

Being a Preacher : The Franciscan Way

John Harding OFM

Reading Simon Tugwell's book *The Way of the Preacher*¹ led me to consider what St Francis of Assisi had to say about preaching and what is the place of preaching in the life of the Franciscan.

Given that both the Dominicans and the Franciscans are essentially mendicant, it is not surprising that over the centuries they have been heavily involved in both preaching and teaching. As Fr. Tugwell ably demonstrates, the Order of Preachers came into being as the practical response of St Dominic to the most urgent need of the Church in southern France, namely, the need for competent and devout preachers. St Dominic realized that to reverse the serious decline of the Church in southern France (and elsewhere too) there was a need for preachers who could be relied upon to expound and if necessary defend the authentic catholic tradition. Such preachers were not easily to be found and when they were to be found they were not easily retained. St Dominic did the obvious and eminently practical thing, he began what was soon to become the Order of Preachers. Preaching, for Dominicans, is very much a matter of self-definition. For Franciscans it is not quite so straightforward.

Many studies have sought to isolate the distinctive characteristics of the Franciscan charism but few, if any, would list preaching as being among its most noteworthy. Having said this, it would be hard to trace the growth of the Franciscan movement without encountering such notable preachers as would compare with the great preachers of old. Not discounting St Francis himself, we would have to reckon with St Antony, St Bonaventure, St Bernardine and many others. Preaching, then, has arguably been as much a characteristic of the Franciscan way of life as of the Dominican. Yet Franciscans have not been, and would not adequately be, described as an order of preachers *per se*.

How, if at all, can we set about the task of describing the Franciscan way of being a preacher?

The Preaching of Example

We may never know for certain whether St Francis and St Dominic ever met each other and, even if they did, we do not know what passed between them. However, if St Francis' first biographer, Thomas of

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Celano, is to be believed, it does appear that St Francis met Friar Preachers from time to time. One such meeting is recorded by Celano² which sheds some light on what St Francis conceived the task of the preacher, and of preaching itself, to be. The story is worth giving in full:

While Francis was staying at Siena, it happened that a certain friar of the Order of Preachers came there; he was a spiritual man and a doctor of Sacred Theology. Since he had come to visit the blessed Francis, that learned man and the saint enjoyed a long and pleasant conversation about the words of God. The aforesaid master questioned Francis about the saying of Ezechiel: *If thou proclaim not to the wicked man his wickedness, I will require his soul at thy hand*. For he said: 'Good father, I know many who, to the best of my knowledge, are in the state of mortal sin, but I do not always proclaim their wickedness. Will the souls of such men be required at my hand?' The blessed Francis said that he was unlettered and therefore it would be more fitting for him to be taught by that master than for him to interpret the meaning of Scripture. And the humble master said: 'Brother, though I have heard these words interpreted by learned men, I would be glad to hear your understanding of the passage'. The blessed Francis said to him: 'If the passage is to be understood in a general meaning, I would take it that the servant of God should be so aflame in his life and his holiness that he would reprove all wicked men by the light of his example and by the words of his conversation. So, I say, the splendour of his life and the renown of his fame will proclaim to all their wickedness'. That man, therefore, went away much edified, and he said to the companions of the blessed Francis: 'My brothers, the theology of this man, based upon purity of life and contemplation, is a soaring eagle; but our learning crawls on its belly on the ground'.

To grasp St Francis' understanding of preaching (and so much else besides), it is necessary to look for the clues and piece them together into something like a mosaic. The problem arises that it is difficult to come to any consensus about the accuracy of the picture that emerges. Much depends on the weight accorded to the various elements which are often in the form of spontaneous spiritual gems. The incident related by Celano is no exception. While recognising his obvious desire to extol the wise simplicity of St Francis, we can draw out a number of important clues to the picture of the preacher that Francis favours for his friars.

It is clear from the meeting and from other 'sayings' that St Francis held preachers and theologians (whom he frequently holds together) to be worthy of honour and reverence. By preachers we mean those who are specifically set apart, trained and commissioned *as* preachers. St Francis was no simpleton. While he himself received no formal academic

training, he knew only too well that the church needed good, learned, and well trained preachers who could be entrusted to hand on intact the fullness of the Word in fidelity to both Scripture and Tradition. Not only did he honour and reverence preachers, he appreciated that scholarship (necessary to good preaching) and holiness were not mutually exclusive. They could be harmonized, as evidently they were in his distinguished Dominican visitor.

It was also a fact of life that learned men were entering the ranks of the Friars Minor, and St Francis was not opposed to this development. Many of these were trained in the schools and were respected preachers and theologians in their own right. St Antony is a good example of this. As the numbers of friars swelled and the variety of tasks to be done increased, the preaching ministry took on a greater significance. It soon became clear that some guidance was needed for those who would be preachers. What sort of guidance did St Francis offer? This takes us back to the meeting described by Celano. When St Francis replied to the Dominican master he gave some telling indications of his thought on preaching. For the sake of conciseness I will endeavour to indicate, in point form, the constitutive elements in this mosaic-picture of the Franciscan preacher:

1. For St Francis preaching is not an end in itself and is of little or no value if the preacher remains unchanged by the Word he seeks to proclaim. St Francis places great stress on the power of *example*. The giving of good christian example is itself a sermon and he constantly asserts that it is better to offer good example than good words. St Francis does not intend that his friars become good preachers but rather he prefers that they be good examples for those to whom they are sent. This is not a denial of the value of formal preaching but it is to place preaching at the service of fostering that interior conformity of the whole self to Christ, the one Teacher of all.

