RICCOLDIAN STUDIES

In 1884, the German orientalist Reinald Röhricht published for the first time the *Epistolae quintae de perditione Acconis 1291 fratris Ricoldo de Monte Crucis*[9] according to the only known manuscript. He thus revealed what the last episode of the *negotium fidei*, which had been undertaken two centuries before Riccoldo's time in order to free the Holy Land, had represented for Riccoldo. In 1893, Father Pierre Mandonnet OP devoted a long article to Friar Riccoldo in the *Revue Biblique*,[10] in which he emphasized the excellence of Riccoldo's description of Palestine in his *Liber peregrinationis*.[11] In this article, Mandonnet brought to light the *Letters* that Riccoldo had addressed after the fall of Acre to the Church in Heaven, the Celestial Court, which he recognized as one of the major medieval lyrical texts.

In 1967, Father Antoine Dondaine OP achieved a true *aggiornamento* within Riccoldian studies. In his article 'Ricoldiana', published in the *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum*,[12] he took stock of what was known of Riccoldo's work, and published some extracts of his *Ad nationes orientales*. At this time, there was already a rich documentation on Riccoldo: Monneret de Villard's book *Il libro della peregrinazione nelle parti d'Oriente di Frate Ricoldo da Montecroce* and several articles about Riccoldo,[13] Father Raymond Loenertz's (OP) works on the *Frères Pérégrinants*, those of Father Joseph Henninger on the missionaries' contribution to the knowledge about Islam,[14] Father Marco Voerzio's (OP) works on Friar Guillaume of Tripoli,[15] those of Father Angel Cortabaria, Dominican from Cairo,[16] and Charles Puech's laudatory appreciation of Riccoldo as the first medieval Westerner to talk about the Mandeans.[17]

While making a catalogue of the manuscripts originating from the Florentine monastery of Santa Maria Novella—where Riccoldo had stayed—and kept in the National Library of Florence, on the occasion of the monastery's seventh centennial in 1980, Gabriella Pomaro discovered Riccoldo's major work, the *Contra legem Sarracenorum*, under the registration BnF Conv. Soppr. C 8. 1173, ff. 185r–218r.[18] It is followed on ff.

9 Röhricht 1884.
10 Mandonnet 1893.
11 Cf. Baldi 1955.
12 Dondaine 1967.
13 Monneret de Villard 1944; 1948.
14 Henninger 1953.
15 Voerzio 1955.
16 Cortabarria Beita 1970.
17 Cf. Puech 1949.
18 Cf. Pomaro 1980.

219r–244r by *Ad nationes orientales*,[19] a presentation of the Eastern peoples and religions written for the Dominican friars who were destined to work in the East.

In this Florentine manuscript—a true authorial manuscript—there were passages written by Riccoldo's own hand. In view of the significance of this discovery, Father Emilio Panella[20] rewrote the note 'Riccoldus' in the *Scriptores Ordinis Praedicatores Medii Aevi*.[21] Among the old notes dedicated to Riccoldo, one may recall those by Quétif-Echard,[22] by Vincent Fineschi in *Memorie istoriche que possono servire alle vite degli uomini illustri del Convento di S. Maria Novella di Firenze dall'anno 1221 al 1320*,[23] and by Father Stefano Orlandi in the *Necrologio di S. Maria Novella*.[24]

The *Liber peregrinationis*,[25] the *Contra legem Sarracenorum* and Riccoldo's first Letter have since been translated into Italian,[26] and the *Liber peregrinationis* and the *Letters* into French.[27] Thanks to Father Emilio Panella, the text of the *Ad nationes orientales* can be found on the internet, along with a new edition of the Latin text of Riccoldo's *Letters*.[28]

THE FALL OF ACRE, AS EXPERIENCED IN BAGHDAD

When Friar Riccoldo arrived in the East in 1288, he did not know, as he put it himself, "what he should have known" in order to face what awaited him. He had not opened himself up to the spiritual wealth of the Eastern Christians and he still knew nothing of the Arabic language or of Islam. During a stay of almost ten years in Mesopotamia, his knowledge about ecumenism and Christian–Muslim dialogue developed consid-

19 Cf. Mérigoux 1986a. In the Latin–Arab glossary that was authoritative in the 13th century, *lex* signifies *dīn* (religion) and *sarracenus* signifies *muslim*, cf. Schiaparelli 1871. It is worth noting that in his *Ad nationes*, Riccoldo quotes entire passages of the *Contra Gentiles* in order to describe the Nestorian and Monophysite positions.

20 Cf. Panella 1988.

21 Kaeppeli & Panella 1993.

22 Cf. Quetif & Echard, 1719, pp. 504–506.

23 Fineschi 1790.

24 Orlandi 1955, n. 222.

25 de Sandoli 1984, 'Itinerarius fratris Ricoldi, ordinis fratrum predicatorum, textus latini cum versione italica', with the Latin text 'Itinerarius Fratris Riculdi' in Laurent, 1873.

26 Ricoldo da Montecroce, *I Saraceni*, pp. 55–181. Riccoldo's first *Letter* has been republished, presented and translated into Italian in Panella 1989.

