meeting produced a surprising bond of friendship and understanding between them.

Eight hundred years later, this time in another age of conflict, a Franciscan brother met a Muslim chaplain and educator for the first time in a busy coffee shop in Edmonton, and once again they found common ground. Brother Michael Perras and Ibrahim Long, a Muslim chaplain and educator, went on to serve as guest speakers at Edmonton's fourth annual Iftar and Friendship Dinner on May 9 at Providence Renewal Centre.



The seraphic icon symbolizes the meeting between Christian St. Francis of Assisi and Muslim Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil that resulted was a deep sense of relationship and compassion. Br. Robert Lentz, OFM

The event takes place during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, when the faithful fast from all food and drink between dawn and sunset. *Iftar* refers to a communal breaking of that fast, and in a northern city such as Edmonton, they can get pretty hungry by the time the sun sets, around 9:20 p.m. this time of year.

Before dinner, both Perras and Long addressed "Christian-Muslim Relations in an Age of Conflict." For Perras, the parallels between St. Francis's time and our own were obvious.

"St. Francis of Assisi was tired of the second-hand sources that were feeding him information about the other and about the conflicts that were raging in his time and place," Perras said. "He decided that enough was enough, and made his way to a source of information that could provide him with the truth he needed to know about the other, who in turn become his brother.

"He made his way across the Crusade lines of both the Christian and Muslim camps, and although he was maltreated by both, he was not deterred from meeting the Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil," he said.

"Regardless of why Francis went to the sultan, and regardless of what was discussed, what resulted was a deep sense of relationship and compassion."

Perras conceded that he is no expert in interreligious dialogue or human relationships.

"I am, however, a human being, and although I was born in a small rural community, where everybody looked the same and everybody had the same Christian background, I am part of a global family, who desires to be brother to all and to work toward fostering the depth of relationship and compassion in our hurting world."

For Long, who normally avoids public engagements during Ramadan, recent events such as the massacre of Muslims in a New Zealand mosque prompted him to accept the invitation to speak. He opened his address by offering a prayer for all who have suffered violence in the name of religion: "May God be with all those people who have lost their lives, and may God give strength to and envelop in kindness and support all those people who have lost their loved ones."

He noted that together, Muslims and Christians make up the majority of the world's population.

"This means that if Muslims and Christians get along, great; most of the world is getting along. But if Muslims and Christians are not getting along, that

means most of the world is not getting along. Thus our gathering tonight is not just for a meal – though we're hungry – more importantly, it's a sign of solidarity.



**Brother Michael Perras OFM and Ibrahim Long pictured with event organizers Mustafa Supur and Julien Hammond**  
Lorraine Turchansky, Grandin Media

“Though we may not share the same faith, we share the same sense of obligation to our community, and the same sense of empathy that forms the soil from which springs the Golden Rule – to want for our brother or sister what we want for ourselves. We desire that our brother or our sister be allowed to worship according to his or her conscience, to feel a sense of safety in their homes and houses of worship, and we recognize in each other another soul that is seeking serenity and communion with God.”

The key, he suggested, is mercy – a central tenet of both faith traditions. And the way to begin exercising that mercy is simply by getting to know each other. Long has some practical experience in that regard; he grew up in a Christian family and converted to Islam 14 years ago. At the time, his father told him “it’s not the faith I would have chosen for you, but if it is what makes you happy, I’ll support you.”

“If we could take the same mercy into our relations with our neighbours, with each other, then God willing, we could all feel the mercy that God wants us to bring to this world,” Long said.

“It begins by looking into each other’s eyes and seeing love is there, at our core, because of God.”

Both speakers suggested that the immediacy of social media has exacerbated the spread of hatred and misunderstanding.

“We’re living in a time when social media has reached into all of our homes, and so we have to reach out of our homes at times like this,” Long said. “Because if we’re only in our home, constantly secluding each other from the

goodness of each other's heart, if we do not make contact with each other ... then what perspective will we have of them? For most people, it will just be whatever they read in the news. But when you hear a story, when you know a person's background, it's hard to just make them a stereotype."

Perras learned something of that when he first enjoyed a cup of chai with Long. As they chatted, he said, questions were asked and answered, awareness was raised, and pieces of a bridge to friendship were built.



Franciscan Brother Michael Perras and Ibrahim Long, a Muslim chaplain and educator, were guest speakers at Edmonton's fourth annual Iftar and Friendship Dinner at Providence Renewal Centre, May 9, 2019. Lorraine Turchansky, Grandin Media

"This meeting stirred the soul language that is written on our hearts because we are God's children and we desire to make known God's love, mercy, faithfulness, goodness, and generosity in our world today," he said. "No matter where we worship, no matter where we live, no matter if Friday, Saturday or Sunday is our holy days, no matter what we wear, no matter the colour of our skin, we are God's children."

We should take guidance, he suggested, from St. Anthony of Padua, a Franciscan friar of the 13<sup>th</sup> century known for his preaching that 'Actions speak louder than words; let your words teach and your actions speak.'

"Whether it was 800 years ago between St. Francis and the Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil, or whether it was three weeks ago between Ibrahim and myself, the

reality that we face in this age of conflict is to be brave enough to let our actions and words be those of love, respect and universal fraternity.”

“I believe that St. Francis of Assisi and the sultan were transformed by the encounter they had with each other. Why? Because they had to drop the false images they were putting up and open themselves up to listen, to be in dialogue, to accept differences. To appreciate in each other things such as prayer, almsgiving, fasting and pilgrimage as ways that express our desire for God and the need to live and learn among each other. This is where we find the common ground that is the bond of peacemaking, because it means entering into relationship rooted in value and compassion, not in power or greed.”

The Iftar and Friendship Dinner is a gathering of Muslims and Christians co-sponsored by the Catholic Archdiocese of Edmonton and Intercultural Dialogue Institute Edmonton, a Turkish community group that promotes cross-cultural and interreligious learning.

Julien Hammond, who coordinates ecumenical and interreligious relations for the Archdiocese, said the dinner is part of an intentional Catholic outreach to Muslims that began about five years ago. In addition to the speakers, the evening also includes hymn singing and an interfaith prayer. About 125 people from various faith traditions attend each year.