



“Francesco Rocks”

M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco
Thursday, April 24, 2008

Remarks by Michael G. Pappas, Executive Director

In the midst of so many religious, civic and diplomatic dignitaries, I stand before you humbled, yet at the same time emboldened, to say just a few words about a simple monk whose words and deeds have left an indelible mark upon civilization and certainly, our beloved city which bears his name and is privileged to claim him as patron.

Saint Francis’ life is legend. Invocation of his very name inspires us to do good, to help the poor, to be kind to animals, and to respect creation. A little known aspect of his life and works is the one I’ve been asked to touch upon in these brief remarks; that being his courageous endeavor to bridge the divide among people of different faiths. In fact, by virtue of Francis’ zeal to love all human beings, he found himself catapulted into the role of interfaith activist and pioneer.

One little spoken of, yet critical encounter affirms this assertion. In the year 1219 St. Francis left, together with a few companions, on a pilgrimage of non-violence to Egypt. Crossing the lines between the sultan and the Crusaders in

Damietta, he was received by the sultan Melek-el-Kamel. Interestingly, Francis fearlessly challenged Muslim scholars to a test of true religion by fire; but they retreated. When Francis proposed to enter the fire first, under the condition that if he left the fire unharmed, the sultan would have to recognize Christ as the true God. The sultan was so impressed that he allowed Francis to preach to his subjects. Legend has it, that although Francis did not succeed in converting the sultan, the last words of the sultan to Francis of Assisi were these, "Pray for me that God may deign to reveal to me that law and faith which is most pleasing to him."

These words never would have been uttered had Francis not had the courage to make the journey and engage one whom non-Muslims both feared and hated. Here, St. Francis teaches us the power and, really, miracles, which can emerge from dialogue among people who possess different beliefs. Here, St. Francis challenges us to risk confronting and overcoming prejudice by casting aside fear and dialoguing with the other.

Dear Angela you are a true visionary. You have invested so much in this project, with its many incredible implications. Your love for the saint, whom you acknowledge with confidence as ever present, and refer to in the familiar as Francesco, reminds us that his message and zeal for love is timeless. Never, more so than the present, is such a reminder essential. In the physical space of the Porziuncola, Francesco will invite and challenge leaders of all faiths to gather and wrestle with the issues that divide us, but more importantly to work together to seek peace and justice in our city and in the world. For this great vision and these sacrificial efforts, the interfaith community of San Francisco is indebted to you.

To the Friars who have crossed the seas and stewarded this sacred relic to our midst, we thank you. This evening we celebrate your journey which is now a sacred part of our rich history. May your stay with us be joyous and fulfilling and may we entreat your prayers to the saint for our successful completion of this inspired project.

A special thanks is extended to our spiritual host this evening, a true leader in the cultivation of interfaith relations, Archbishop George Niederauer of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of San Francisco, on whose behalf I would take just a moment to recognize and welcome the interfaith clergy present with us:

- Monsignor Harry Schlitt, Archdiocese of San Francisco, Moderator of the Curia and Vicar of Administration
- Very Reverend Robert Cipriano, Rector of the National Shrine of Saint Francis of Assisi
- Venerable Tenzin Priyadarshi of the Bodhimarga Buddhist Monastic Community
- Rabbi Stephen Pearce, Congregation Emanu-El
- Father John Harden, Executive Director of the St. Anthony Foundation
- Rev. James DeLange, Chair, San Francisco Interfaith Council
- Fr. John Talesfore, St. Mary's Cathedral/Board of Directors, San Francisco Interfaith Council

Your presence here this evening truly enriches our fellowship and affirms the inclusive and universal message of the saint, whose presence in San Francisco will be felt through the humble Porziuncola we are building.

To all who have joined in this festive observance, may God bless and keep you. Thank you!