27 Riccold de Monte Croce, *Pérégrination en Terre Sainte et au Proche Orient* (text at pp. 36–205), *Lettres sur la chute de Saint Jean d'Acre* (text at pp. 208–252), ed. Kappler 1997. Cf. Mérigoux 1990. On the first French translation of the Itinerary, by Jean Lelong, cf. Mérigoux 1973, p. 616; Panella 1988, pp. 65–77.

28 Riccoldo da Monte di Croce, *Libellus ad nationes orientales* and *Letters*.

erably. The link between theology and missionary behaviour is very close in Riccoldo's work. When he arrived in the East, he considered that not only the Saracens, but even all the non-Catholic Christians would be damned. His life in the East caused him to change his judgements to such an extent that he ended up wondering if these non-Catholic Christians really were heretic, and admiring many aspects of Muslim life.

In Baghdad, Riccoldo came to know apostolic delights, but also the great sorrow of seeing the persecution of the Christians by the Mongols, who had turned into radical Muslims.

On 18 May 1291, the Mamluks of Egypt captured Acre, a city that would later be known as "Saint John of Acre" in memory of the Knights of Saint John.[29] This event was extremely painful for all of Christianity.[30] Its repercussions were felt in the entire East and the Christians were the first to be affected.[31] Although the event did not alter the ruling khan's favourable policy towards the Christians in Baghdad, the population often reacted with growing hostility. Many Muslims changed their behaviour and the relations between both communities deteriorated. The event was traumatic for Riccoldo because he had personally known the friars of Acre who were slaughtered. The group of Dominicans in Baghdad was now condemned to isolation. Acre, which had formed the connection with the West and was where their religious supervisors had lived, did not exist anymore.

Baydu, the new khan who gained power in March 1295, was, just like his father, a friend of the Christians. But his reign was brief and he was assassinated in September the same year. The Mongols' arrival in Baghdad and the end of the Abbasids had firstly brought hope to the Christians, but the atmosphere changed quickly after the assassination of Baydu.[32] For the Christians, this was the beginning of their suffering. Having embraced Islam, the new sovereign Khan Ghazan proclaimed it the official religion and enacted a *yarlik* of destruction of the churches. The catholicos-patriarch Yahwalaha III was arrested and tortured.[33] New taxes were imposed on non-Muslim men. Jews and Christians had to wear special clothing. *Maphrian* Bar Hebraeus, a rep-

29 The city of Acre, Acco, Akkâ, known as Ptolémaïs in ancient times and Saint John of Acre during the Middle Ages.

30 Cf. Grousset 1934–1936, vol. 3, pp. 741–763; Richard 1996, 'Les lendemains de la chute d'Acre', pp. 479–482.

31 Cf. the account of the capture of Acre in Wiet 1931–1940, vol. 4, pp. 459–460.

32 "One cannot deny that the Christians considered the Mongols' arrival (in 1258) as a relief and that they were pleased with their triumph as with the fall of the new Babylon." Fiey 1980, pp. 271–274.

33 Cf. Chabot 1895, pp. 134–142.

resentative of the Syriac catholicos in the region, wrote sadly: "The Mongols had all become Saracens, the nobles as well as the little people."[34]

OPEN LETTERS TO HEAVEN

Facing these dramatic events in great spiritual darkness, Riccoldo entered into profound meditation about Providence's mysterious intentions, and he thought back of all he had learnt of the slaughter of the Dominicans and Franciscans in the city of Acre. All this tormented him greatly,[35] and in an attempt to restore inner calm, he set to express his complaint in five "Epistles" addressed to the Celestial Court:[36] "Open Letters" where he displayed his suffering as well as his and the Eastern Christians' personal drama, in a style that evokes Jeremiah's *Laments* and the *Fourth Book of Esdras*.[37] He confessed his indignation at so much suffering and disgrace inflicted on the disciples of Christ.

34 Cf. Fiey 1975, p. 63.

35 "The Mamluks slaughtered the Dominicans who sung the *Salve Regina* as they awaited martyrdom", in Richard 1953, pp. 333–345. Cf. Grousset 1939, pp. 371–384. In the monastery of Acre, Riccoldo was probably able to receive the intellectual and missionary legacy of Friar Guillaume of Tripoli, who lived in Acre until 1273 and was the author of an important work on the Saracen world and Muslim religion. Cf. Voerzio 1970.

36 Cf. 'Epistolae V', ed. Röhricht; Panella, 'Preghiere e protesta'.

37 In bringing up his pain, Riccoldo may have drawn his inspiration from the *Fourth Book of Esdras* [also known as *Apocalypse of Esdras*], III, 1 [French translation quoted by Father Mérigoux]: "La trentième année de la ruine de la Ville, j'étais à Babylone, moi Salathiel, qu'on appelle aussi Esdras. Reposant sur mon lit, j'étais troublé et des pensées me montaient au cœur, parce que je voyais la désolation de Sion et la prospérité des habitants de Babylone. Mon esprit était fortement agité et je m'adressais avec crainte au Très Haut. Je dis: Ô Seigneur souverain, n'as-tu pas parlé au commencement, lorsque tu as, toi seul, formé la terre [...] Et maintenant, je te dis en mon cœur: se conduisent-ils mieux, les habitants de Babylone? Est-ce pour cela que Babylone domine Sion ? A mon arrivée ici, j'ai vu des impiétés sans nombre et j'ai vu moi-même une multitude de pêcheurs durant trente ans. Mon cœur est troublé. [...] Car j'ai vu comment tu soutiens les pécheurs, comment tu as épargné les impies, perdu ton peuple et préservé les ennemis! Babylone fait-elle mieux que Sion? Y-a-t-il un autre peuple qui t'ait connu en dehors d'Israël ? [...] J'ai en effet parcouru les peuples en tous sens et je les ai vu prospères, alors qu'ils oublient tes commandements. IV 1: L'ange Ouriel, qui m'avait été envoyé, me répondit en ces mots: Ton cœur s'est fort éprouvé à la vue de ce monde et tu penses comprendre la voie du Très-Haut!". See *La Bible,* écrits *intertestamentaires*, pp. 1399–1402.

