

Preaching Francis

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That's what I want! That is what I am looking for! With my whole heart I long to do that!" What did Francis want and long to do? He earnestly longed to live and preach the Gospel as a herald of the great king. The Gospel was his rule and life, and that became the basis of his preaching. If we can describe a preacher, as Christ preaching Christ, Francis indeed was one of the great preachers because he had carbon copied Jesus' life so thoroughly. He was known as the Christ of Umbria. A surfer delights in a wave that moves, especially when on top of the wave and moving at a breathtaking pace. Francis delighted in surfing as long he was moving rapidly to live and preach the Gospel.

But Francis had to struggle within himself asking, "Brothers, what do you advise and commend? That I give myself wholly to prayer, or that I go about and preach?" He looked at his model, Jesus Christ, and decided to

preach as he did. Francis re-echoed John the Baptist as well as Christ's message: a turning away from selfishness and a turning toward God. He encouraged the friars, "Do not be afraid to preach penance even though we appear ignorant and of no account. Put your trust in God who overcame the world; hope steadfastly in him who, by the Holy Spirit speaks through you to exhort all to be converted to him..." Unlike many preachers of his time, like the Poor Men of Lyons, Francis proclaimed a Gospel of honesty; he practiced what he preached.

Francis took Christ at his word and tried to preach a literal Gospel message. But literalness did not mean how we interpret it. For Francis it meant handing himself over completely and nakedly to Christ as well as to all people and creation. He ceased to belong to himself and became available to all. People laughed at him and thought he was insane, but once they stopped laughing they

found not insanity but a saint. Because his father demanded restitution for the goods he sold, he stripped himself of everything in public before his father and the Bishop. What Francis felt inside, he expressed externally wanting to strip himself of all possessions so he could give himself completely to God. He surpassed the art of Michelangelo who could portray a naked body but never a naked person.

This literal proclamation of the Gospel offers a challenge to preachers today and continues as a Franciscan charism. Who were more qualified to restore the Gospel to its place of prominence than preachers who translated it so literally into their lives? The challenge to any preacher is to divest oneself of everything so one can preach Christ crucified and risen. Kahil Gibran, author of *The Prophet* states, "When we give our possessions, we give little; it's when we give ourselves that we truly give." Francis did that by risking all to find "My God and my All." How many preachers are willing to risk that?

Through his preaching, Francis helped others to grow in a basic insight into themselves. By preaching Christ he helped people liberate themselves to follow him who said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." (Jn 14: 6) Francis demonstrated what it meant to have the freedom of the sons and daughters of God. He realized that many were afraid about the

truth concerning themselves and the deeper Gospel message. By immersing himself into the Scriptures and studying the life of Jesus he was able through his preaching to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. Celano, his biographer, wrote of Francis' manner of preaching, "He looked upon the greatest multitude of people (sometimes thousands) as one person and he preached to one as he would to a multitude."

The Scriptures

The Scriptures penetrated his thinking, living and writings. Cajetan Esser believed that Francis did not quote Sacred Scripture so much, but rather he thought and lived it. Francis wrote, "Those religious are killed by the letter who do not wish to follow the spirit of Sacred Scripture, but only wish to know what the words are and how to interpret them to others." Francis had the greatest respect not only for the content of the Scriptures but also the paper they were written on. He believed God's will was revealed through them, and often repeated certain passages especially the words of Jesus, "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life." He knew many of the psalms by heart. Toward the end of his life, when he was in much pain, one of his companions asked him if he wanted the Scriptures read to com-

fort him. Francis replied, "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 revolve in my mind. I need no more, son; I know Christ, the poor crucified one."

Barbara Reid, OP and Leslie Hoppe, OFM listened to over a hundred tapes of homilies given by priests since 1970. They found very few examples of effective preaching using the Scriptures. Homilies are an integral part of the liturgy and therefore they have to flow from the Scriptures that are proclaimed. Jesus used many scriptural passages to proclaim the Good News. Francis who loved the Scriptures made a tongue of his whole body. The whole person spoke. We proclaim what we know and how we are formed. Preachers need to develop a deeper love of the Scriptures and incarnate God's word before they preach.

