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## Clare and Francis: A Mission in the Name of the Lord

James Koch  
*St. John Fisher College*

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# Clare and Francis: A Mission in the Name of the Lord

## **Abstract**

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph:

In the film, *Clare and Francis*, the viewer is taken through the significant life events of Francis and Clare of Assisi that led them to become people of God. While Francis and Clare lived in the thirteenth century, the film portrays their spiritual journeys with commendable historical accuracy. In particular, there is much to be analyzed in the meeting of Francis and the Sultan for its significance and the accuracy of how it is depicted in the film.



*James Koch*

## **Clare and Francis: A Mission in the Name of the Lord**

### *Introduction*

In the film, *Clare and Francis*, the viewer is taken through the significant life events of Francis and Clare of Assisi that led them to become people of God. While Francis and Clare lived in the thirteenth century, the film portrays their spiritual journeys with commendable historical accuracy. In particular, there is much to be analyzed in the meeting of Francis and the Sultan for its significance and the accuracy of how it is depicted in the film.

### *Movie Review*

In Fabrizio Costa's film *Clare and Francis*, a depiction of the life of Francis is shown in a historical and often imaginative narrative. Beginning with the ambitious son of a merchant, the viewer is first taken through the life events that caused Francis to abandon his quest for glory as a knight and instead pursue a holy life in the footsteps of Christ. From fighting in the civil war in Assisi to the somewhat over exaggerated kissing of a leper on the face, we see the spiritual transformation of Francis. The director occasionally cuts to the life of Clare as the daughter of a wealthy family, and we see similar signs of a calling to serve God despite a life of wealth and social status expected of her. The film continues to describe several of the historical events that

were significant in the creation of the Franciscan Order and ends showing the stigmata and death of Francis after he has returned from his travels to the east. Overall, many events in the film such as Clare escaping from home and Francis having a vision from the crucifix at St. Damiano are historically correct. In different biographies, these events have been described respectively: “At 18, she escaped...and was met on the road by friars carrying torches...” (Foley, n.p.) and “Francis heard the crucifix command him: “Go, Francis, and repair my house”” (Ignatius, n.p.)

As a historical religious film about two holy individuals, *Clare and Francis* measures up differently to similar productions. Compared to Costa’s film *Mother Teresa* which he directed four years prior and was recorded in English, the 2007 production is 90 minutes longer and was recorded in Italian. According to reviewer Steven Greydanus, *Madre Teresa* presents a “rather choppy, episodic feel” (Greydanus, n.p.) which is replicated in *Clare and Francis* with the intermittent cutting between scenes of Francis and Clare causing the point in time become unclear. On the bright side, Costa includes many lasting symbolic shots of objects such as the cross-shaped hilt of the sword that Francis plunges into the sand representing his mission to resolve the conflict that has caused so much death. This adds drama to emphasize the spiritual significance of doing such an act, and a similar emphasis on photography is seen in the “beautiful photography” in *Mother Teresa* (IMBD, n.p.). In comparison to a movie such as *Flowers from Francis* from 1950, Costa’s *Clare and Francis* is definitely a more engaging, entertaining, and historical story of the individuals. Lastly, since it is a modern film the cinematography is immensely better, making it an overall better movie on Francis and Clare.

The character of Francis is adequately played by Ettore Bassi; however in some instances, such as the fearful encounters with the lepers, his acting is less than convincing. On the other hand as a film on saintly individuals, the performances of Bassi as well as Mary

Petruolo (Clare) are rightfully compassionate, and humble. The design of this film does well to utilize characters such as the hesitant sidekick Illuminato, played by Gabriele Cirilli, who highlights Francis' optimistic and determined character. Another example of this design is the evil uncle Monaldo convincingly played by Ivano Marescotti, who helps establish Clare's pure intentions and unwavering devotion to God even in the fearful face of her opposing uncle.

Overall, *Clare and Francis* is certainly worth watching if you have a Catholic background or even if you belong to a different denomination of Christianity because the selfless characters of Clare and Francis are morally inspirational. Also, the fact that this film is so historically accurate makes it nothing short of interesting even if you are not religious. While the acting isn't the greatest, the film is still adequate for its historical narrative with inspirational scenes such as Francis' renouncing his social status before the people of Assisi when he "without a word peeled off his garments even removing his breeches and restored them to his father" (Ignatius, n.p.) Therefore, due to the impressive historical accuracy which is dramatically enhanced by Costa's excellent photography and cinematography, *Clare and Francis* is a captivating film that I would highly recommend to any viewer.