What one can call Riccoldo's great hardships lasted from autumn 1295 to Easter 1296. Lost in the desert into which he had escaped, he was arrested by the Saracens and commanded to become Saracen. Having refused, he was forced to join a caravan and to become a camel driver. This caused him to gladly consider himself as a "camel driver of Christ".[38]

Father Mandonnet has evoked Friar Riccoldo's moving testimony: "For its originality and its importance, Riccoldo's letters on the fall of Acre remain one of the most curious monuments of the apostolic life in the East during the 13th century. Either regarding the psychology of a missionary soul or regarding history and literature, they are worthy of serious study and much attention."[39]

EXTRACTS FROM THE *LETTERS TO THE CHURCH IN HEAVEN* BY FRIAR RICCOLDO

Here begins the preface of the work that a friar preacher was pushed to write. Epistles on the Saracens' worldly prosperity and of the total abandonment of the Christians. *Aleph*.[40] I was staying in Baghdad among the deportees on the banks of the Kebar River, the Tigris.[41] On the one hand, I was thrilled by the charm of the surrounding greenness. It was like a paradise planted with trees of abundant and various fruits, like a well-watered garden surrounded by edifices covered with gold.

On the other hand, the collapse and enslavement of the Christian people after the dreadful capture of Acre plunged me into immense sorrow: on the one hand indeed, the triumphant Saracens, on the other the Christians stripped of everything, dismayed and demoralized. Their daughters, their children, their elders and spouses[42] taken to the remote Eastern regions in order to be enslaved by barbarian nations. Suddenly, I entered into unfamiliar meditation. In my profound sadness, I began to reflect more seriously than usually about the purposes of God in governing the world. Why had this race triumphed? Why had the Christian people collapsed? Finding no explanation, it came to me to write to God and the Celestial Court. I wanted to present my request in prayer, with the desire of being strengthened in the purity of the faith and to see

38 Cf. Mérigoux 1986b.

39 Mandonnet 1893, p. 594.

40 This is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet; cf. Lamentations 1:1.

41 Ezekiel 1:1.

42 According to Röhricht's edition the text says *senes et rumoribus*, according to Panella's edition it says *senes cum uxoribus*.

the Christians, especially the captives, freed of the enemies. Distressed as I was, I have written the following epistles like a prayer of a soul in bitterness.

First Epistle

Epistle of an astonished soul (*admirantis animae*) to the living and true God governing the world.

To the King of the ages, God incorruptible and invisible, unique, honour and glory forever and ever. Amen. You are admirable, your decrees are unfathomable and your ways are incomprehensible.[43] It is not surprising that you do wonders; it would be much more if you did not. Indeed, you are so wonderful that I do not know what would be the most wonderful: to do wonders or not to do? This would be wonderful as well. Your holy prophet David declared to us: "You are the God who does wonders."[44] If my intelligence rises above the terrestrial dust and strives to gaze upon you, it is filled with admiration. Who will allow me to reach your throne? Then, my judgement will vanish in your presence, and full of objections, my mouth will wish to know all your responses.

But now I am prompted by the tribulations and cannot reach the serenity of contemplation. How can I talk to you in sweetness while my body is wrapped in sackcloth and ashes are sprinkled on my head? It is not appropriate for the one "wrapped in sackcloth" of mortality to enter the dwelling of the eternal King. I would rather resemble a second Mordecai, "crying out with a loud and bitter cry" in the midst of the city.[45] Perhaps my laments will then reach the ears of Esther's servants and of the eunuchs, who will themselves announce it to Queen Esther, to the Virgin Mary and finally to the King of the Kings. In my suffering, my God, I will say to you: "You are just and I cannot argue with You without your consent. I know my Lord that all your judgements are just."[46] These judgements, nobody can blame them fairly, for nobody understands them fully.