Simple language

Francis preached so simply that the simplest person could understand, but his simple words were filled with meaning and action. This was his genius. A close relationship exists between the genius and the simpler. He told his friars to let their language be well considered and simple saying, "I further warn and exhort

these same brothers that in the preaching they do, their words be fire-tried and refined, to serve for the benefit and edification of the people, telling them about the vices and virtues, the punishment and glory in few words, for a speedy word did the Lord make on earth." Francis did not make use of philosophical distinctions. He warned preachers to stay away from difficult and affected phrases because they were unworthy of Christ who died naked on the cross.

His simple words, however, were filled not only with meaning but also action. Chesterton wrote that Francis' acts "were always acts and not explanations; and they also meant what he meant to mean." He believed that more respect is paid to action than to words. Toward the end of his life Francis was suffering from intense pain due to his many illnesses. He spent some time at San Damiano and was asked to preach to the sisters stationed there. Instead of preaching he sat on the floor and then proceeded to spread ashes on the floor in a circle surrounding him. The rest of the ashes he sprinkled on his head. Francis did not utter a word while sitting in silence. After a while he prayed Psalm 51 and left. Raoul Manselli states that Francis used these symbolic actions to preach a message of conversion. This form of preaching we have to remember was part and parcel of the popular culture of his time.

Preachers can encourage their listeners to do something similar. A preacher of parish missions distributed seeds to the people attending a Lenten mission and asked them to watch them grow as a reminder of the dying process necessary for conversion. Jesus said, "Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." (Jn 12:24)

Simple language means using down to earth words, common words. It means using plain, unadorned, familiar language that is easily understood by listeners. St. John's prologue is a powerful example of simple yet sublime thought. Jesus used simple language as is brought out in his Sermon on the Mount. St. Paul insisted that if you "do not utter intelligible speech, how will anyone know what is being said? For you will be talking to the air." (1 Cor. 14:9) The Epistle of St. James is simple, direct and compact. St. Augustine wrote, "I prefer that grammarians should criticize me rather than my people should not understand me." He also maintained that it is useless to raise one's voice if we are not understood. Pope John XXIII lamented homiletic abstractions and profundities in an address to Lenten preachers of Rome. If we have a choice between a long or a short word, choose the short word ordinarily. The same principle applies to sentences. St. John Vianney could

warm the hearts of his people with simple sermons, while Lacordaire could arouse his listeners to nothing than applause.

One of the ways that Francis preached the good news of the birth of Jesus was to have it re-enacted. He asked the people of Greccio on Christmas day to re-enact the birth of Jesus with live animals and a real manger. This undoubtedly impressed on the people the poverty Jesus experienced at his birth. He followed this dramatic way of preaching by his own simple words. Francis, however, did not give a theological discourse, but knew how to preach on a feeling and intuitive level.

I remember giving a retreat conference to a group of religious sisters some years ago on poverty and identifying ourselves with the poor. For the noon meal that day I asked for some to volunteer to have only bread and water, some to have just a sandwich, some to have soup and a few vegetables, and others to have a sumptuous meal. It was fascinating to watch their reactions because they ate in silence. Some who had the food finally shared with others. Years later they remembered this event more than the conference.

Preaching by example

Francis preached not only using simple words, but especially by example. His basic underlying thought

was living example is more effective than the most beautifully constructed sermon. "A man has only as much knowledge as he puts into action. For a tree is known by its fruits." was the message he always insisted on in his life. It was not important to know the world but change it, was a dictum of Karl Marx. Francis changed his world because he was a man of concrete action and example.

The story is told how Francis went to a certain town to preach with one of his brothers. They walked through one gate of the town and walked out the opposite one without uttering a single word. The brother asked, "When are we going to preach?" Francis responded, "We have already done so by our example." He believed that an ounce of exemplification was worth more than a pound of explication. After he resigned as minister general of the Order he said, "Now there remains for me only to preach to the brothers by example, for that is why I was given to them."

Two by two

Francis said to his followers, "Go, my dearest brothers, two by two into the various parts of the world announcing to men peace and repentance unto the forgiveness of sins." The meaning of two by two was significant to Francis because Jesus had said where two or three are gathered

together in his name he was present. Jesus also sent out his disciples "ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit." (Lk. 10:1) In bringing the good news to others the friars were to build a community or nourish an existing one. What better way to exemplify this than by bringing in a sense one's own community? A deeper power lies in the lived word. Good example is an important aspect of Franciscan preaching.