2. Preachers should prefer to draw from their prayer and meditation what they hope to pass on to others. In this connection St Francis was opposed to the accumulation of books for study. For him there was enough to learn in the book of the Gospels. This was not an ill-considered judgement, for St Francis had a genuine, literal trust in the power of the Word to teach and instruct those who pondered it day and night. The Wisdom of God is given to the learned and the simple alike, just as God wills. It is interesting to note that the learned Dominican who came to St Francis asked his opinion precisely because he had heard the learned interpret the Scriptures, they and he presumably having read widely and deeply, and found the interpretations in some way wanting. He wanted to hear the opinion of St Francis, whose wisdom came from his constant reflection on the Scriptures. St Francis' reply that a life of

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manifest goodness will shame those who do evil deeds to conversion is very typical of his approach to preaching and teaching. The Dominican's response shows that he has recognized in this something true and precious.

3. St Francis was aware of the need for preachers to be adequately equipped for their difficult ministry. He had a profound respect for the written word in all its forms because all words could be turned to use, in that they can be re-arranged to become vehicles for God's Word. But St Francis wished that his preachers be prepared first in the school of contemplation before being anxious about formal study. Study without prayer leads so often to pride and vain-glory. There is also the strong suggestion that those who are given to study and preaching need to be on their guard lest they become separated from their fellow brothers who are not engaged in this task. He insisted that they show by practical deeds their unity with the other brothers. For St Francis the fraternal life is of paramount importance. He did not found an order of preachers but, by God's grace, became the catalyst for a fraternal way of life which included preachers but many more besides. Preachers must be prepared to serve the brothers like everyone else and do the humble tasks willingly and joyfully. Again this points to the primacy of example.

4. St Francis did not wish to frustrate, still less to ignore, the special grace of preaching. He recognised this as a gift and counselled those in positions of responsibility to be prudent about who was sent to preach. Such friars need time to listen to and to learn from God what they are to give to those who will listen. This may mean foregoing other duties but that is not the same thing as being too important a person to share in the lesser tasks. Those who returned from the preaching missions were expected to resume their responsibility of sharing in the more menial tasks of the community.

5. He treasured and guarded the privilege extended by Pope Innocent III to himself and his first brothers to preach the simple exhortation to penance and conversion. This St Francis valued, for not only he, but many of the unlearned friars, could do it. Often he would send his brothers out in small groups to call people to conversion and to announce the evangelical greeting of peace. He frequently did this himself and was anxious that this sort of preaching should not be abandoned in favour of the more formal preaching of the professionals. In fact, he often encouraged the more sophisticated among his friars to leave their more polished style behind and adopt this simpler form. The reason for this was quite clear: simple people need the gospel to be preached in simple terms and briefly! The task of the preacher is to inflame people with love of God and for each other and the preacher was better employed trying to change people rather than to give them a show of oratory. The task of the preacher is, in other words, to 'beget children

for the Church' and not simply to win flattery for the preacher.

6. If it is reasonable to say that the Order of Preachers came into being in response to a danger to the unity of the Church from without, for example heterodox life and preaching, then it might be just as reasonable to assert that the Order of Friars Minor came into being in response to a similar danger from within, such as pride and indolence. Given that there is some truth in this, it helps us when we try to describe the sort of preachers both Founders desired to have in order to further the purpose of their respective Orders. St Dominic needed highly trained preachers who could both expound and defend orthodox catholic doctrine. This was so even given the fact that St Dominic was not afraid to send out inexperienced friars from time to time. For St Francis the primary need was for friars who, by their very manner of life and contemplation, could re-ignite the flame of faith in the lukewarm hearts of the faithful.

These few points can hardly exhaust the factors which would need to be taken into account for a description of the Franciscan way of being a preacher. They do, I hope, offer some points of reference. I have tried to show why Franciscans need St Francis in a way far more definite than could be said of St Dominic for the Order of Preachers. St Francis still teaches by example and is, for Franciscans, a kind of sermon on their ideal way of living the Gospel. St Dominic preferred, or was allowed, to fade into the background while his brothers got on with the job he entrusted to them. It is true that, following the death of St Francis and in the light of the constantly changing situation of the Church, the Franciscans came increasingly to adopt more formal methods of equipping their preachers for their task, learning much from the Dominican approach, but still preaching has always been but one among many different activities of the fraternity. In a phrase, for St Francis preaching was primarily to be done by giving good example before good words. How well his brothers have lived up to this must best be left to the judgement of another.

1 London, *Darton, Longman & Todd*, 1979, 1981.

2 Celano, 103. in Marion A. Habig, ed., *St Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies. English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St Francis*, Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973. In an effort to keep these reflections within reasonable bounds I have avoided much direct quotation. A cursory glance at St Francis' own writings and those of Celano given in the *Omnibus* will quickly show where I am indebted to both.