My Lord, you know everything;[47] I do not come to you with a criticizing mind, but with the desire to talk to you and express my feelings, although you are more interior to me than I am to myself. My Lord, I do not try to penetrate your transcendence, which exceeds my intelligence so much, but my heart believes in your mercy and in your truth. It loves them and desires to understand them: "I do not try to understand

43 Romans 11:33.
44 Psalms 77:15.
45 Esther 4:1–2.
46 Acts of the Apostles 16:7; 19:2.
47 John 21:17.

in order to believe but I believe in order to understand, by believing I will certainly understand."[48] I know that you always do wonders, but it seems to me that you have renewed these wonders and changed their signs. Yet, the holy prophet used to assure us of your might. But now, what happened in Antioch, Tripoli and Acre[49] encourages the Eastern people to claim your powerlessness. For us however, there are no gods or lords but Lord Jesus Christ, whom some would like to consider only as a man, and not as a God: a man incapable of confronting Muhammad, whose fortune seems to worsen dismally. They also say that Muhammad's fortune has totally surpassed Christ's. The "Where is the God of the Christians?" that they openly claim among the people has also become the shout of the Jews and of the Tatars. All of them want to convince us that Jesus, son of Mary, is not God and cannot help us. My Lord, why do you not display your might among the people? Please remember Sennacherib's insulting words: "Where is the God of Sepharvaim?"[50] Then you had responded by sending your angel, who had killed 18,500 men in one night alone.

So why are you now sleeping, my Lord? Do you not care if we perish? As Mark the Evangelist has said, not only did he sleep, but "he slept on his pillow".[51] O pillow on which the one sleeps who is vigilant and holy. But I cannot shake my Lord, not even softly, to wake him! Your prophet has said: "You made your strength known to the people."[52] To me it is not enough that you have made it known to them, make it known now. Arise Lord, save us, do not reject us definitively! Why are you looking away and forgetting about our misery and tribulation?[53] Arise, Lord, help us, not because of us who are sinners, but release us because of your name. You are in us Lord, and your name has been invoked on us ...[54]

It is impossible not to mention the fundamental attacks of Muhammad's followers: they eliminate the Holy Trinity and the mystery of Incarnation, they take away the Father from the Son and the Son from the Father and the Holy Spirit from both of them. Yes, I have read in Arabic in the Alkoran: "The Father can have no son since

48 Cf. Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, I, 241–243: "And you my Lord, how long? How long my Lord will You forget us, for how long are You looking away from us? When will You look at us and listen to us? [...] And neither do I try to recognise in order to believe, but I believe in order to recognise. For I believe it: if I did not believe, I would not recognise."

49 Capture of Antioch on 14 May 1268 by Baybars, of Tripoli 26 April 1289 by Qalâwûn, of Acre 18 May 1291 by al-Achraf Khalil.

50 Isaiah 36:19.

51 Mark 4:38.

52 Psalms 77:15.

53 Lamentations 5:20; Isaiah 64:7.

54 Jeremiah 14:9: this text comes from the chapter of Dominican Complines.

he has no wife." O Lord, how many altars and churches they have destroyed, and how much contempt they have shown in putting Christians, perfect men, predicators of the faith, preachers and minors to death! How many times have their tyrants shared out your consecrated nuns and those who were destined for virginity, your faithful wives! What king, being able to fight back, has ever suffered that another king seized his wife?

Therefore, with the obedience of your Vicar, I have come to these profound Eastern lands as a weak friar preacher, going around and preaching you Christ. But I fell into the hands of the enemies, who wanted to force me to preach Muhammad and his belief by hitting and threatening me. As I refused and withstood their torments and threats with your help, they deprived me of the holy habit of my Order. In my confusion, I had to take a camel driver's habit and to drive a camel with a chain. Having been for so long a negligent friar preacher, I suddenly became an attentive camel driver. So, crying tears of joy, I said: "O Lord, I know that Muhammad has been a camel driver;[55] can it be that by your decree, I, under the habit of a camel driver, will have to face this camel driver? No, I do not refuse to fight for you, no matter under which habit." But having returned to myself, I experienced how difficult it is to accomplish what I had projected. Pulling myself together, I then thought that my poverty, in the apostolic perfection ordered to your apostles, was the cause of my failure. And now suddenly, I think of this great and very fervent preacher, the blessed Dominic, founder of the Order of the Preachers,[56] whom you have let shine in the West by his doctrine and his miracles ...

Lord, how long will you suffer that? Be attentive to the captives' groaning; avenge the blood that has been shed. Now the Holy Land, having been corporeally visited by you, the Most Holy, and consecrated by your precious blood, groans as it is deprived of its Christian inhabitants. Day and night, Muhammad is now announced aloud where Christ used to be preached. Yes, I have learned how the sea of Tripoli and Acre have turned red by the blood of the slaughtered, and how the sea has swallowed those who had been spared from the Saracens' swords and arrows ... We have become a reproach to our neighbours,[57] and I do believe, Lord, that we have deserved these punishments by our sins. But Lord, once, you accepted to spare Sodom for ten righteous persons. Were there not ten righteous persons among so many Christians and clergymen living in the whole city of Tripoli or Acre? For one single righteous man you once spared the Jews and you said through you prophet: "Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through its squares. If you can find but one person

55 Cf. de Premare 2002, pp. 38–39.
56 Cf. Vicaire 1957.
57 Psalms 44:14; 79:4.

who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city."[58] Lord, I have learned that not only one or ten, but many friar preachers had stayed in the city of Acre although they could have gone out and escaped. They preferred to die with God's people as witnesses of the faith, and they were killed. Does he not pursue the faith, the one who dies for the faith? Lord, do I dare to ask you if you have changed in our respect, have you become crueller in letting a large amount of righteous people perish with few impious people, you who had often spared many impious people for few righteous people? Indeed, you have saved Moses from the waters as he was a child crying in a basket of rush, in order to make him a liberator.