Capuchin preachers, imitating Francis, journeyed from town to town barefooted, clothed with simple looking habit, carrying a cross aloft. They were not intimidated by the rich and powerful, but fearlessly rebuked sinful people regardless of the consequences. Enormous crowds, as many as 15-20 thousand people, attended Capuchin sermons. People were attracted as much by their example of penance and mortification as by their eloquence. They were so much in demand that city officials were forced to have recourse to Rome to obtain a Capuchin to deliver a Lenten or Advent sermon in their churches.

Franciscan Themes

Francis encouraged the friars, "Do not be afraid to preach penance even though we appear ignorant and of no account. Put your trust in God who overcame the world; hope steadfastly in him who, by the Holy Spirit

speaks through you to exhort all to be converted to him..."

Whenever Francis preached he would begin by saying, "Peace be with you all." His biographer, Thomas of Celano, wrote that Francis spread peace through his preaching. He told his friars, "As you announce peace with your mouth, make sure that you have greater peace within your hearts, thus no one will be provoked to anger or scandal because of you. Let everyone be drawn to peace and kindness through your peace and gentleness." Realizing that every person desires peace, Francis preached where people could find it: Christ, who said to his disciples, "Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this household.'" (Lk 10:5).

His Holiness Pope John II has said, "If you want peace, work for justice." Francis traveled to Perugia where he preached justice to the people gathered there. Some knights, as was their custom, rode up on their horses and tried to interfere with his words. He exhorted them to be kinder to their neighbors and live in a way more pleasing to God. If they did not, he predicted they would fall into civil war. Francis exclaimed, "Wrath will teach you, for kindness has not taught you." A few days later a civil war did break out.

Prayer

Francis insisted that "A preacher ought first in secret prayer to draw the water he intends later to pour out in sacred sermon; he ought to grow warm within before he utters cold words without." Francis had the custom of preaching at the cathedral in Assisi, but spent the night in prayer before he preached. He practiced what he preached when he exhorted the friars, "Do not neglect the pursuit of prayer and that they study it in order not only to learn how to preach, but to put what they hear into practice." He warned those friars who boasted about how many people came back to the faith by telling them that without the prayers of their brothers behind the scenes their efforts were fruitless. He was not pleased with friars who wanted to be praised as rhetoricians or elegant preachers, rather than preachers who spoke with sincerity and love stemming from their prayer life.

Prayer is intimately connected to our preaching because the heart and center of preaching preparation is prayer. Good preachers are rooted and grounded in prayer. Prayer is indispensable and needs to be a top priority for a preacher. Few of us are "confirmed in grace" or angelic in nature, but our prayer life will help

us to preach like Jesus and Francis who spent so much time in prayer. When we cease to pray we become like a dried up fig tree, which Jesus cursed. Just as people can tell if we have prepared a homily, they can also perceive if we are prayerful preachers.

When we pray the Scriptures we have to allow God to speak to us. Hence active and attentive listening is crucial to prayer. Prayer helps to interiorize the Word so it can become life-giving for our listeners and us. A good preacher becomes a pray-er.

Spontaneity

Francis had difficulty memorizing sermons. He often forgot what he wanted to say. On the feast of the Assumption in 1222, he attempted to memorize the sermon he was to deliver before the papal court. While giving the sermon his mind went blank. He opened up his breviary, chose a psalm verse and drawing on his deep spiritual life awed those in attendance.

Francis confessed to the people that he meditated on many things but he could not remember them. But he was filled with such eloquence that he moved the hearts of listeners, and spoke of things not heard before. At other times when he had nothing to say he gave his listeners a blessing and dismissed them feeling that he had given a sermon. St. Augustine

was also known to improvise on biblical texts after much prayer and meditation.

Yes, Francis longed to live and preach the Gospel as a herald of the great king. He also wanted his friars to do the same saying, "They are life of the body, the campaigners against the demons, the light of the world." He practiced what he preached and set an example for the other friars. Charles Laughton once wrote, "Good reading is reading something you love to someone you love." Maybe Franciscan preaching can be characterized in this way: preaching Christ whom the preacher loves to someone the preacher loves. Lacordaire, the outstanding Dominican preacher asked, "Who will carry truth down below: Who will make it descend to the poor, the common people? Let them hear Demosthenes. And the Demosthenes of the people is the Capuchin!"

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Feast of St. Francis is Oct. 4

The Bible becomes ever more beautiful the more it is understood

J. W. Goethe

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