

ISTANBUL “a Franciscan City?”

By Egidio Picucci

One of the first depictions of St. Francis, according to some people, and prior to Giotto's work, is in Istanbul, Turkey, not in Assisi. Indeed, the surprise is all the greater as one discovers that it is not a single fresco but a cycle depicting several episodes of the life of the Saint. For example: the healing of Narni, the blind man, his Transit and his famous Sermon to the Birds. In the fresco the natural attitudes of the birds seems to anticipate the naturalism of Giotto's school.

The cycle, which it seems Fra Giovanni Buralli from Parma commissioned, was painted in the old Orthodox Church of Theotokos Kyriotissa (the Mother of God enthroned), today the Mosque of Kalenderhane, just two steps from the Grand Bazaar.

The church contained two works of art of great interest. A mosaic, one meter square, depicting the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple; the only example of a pre-iconoclastic work with a religious theme to have survived in the city. The fresco cycle which dates from the 13th century, is the only work of the Latin period in Turkey. It is said that these works date back to the time of the Saint's death in 1226. Apart from the date, what is certain is that the Franciscans arrived in the Bosphorus at the time of the Crusades, and have stayed there up until today.

Although no one, including the tourists, takes any notice of the Franciscan works of art (now in the Archeological Museum of the city), the whole of Istanbul knows about and loves a great Franciscan saint who is not depicted in the frescoes. The Saint is deeply revered in the Church of *Sent Antuan kilisesi*. This beautiful church was built in 1917 (the earlier church dated back to 1725) by circumventing the law which forbade the construction of Christian buildings near the road, close to the very crowded *Istiklâl Caddesi*, thanks to a felicitous solution of two architects who masked it by an artistic wrought iron grid.

The Friars Minor Conventual who look after the church welcome weekly from four to five thousand people “for the most part young people” the Friars report, “who come to venerate St Anthony, but pray to God through the intercession of the Saint. This is what we conclude from the large register called “the Book of Requests”. On Tuesdays (the busiest day) a large register is put on display for the visitors to enter their thoughts, wishes, requests for help with the basic necessities, freely in writing.

These visitors are devout Turks, Syrians, Armenians, Chaldeans, Gregorians/Georgeans? The majority of those who come are devout Muslim women, for whom the mosque and the church are the House of God. They feel at ease here because they may enter freely without wearing the veil and far from the eyes of men. On entering the church they approach the statue of the Saint, they buy a candle, light it and start to pray raising their hands. They repeat *Allahim, Allahim*, my God, my God, praying for health, well-being, serenity, a good marriage for their children. Other women come to enjoy the peaceful atmosphere, even when they are not sent by some Imam because here there is an individual relationship with the All Holy, to the point that some of them make a hasty sign of the Cross. They come from all over Turkey, not only from the city and its environs.

Father Luigi, who has spent 50 years in Turkey, wrote “In our church, one often sees large groups of students with their teachers, but above all, many open-minded young people without complexes, who look to the future in search of new paths to the future and to convincing answers to their difficulties. Fiancés and young couples come to ask for a benediction as a surety of faithfulness and unity. The devotion to Saint Anthony enables us to make some valuable experiments and to learn about very revealing situations. Many affirm that before *Aziz Antuan* (St. Anthony) they feel the presence of God. One day a student, studying sociology in Ankara, said “The professors explain everything through atheism and materialism but never notice that we young people are in search of a God adapted to modern people, different from the one in Islam”.

It is said that 80 % of the young Turks are in search of values in the fields of Art, Science, Technology, and Faith. This is not easy in the Muslim sphere. Thus they give credit to what Atatürk said, namely: that “Christianity is more congenial to the Turkish soul than is Islam”. I may say that I can confirm the truth of this every day, because the young people who come to our church say that here they find what they fail to find in the mosque. In this they are helped by the explanations of the religious as well as by the manual in Turkish that we have printed especially for them. In my opinion these youngsters are laying the first foundations of the bridge that may promote encounter and practical Islam-Christian dialogue, taking up that conversation St. Francis opened with Sultan Melek-el-Kamel in Damietta. The “miracle” is due to the Turkish language which has united two religious worlds thanks to Angelo Roncali, the then- Apostolic Delegate, who took the first step by calling the Muslims *brothers* and by praying in Turkish for the first time”.

**Article taken from the *Religiosi in Italia*, CISM Digest, March-April 2017, n. 419.