But whereas I reject these sophistic arguments, the proofs are presented to me that great multitudes of Christians have repudiated Christ and become Saracens after these events. Wretched man! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?[59] I expected the opposite, which would be only too logical. Indeed, when the heathens slaughtered the Christians, many heathens became Christians. But now, O misfortune, it is the opposite. We can observe a change in the right hand of the Almighty, towards the left, and even the most sinister left. The Christians that were spared in the Saracens' slaughters are embracing Muhammad's law. I have no consolation but you, my God. I have stayed alone in Baghdad, separated from my fellows, deepest in the East. From the West, no more news from the Order. What can have happened to the General Master, why does he leave my so sorrowful letters unanswered? Yet, I asked for help. Every day I am wounded to death. Being considered as a lamb to be slaughtered, I have become a stranger to my brothers, unknown by the sons of my mother. For you, Lord, I have abandoned the world. Having come to the Order, I wanted to announce you to the Saracens and the Tatars. I have come out from the very heart of the seas,[60] broken by the tempest! Do not let the tempest of water swallow me! I know indeed, Lord, that your mercy is sweet although mysterious and hidden. I beg you, O my God, to confirm me in your holy faith and to promptly release the Christian people from the hands of the impious. May your name be blessed to ages of ages … Given in the East.

Second Epistle

Since the Divine Clemency did not respond immediately, my afflicted soul added this epistle intended for the blessed Queen in Heaven.

58 Jeremiah 5:1.
59 Romans 7:24.
60 Jonah 2:4.

To the blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, Queen in Heaven and advocate of the world. A friar preacher in the East, with an afflicted soul, deprived of joy and peace, addresses to you who are joy and peace. Several times already, I have written to the divine Wisdom and exposed to it my sorrow and my astonishment, but I have not yet received a consoling and enlightening response. Now, most blessed Queen, in my cries I endeavour to make you know the cause of my sorrow and of my disappointment, and I hope to receive your merciful support in my misery.

I fall back on you with trust and confidence, I, miserable sinner, knowing that the sovereign judge has established you as Queen of mercy and advocate of the sinners in the celestial curia. Having reflected on my future for many years and turned towards bearing witness of your Son, I have faced the enemy of mankind, who wanted to hold me by depicting the numerous and serious dangers of such a trip for my fragile health. As I was crushed and had delayed again and again, I heard a voice in my heart: "Put your thoughts in the Lord, and he will nourish you."[61] From now on, be certain that if difficulties or danger should arise, you will receive support if you invoke the patronage of the Queen of mercy. This is why I stand before you with confidence and familiarity, and ask you: "If you accept to be my intendant and housekeeper, the *massaria*, I will walk safely." As you know, in my land *massaria* commonly refers to the woman providing for the house's necessities; and I have experienced that in all dangers and in the barest necessities, when I have said to you: "Where is the house's *massaria*?", you have always understood me and enfolded me with your patronage.

Here I am now, alone in a remote land, week in my body, sad in my heart, dismayed in my soul. From my exile, I scream to you as the son of Eve,[62] but also as the son of a multitude. Wretched! Wretched! I have come from the West to the Eastern lands to preach Christ, to baptize and to work towards the expansion of our holy Mother the Church, and now I hear of dispersion and dissemination, and I see it by myself. Wrested from the womb, from the very heart of the holy Mother Church, the Christians are killed or sold and taken to Baghdad and the remote Eastern regions; so large is the number of captives. As I was searching among them, trying to recognize some of my friar preachers, I was told that all had suffered a violent death. Old men and children are sold to strangers. Chalices, chalice cloths and other consecrated ornaments intended to the altars' spiritual ministry are passing from the table of Christ and from the service of the Body and Blood of the Lord, to the hands of the Saracens. The holy books of the Prophets and of the Gospels are handed over to the dogs.

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61 1 Peter 5:7.

62 Cf. the *Salve Regina*, a Marian antiphon from the 11th century closing the office of Complines, especially among the Dominicans.

But the most lamentable is that the nuns, the virgin wives of your most holy Son, have been captured: the most beautiful being chosen and sent to the Saracen kings and princes to engender posterity; others being sold or given to minstrels who take them all over the world, to the shame of the Christians and of your most holy Son Jesus Christ. O Our Lady, we know that your Son is the splendour of the eternal light, the spotless mirror to which nothing pleases but purity. Does it please him more that nuns and consecrated virgins become slaves and concubines of the Saracens, and engender Saracens' sons, rather than keeping their vow of virginity, thus conceiving, through the Holy Spirit, holy thoughts in contemplation of your divine Son, and giving birth to a ministry of love? … Of course, we recognize that everything happens with God's permission. But may the Saracens know God and thank him for their victory! On the contrary, their gratitude goes to Muhammad, their benefactor by the merit of the Alkoran. They attack Christ: "The Christians trust a certain Jesus, Son of Mary, who they believe to be God but seems impotent against Muhammad …"

