

Preaching and Lifestyle

To understand the particularly Franciscan style of preaching, it is good to recall that preaching the faith itself was reserved to the bishop. The bishops, however, would delegate their right to specially chosen priests and deacons. From the very beginning, St. Dominic and his brothers, for example, took the bishops' task of proclaiming Church doctrine upon themselves. At the time, this form of preaching was called 'praedicatio', or preaching.

The preaching of St. Francis and his community was something completely different. At least at the beginning, only a few brothers cultivated the 'praedicatio'. In general, the 'exhortatio', a call to penance that resembled a song more than a sermon, was much more typical in the Franciscan fraternity. To deliver an 'exhortatio', no one required special training. Rather, one could, whenever necessary or useful, bear witness to Christ in this manner (cf. RegNB 21). The right and the power to issue a call to penance did not derive from an office in the Church, but from a life-style.

Preaching and life belong together. How can anyone call for conversion when he or she has not converted? Those who vouch for Sacred Scripture remain untouched by empty words.

To understand the meaning of the demand for congruence between preaching and life-style in the Franciscan movement, one must take a look at the historical context, particularly at the life of the thirteenth-century Church. The man or woman on the street, who did not stand before the episcopal palace in ignorance of the life-style of many prelates and officials, had to wonder about the curious incongruity between their life-style and the gospel message. A sermon on gospel poverty and humility delivered in a comfortable environment, or fueled by extravagant claims on power, could hardly be convincing. Of course, no one can accuse all the authorities of the middle ages with luxury and lust for power. Nonetheless, the apostolic poverty movements of the eleventh and twelfth centuries (Humiliati, Waldensians and other poverty preachers) express the longing of many persons for the simple, poor life-style of Jesus of Nazareth and a sharp criticism of the actual conditions. Broadly based groups demanded a gospel message that could be realized in a simple, humble life-style.

It is therefore easier to understand a somewhat odd statement St. Francis made when near death. He spoke to a brother who wanted to read something from scripture to him:

"It is good to read the testimonies of Scripture; it is good to seek the Lord our God in them. As for me, however, I have already made so much of Scripture my own that I have more than enough to meditate on and resolve in my mind. I need no more, son; I know Christ, the poor crucified one" (2Cel 105).

Only those who have the good news in their hearts can preach. But even further: only those who have themselves become the good news can convince others of it. This reality is true not only of individual brothers and sisters, but also of their communities.