### *Francis and the Sultan*

In *Clare and Francis*, the journey of Francis and Illuminato to see the Sultan begins in scene 20 with the setting of Egypt in 1219 as the two friars arrive at the Christian camp. After meeting with Cardinal Pelagius and failing to convince him to try to negotiate with the Saracens, Francis and Illuminato set out to meet the Sultan in person, although it is uncertain whether they actually had the permission of Pelagius or not (Cf. Johnson 152). By walking through the desert, the friars encounter the Saracens who take them to see the Sultan, Malik-al-Kamil in Damietta which in one way or another resulted in the meeting of Francis and Kamil. While it is not known

what was said, it is clear that the two men shared common beliefs and were both in opposition to the war. After astounding the Christian world with his return, it is a fact that the Christians continued to fight despite Kamil's offer of peace; however, it is unclear when in this time of attempted negotiation Francis' meeting actually took place. (Cf. Tolan, 4-5)

Despite the mystery of this journey, Fabrizio Costa does well through cinematography to create a concise, but intriguing depiction of the legendary meeting of Francis and the Sultan. In the beginning of scene 20, he uses a sluggish sort of soundtrack commonly associated with the event of struggling through a desert as well as zoomed in shots of Francis and Illuminato's exhausted faces, which are convincingly displayed. This along with one of his features of design in which a close-up shot of the friars' feet is again shown, this time walking on hard sand and gravel, as the frame slowly pans up to capture the desolate landscape, it conveys how difficult their journey must have been. In addition, the mountainous landscape captured in the background as well as the desert wind are key in establishing a new setting that is completely different from the green city of Assisi which helps the viewer to embrace the harsh climate of this legendary journey whether or not they actually walked this exact path. Another feature of design included in the two Egypt scenes is the presence of the Franciscan crucifix. This visual element of design is symbolic of how Francis is following in the footsteps of Christ and is going where God would have him go to try to bring peace to the warring sides. The placement of the crucifix, along with the scene with the dramatic throwing down of a sword, also helps to emphasize the notion that Francis, returning to the crusade not as a knight but as a humble messenger of the Gospel, was inspired by his vision of the crucifix back at the church of St. Damiano at the beginning of his holy life. It must be noted that in contrast to joining the crusade for his own glory when he was younger, this time Francis is entering the crusade for the glory of God. As for the interaction

between the two men of God, Costa keeps the alternating shots during their conversation on the same level angle, implying that they are equal in character and morals. Such a respectful dialogue may have occurred based on the fact that Sultan Malik-Al-Kamil “was not opposed to religious debate” (Tolan 6). Their mutual understanding is ultimately exemplified greatly through a zoomed-in shot of the shaking of hands between Francis and the Sultan. Regardless of historical accuracy, all of the objects such as the crucifix, sword, desolate setting, and the characters’ appearances work together to create a *mis-en-scene* that is instrumental to the portrayal of Francis’ journey to meet the Sultan.

In regard to the actual meeting with the Sultan as well as Francis’ possible reasons for doing so, the first person point of view used when the friars are taken to the camp of the Saracens is crucial in emphasizing the vulnerability of Francis in the territory of the enemy. This reminds the viewer that even though he is on a holy mission, Francis’ quest for spreading the Gospel is an extremely dangerous one, especially when the Sultan’s decoy first calls for their execution causing a sense of despair. This idea of full submission to the enemy with the potential to become a martyr seems to have been exactly what Francis wanted. Francis wrote in the *Franciscan Rule*, “I beg my brothers that, when they travel about the world, they should not be quarrelsome, dispute with words, or criticize others, but be gentle, peaceful...” (Burr, n.p.) This part of the Franciscan Rule supports the historical likelihood that Francis would have left himself unprotected in the face of the enemy and it is a reason to believe in this aspect depicted in the film. The seeking of martyrdom is supported by St. Bonaventure who is quoted saying that Francis was still “convinced that death was a prize to be won” (Johnson 149). Interestingly enough, philosophy professor Galen Johnson claims that the records of Bonaventure completed in 1263 “strongly emphasize Francis’ fascination with the crusades when a young man and his

desire to be a Christian martyr. After his spiritual conversion, Francis' desire for martyrdom did not wane" (Johnson 147). The account of Bonaventure suggests that Francis had always felt compelled to give his life for others before and after leading a holy life, which further explains Francis' reason for travelling to meet the Sultan. Although this idea of his desire for martyrdom as a young man is not depicted in *Clare and Francis*, the transformed Francis played by Ettore Bassi definitely portrays such a desire as he cheerfully walks through the desert to meet the enemy who the Christians claim are barbaric. Regardless of martyrdom, which seems to have been Francis' primary motivation, it is likely that his overall goal was to alleviate the tension between the Christians and the Saracens rather than to actually convert the Sultan to Christianity. Therefore even when it comes to writers who considered the goal to be full conversion, the following can be said: "Francis' voyage was not in vain, for Michaud: it inaugurated Franciscan mission to 'savage people', a heroic and colossal effort to deliver these people from ignorance and misery" (Tolan 3).

### *Conclusion*

The meeting of Francis and the Sultan of the Muslim army during the fifth crusade in 1219 is a fabled event that is generally accepted as historical. It is no surprise that two of the most important scenes of *Clare and Francis* are dedicated to the depiction of this marvelous event. Therefore, this film does a service by giving the audience the chance to understand this historical event since it gives hope for the mutual understanding of opposing sides in the various conflicts of modern day.

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