As you know, I was in Sebaste,[63] a city in Turkey, when I heard the sorrowful news of the capture of Tripoli. They attached a cross depicting the crucified to the tail of a horse who went all over the city, starting with the quarter of the Friars and the Christians, and dragged his sorrowful trophy in the mud. And this they did on a Sunday, to make the insult to the Christians and to Christ even worse. We learn from eyewitnesses that everywhere, in Galilea, in Judea, in Jerusalem, the Saracens have put out the eyes of your images and of those of your divine Son with spears, swords and sticks. All the paintings have been so to say "blinded" as an insult to the Christians and to Christ. What mother would endure her son being blinded? Have we not found, in Turkey, Persia and until Baghdad, that Christian churches had been destroyed or changed to barns, sometimes to mosques? Where they were not able to do so, they have built a mosque or a minaret just next to the church, with a high tower from where they proclaim the faith of Muhammad in the face of the Christians. In Tauris,[64] a city in Persia, they have made a Koranic school of the very large and beautiful church that the Christians had built in the honour of the beloved disciple saint John the Evangelist, your nephew. Do you not read in Arabic, in many passages of the Alkoran, Muhammad's demonstration: "It is impossible that God has a son since he has no wife." In this short and foolish speaking, this fleshly and obscene blasphemer endeavours to take away the Son from the Father and the Father and divinity from the Son. And you, O Virgin Mary, in many passages of the Alkoran, you become this ancient Mary from the time

63 Sivas, Turkey. The news of the fall of Tripoli (27 April 1289) must have reached Sebaste on 1 May: cf. Panella 1986, p. xxxiii.

64 Tabriz, Iran.

of Moses, daughter of Amran, sister of Moses and Abron. You are supposed to have said: "I would prefer death rather than having given birth to such a son". O Our Lady, you know that they commonly teach that your Son Jesus should come back at the end of the world to become a Saracen. O Our Lady, as I passed close to the Tigris, the river of Paradise, between Baghdad and Nineveh I found the ancient Baghdad,[65] where they still wait for the son Haah,[66] dead 600 years ago, with a mule lavishly saddled and prepared which they display every Friday. As to Jesus, Son of Mary, they announce that he will return in his time and choose the Saracens. O Our Lady, regarding your Son, I believe in you and reject the Saracens' thought. I cannot admit such an error. I beg you, O most merciful, take care of us, look at our miseries and relieve them ... Obtain from him that the Lord's wrath and fury turn into tranquillity and mercy, as much for the Christians as for the Saracens. Hail, O most beautiful, and always pray Christ for us. Given in the East.

Third Epistle

[In this letter, Riccoldo brings up the social situation in Baghdad after the fall of Acre.]

I, miserable sinner sent to preach the faith of Christ to the Saracens and the Tatars, I see Tatars, other people and even Christians become Saracens. If the persecution initiated two years ago in Tripoli and Acre continues, with all the murders, imprisonments, torments and tortures, all Christians will disappear from this world. Who will give water to my head and to my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I can mourn day and night the victims of the daughter of my people? Stifled by the devil rather than killed by sword, affected by the scandals or the impatience, or pressed by hunger or other necessities, they have disavowed the faith of Christ. Alas! Alas! Alas my God, have you deceived your people, by saying "Peace, Peace", whereas the sword is now piercing to the soul? What will I do, I, miserable and afflicted, left alone deep in the East among the captives. In the course of one day, they say, thirty thousand Christians have been slaughtered. By distress and lack of courage, others disavow the faith of Christ and embrace the faith of Muhammad. I have already written to the divine Wisdom and its immaculate Mother, exposing to them my sorrow and my astonishment. Having

65 Samarra, a city located 125 km north of Baghdad, which was the residence of the Abbasid caliphs between 836 and 692.

66 Muhammad al-Mahdi (868–874), twelfth imam 'alide of the Twelver Shi'a, whose return to Samarra is awaited after his "occultation", *ghayba* in the *sirdâb* of his palace; he is the "awaited", *al-muntazar*.

received no response yet, I will do like the one who suffers an intolerable insult on the public place. I will scream aloud: "Come running, man!" Will nobody respond?

O Father, grand Dominic, founder of the Order of the Preachers, you have grown your beard in order to face the Saracens in the West. You have not succeeded. Now that you are close to your God, you are very mighty. How could you remain silent when we have such a need for your patronage? Many saints are joining you to implore strongly the God Almighty. Many clergymen slaughtered by the Saracens can reinforce your group. I anxiously question those who come from the capture of Acre, but nobody can ensure me that a single friar preacher is still alive.[67] I examine the captives: none of my friars among them. But among the Saracens, I find tunics, ornaments, books, breviaries. O my friars, thus despoiled, where have you gone? It is not in our habits to travel without tunics and breviaries. From those coming from the disaster, I could get a tunic pierced with a spear or a sword and even lightly reddened by blood. Moaning and crying, I recognized the tunic of my Order and bought it back cheap.

O blessed Dominic, I am looking for my brothers. Sent from the Valley of Hebron, from the Western regions I came to Shechem.[68] In a dry land burnt by the sun. I came to preach the faith; I find plenty of books, writings on the faith, but I do not find my brothers. I am looking for my brothers. Please show me where they take care of the flock.[69] No, they do not feed the flock anymore but are fed themselves by an excellent Pastor in rich pastures. They have been slaughtered: Earth, do not cover my blood![70] Do not cover the blood of my brothers that has been shed, so that the blood of the captives may enter in your presence …

O Saint Gregory[71]… after having destroyed Acre, the Saracens have taken your book of the *Moralia* to Nineveh, this great city, where I bought it as a captive slave, separated from Christianity by more than fifty days of camel caravan …

O, group of the Apostles … the Christian churches are destroyed and mosques are erected. The holy Gospels are burnt or thrown to the sea. I myself have found a missal

67 A friar from the convent, Fra Matteo, escaped and reached Florence, broken by tiredness after his travels; cf. Abel 1934, p. 283; Orlandi 1955, p. 15, n. 148; Cenci 1998, n. 37.

