**The Saint and the Sultan**
*– reflections by Brother Alfred BoonKong, Society of St Francis*

It is just over 800 years since the encounter between St Francis of Assisi and Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil, who ruled Egypt, Palestine and Syria during the Fifth and Sixth Crusades. The motivation behind St Francis’ visit to the Sultan in 1219 was traditionally portrayed by his biographer Bonaventure as his desire for martyrdom and going across the enemy line between the Crusaders and the Saracens at Damietta like sheep amongst wolves. He so impressed the Sultan that, while he did not convert him to Christianity, he won his respect and the custody of the Holy Places and Shrines in the Holy Land.

Francis was a changed man from this meeting. In his Rule of 1221, the so-called Earlier Rule, he advised the friars to submit to the non-Christian authorities when they go among Muslims and others who do not practise Christianity, and not engage in disputes or disagreements, only proclaiming the Gospel when it pleases God.

Scholars have suggested that the ‘Angelus’ (a prayer commemorating the Incarnation) and the ringing of bells traditionally calling Christians to prayer three times a day at 6 am, 12 noon and 6 pm were inspired by Francis observing the call of the *muezzin* (the man who calls Muslims to prayer from the minaret of a mosque) five times a day.

Similarly, scholars suggest that St Francis’ Divine Praises, “You are holy, Lord, the only God, and your deeds are wonderful. You are strong, you are great. You are the Most High, You are Almighty…You are love, you are charity, you are wisdom, you are humility, you are patience. You are rest, you are security. You are inner peace, you are joy, you are gladness. You are justice…” was inspired by Islam’s 99 Most Beautiful Names of God (*Al* *Asma ul-Husna*).

Francis’ friendship with the Sultan challenges us today to seek ways to listen to and dialogue with Muslims and people of other faiths in a spirit of openness and collaboration.