68 Genesis 37:14.

69 Song of Solomon 1:7.

70 Job 16:18.

71 Gregory the Great, pope 590–604, *Doctor Ecclesiae*. Among his writings, a commentary of the Book of Job: *Moralia in Job*. This is the work of a great spiritual master, made to enlighten and give confidence to the faithful in their spiritual life and in the midst of their trials: "The soul of the afflicted man approaches God all the more as it is abandoned by men's favour. He immediately pours prayers out and, being oppressed from outside, he purifies himself in order to seize interior realities." (*Moralia* 10, 47–48). Cf. Dagens 2014, pp. 328–333; Gregoire le Grand, *Morales de Job*.

containing the epistles or Gospels, which had been taken to Nineveh, the great city, as the remains of the plunder of Acre. The Saracens had forbidden this book, they wanted to destroy it, to scratch its pages in order to turn them to skin for their drums and tambourines, which are widely used in the East. How can you sleep with that? ...

O sorrow! The Saracens pretend that Muhammad's name is written in the Gospel. I read chapter sixty-one of the Alkoran: "Jesus, son of Mary, openly declares: I am the envoy of God, O son of Israel, but I announce that another envoy will come after me, whose name is Muhammad."[72] To tell the truth, I do not find this in the Gospels, neither in the Chaldean ones,[73] neither in the Arabic ones, although I have read them very attentively in the East ... All you evangelists have written that Christ has been crucified to death. Muhammad pretends that a double had taken his place.[74] By saying so, the Saracens prevail against us. The Alkoran seems to prevail against the Gospels, especially in the East where this error has triumphed for more than seven hundred years.

When I was fleeing from Babylon[75] for the desert, I was captured at the gate of the city by the followers and ministers of Muhammad. They were of Saracen rite and wore Tatar habits. They stabbed me as they stripped me to force me to become a Saracen. But charity helped me to suffer their stabs and insults like a game ... This is why they took away from me the holy habit of my order and dressed me with the habit of a camel driver. The Saracens have been able to turn me into a camel driver, but not into a Saracen ...

And I, sinner but fully confident in your mercy, I scream and yell before the palace's gates. Like a second Mordecai with torn clothes,[76] a long beard, disavowed by my brothers even under my preacher's habit, dressed as a soldier or as a camel driver or as a preacher, I go all over the East to preach Christ to the Saracens and the Tatars, although not only the Tatars but even the Christians become Saracens ...

Wretched, what will I do when seeing dazed Christians upon the roads, dismayed by their sorrow and the fear for the Saracens? I meet old men, virgins, young children, tattered innocents, pale, weak, looking for bread to no avail, even among the Christians. Many desire to become the Saracens' slaves to get some food and avoid starvation. I see women, young and old, crying at the foot of a crucifix, hitting their desiccated breasts and imploring help with a broken and enfeebled voice ...

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72 Sura 56:6. An excellent overview of Islam's position regarding Jesus can be found in Arnaldez 1980.

73 Riccoldo knew both Syriac and Arabic, as appears from his study of the Christological vocabulary in these two languages; cf. Panella 1986, pp. xiv–xvi.

74 Sura 4:157.

75 Baghdad.

76 Esther 4:1.

O God, I beg you with all the saints and the whole Celestial Curia, deign to release us Christians from such a great misfortune, we that are placed under the Saracens' domination. As to the Saracens, I beg you with all my soul, deign to show them the true faith: You, Father of Heaven and Earth, true God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Forgive, for many sin by ignorance and not by malice. Honour and glory to you with all the saints to ages of ages. Amen. Given in the East.

Fourth Epistle

To the venerable father and brother in Christ, Friar Nicolas from the Order of the Friars Preachers, Patriarch of Jerusalem and to the other brothers who died during the capture of Acre, Friar Riccoldo from the same Order, afflicted and miserable pilgrim come to preach the faith of Christ in the East, sad and in tears.

To tell the truth, when Acre fell, my sorrow and my sadness were immense. Each of you has a personal experience of it. I was in Baghdad, deep in the East, when I learned of it. Moreover, remains from Christians have been brought. Books and ornaments were sold. Women and children were led all over the city to the shame of the Christians. Nuns and virgins consecrated to God were sent to the barons and kings of the Saracens to sell them at the higher price. As to me, I sadly and sorrowfully inspected them, hoping to find some of my brothers, to buy at least one of them free or to provide one or another service. I was surprised to find only tunics and breviaries, but no friar! In our Order, we usually do not go without a tunic and a breviary. Saracen cooks[77] coming from the capture of Acre showed me a very beautiful tunic pierced with a sword or a spear and lightly reddened by blood. I do not know to whom of you it used to belong. I bought it back. According to these Saracen merchants, no friar preacher would have escaped the slaughter. O brothers! The Saracens have killed you to prevent you from strengthening the other captives' faith. So rejoice in the Lord, my brothers, and again I say, rejoice![78] You have been put to death for your faith; you could have escaped the city by quitting your convent, which was built close to the sea. But you have preferred to stay to encourage the others in their faith.

But you, my brothers, tell me the time of your agony. What were your words when the enemies of the Christian faith swooped on you? It is told to have been a Friday at the Third Hour,[79] after you had celebrated the holy mass and received the Body and the Blood of Christ, whereas as great multitude of men, women and children sur-

77 *foccari*.
78 Philippians 4:4.
79 About 9 o'clock in the morning.

rounded you. I learned these details from a pious and trustworthy woman, captive of the Saracens. She attended your slaughter. When the enemies arrived, you were singing the *Veni Creator Spiritus* aloud.[80] It was costumary to sing it during the reception of a new member into the Order. It was just to sing it during the reception of so many friars preachers into the Order of the Angels. You were slaughtered during this chant, and since then, I have heard nothing of you …

Fifth Epistle

[In his last epistle, Riccoldo shows how, by means of Saint Gregory the Great's spiritual doctrine, he had been able to overcome the severe internal crisis into which he had been plunged by the slaughters that had happened during the capture of Acre. At the market of Mosul, among the objects looted from the convents of Acre, he had bought a copy of Pope Gregory's *Moralia*. This commentary of the Book of Job became the true response to the *Letters* that Riccoldo had sent to the Church in Heaven.]

I had before me the closed book of the *Moralia* by the blessed Gregory. I had asked God to respond by the doctrine of the blessed man to whom I had particularly addressed in my lament: "O Saint Gregory, you did not deign to respond, whether with a messenger or with letters. I beg you: show me in your ancient doctrine the reason of God's silence. My heart is so full of bitterness, so anxiously expecting a response. Then I heard like a voice in my heart: "Take it and read, take it and read."[81] I opened the book eagerly, and looking at the point where I had put my finger, I saw chaste words approaching me like a face. I had come across Job's words: "Why do you complain to him that he does not respond to all your words? For God speaks once and does not repeat twice."[82]

80 *Come, Creator Spirit*. This is the sequence of the Pentecost mass (12th century) that was sung during the ceremonies of taking of the habit in the Order of the Preachers.

81 Cf. Augustinus, *Confessiones*, VIII, 12, 29: "Tolle, lege."

82 Job 33:13–14.

And Gregory explains: "It is proper to an afflicted heart to want the Lord to respond to all demands by words."[83] This is the thought of God himself, who would openly say: "He does not respond privately to the heart of every single man, but his word is constructed so as to respond to everyone." The Scripture resolves all our questions. God responds in communion with our individual sufferings. There we find the life of our predecessors and the examples of those who may come. Again, the blessed Gregory says: "God speaks once and does not repeat twice,"[84] for he is careful to teach us through the Scriptures … This is what Saint Gregory says. I thank you, Lord, for having responded to my question the way you did through your servant Gregory. I have nothing more to ask. My Lord, I thank you for your theoretical response, however, I affectuously and ceaselessly wait for your practical response. Written in the East. Explicit. Deo gratias.

CONCLUSION

After this presentation of the *Letters* in which Riccoldo brought up his moral and spiritual sufferings, I would like to highlight a teaching of Saint John of the Cross, which brings up the obscure nights and the mystical sufferings that the followers of Christ may experience:

"It is Apostle Paul's doctrine to the Hebrews, when he compels them to abandon their primitive customs and their relations with God under the Law of Moses, and urges them to fix their eyes on Christ only. So many times in the past, and in so many ways, God had addressed to our fathers through the prophets, but in these times that are the last, he has addressed to us through the Son. Thus, the Apostle teaches us that God has become sort of mute. He has nothing more to say to us, since he has now told us thoroughly what he used to say in separate declarations through the prophets, delivering it completely through the Son. Consequently, you must admit that long-

83 Riccoldo quotes Saint Gregory quite accurately: Sancti Gregorii Magni, *Moralium libri in Job*, XXIII, 34, cols 271–272; S. Gregorii Magni, *Moralia in Iob libri XXIII–XXXV*, 19, 34, 1168. Riccoldo's fellow friar Saint Thomas Aquinas commented the verse 33:14 of Job similarly: "Ostendit consequenter Eliud non esse necessarium quod Deus homini ad singula verba respondeat, sed unicuique sufficienter loquitur ad eius instructionem, unde subdit *Semel loquitur Deus*, scilicet homini sufficienter ad eius instructionem; unde deinceps non oportet quod ad singulas hominis interrogationes respondeat, unde subdit *et secundo id ipsum non repetit,* quia quod sufficienter factum est iterare superfluum esset" (Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio super Iob ad litteram*, 175), and he praised Saint Gregory's commentary on Job, to which he seems to have nothing to add: "nihil ultra addendum videatur" (*Expositio super Iob*, *Prologus*).

84 Job 40:5.

ing for visions or revelations under the New Law is not only foolish; it is an offence to God, since by doing so our eyes are not fixed only on Christ anymore, but are searching for something new. God could answer indeed: I have told you everything I had to say through the Word which is my Son."[85]

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85 Jean de la Croix, 'La montée du Carmel', 2, 20.

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