

Introduction to Ratio

I. Francis and the Early Fraternity: Sent to Proclaim the Gospel

The Most High Himself revealed to me that I should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel. (Test 14)

With all Christians Franciscans share the evangelising mission of the Church, given by the risen Lord himself: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19; cf. CCGG 49). While the Holy Spirit has called and equipped some specifically to “be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers” (Eph 4:11), all have the baptismal vocation to proclaim and promote the Gospel through their actions and words. Jesus reminded all his disciples that “your light must shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your heavenly Father” (Mt 5:16). Saint Peter exhorted Christians to “be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope” (1 Pet 3:15). In his apostolic exhortation on evangelization, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI called for the witness of *all Christians* to be “made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus” (EN 22). Each Christian must look for ways – according to his or her abilities, preparation, and circumstances – to fulfill this divine mandate to invite others into a relationship with Jesus Christ and to promote the growth of the Reign of God.

In connection with this vocation to bear witness to the Gospel, Francis of Assisi received a special call and mission to witness the Gospel in a particular form of life. The challenge of God’s call (revelation) which our Father Francis received led him to take up a life according to the Gospel. He did this in fraternity with brothers and sisters given to him by God to join him in following the footsteps of Jesus Christ in poverty and humility. In a life of service and *minoritas*, the fraternity together with Francis was called to spread the message of repentance and peace throughout the world, bearing witness to the Gospel in deeds and words. This divine call to bear witness to the Good News by living according to the pattern of Christ, in a fraternal community and wherever it pleases God, is the basis of the Franciscan vocation to missionary evangelisation.

Francis discovered this mode of evangelizing mission in stages, or gradually. The saint credited the beginning of his conversion “to do penance” with his encounters with the lepers (Test 1-3, 1C 7:17). The divine impulse that led him to embrace and serve the lepers also touched him with the grace to overcome his disgust and fear of fellow human beings. By transforming him, the relationship with the lepers also evangelized him. This early experience of Francis gives rise to and illustrates an essential element of Franciscan evangelization, namely, placing oneself under divine inspiration (LR 12:1) and going out to meet people, especially those who are marginalized (ER 9:2).

Just as Francis and his first companions were “heralds of the Great King” in the marketplace and countryside, so we friars today are called to seek out and to live among all peoples (*inter gentes*) “because deep down [we] have decided to be with others and to be for others” (cf. EG 273-274). We do this together, as brothers with a common purpose (CIC 210, 781), forming “contemplative fraternities in mission” (cf. PCO 92-105). Committed to living together as “pilgrims and strangers in this world” (LR 6, 2; Test 24), always in humble minority, we place ourselves under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit, who enables us not only to proclaim the Gospel but also to hear it ourselves in every encounter. Not only, but especially, among

those who have no voice in the world, our eyes and hearts can be opened to see the grace of God at work in the lives of all people.

Francis's understanding of his evangelizing mission further developed when, according to Celano (1C 9:22), one day he heard read at Mass the Gospel about Jesus sending out his followers to preach the kingdom of God (Mt 10:5-15; Mk 6:7-11; Lk 9:1-5; 10:1-11). When the priest had explained the reading to him, Francis became exultant: "*This is what I want...this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart.*" Taking immediately to heart the Lord's instructions that the disciples should have no money, or bag, or bread, or staff, or shoes, or more than one tunic, Francis "*took off the shoes from his feet, put down the staff from his hands, and, satisfied with one tunic, exchanged his leather belt for a cord.*" It was after this that Francis first began to preach (1C 9:23).

Francis's incorporation of Christ's instructions marks his *manner* of evangelizing together with his brothers. In the *Regula Bullata* (3), he exhorts his brothers to go about the world in meekness and gentleness ("*as lambs in the midst of wolves*": Lk 10:3), to announce peace in whatever house they enter, and to eat whatever is placed before them (Lk 10:5, 7). While Francis certainly proclaimed penance forthrightly (cf. 1LtCus 6; 2LtF 63-71), he and his brothers were never to do so ungraciously, disputatiously, or self-righteously (cf. LR 3:10-11; ER 16:5-6; 1C 12), and they were always to also preach peace and praise of God in a manifest spirit of joy (cf. 1LtCus 8).

II. Bearing Witness in the World and Cultures in Which We Live

***For this reason He has sent you into the whole world:
that you may bear witness to His voice in word and deed. (LtOrd 9)***

The Church's mission to evangelize is not a merely human endeavor, but a participation in and continuation of the *missio Dei*, the "joint mission" of the Son and the Holy Spirit for the salvation of the whole world. Just as God has sent the Son "into the world so that we might have life through him" (1 Jn 4:9), so the Spirit sends the Church "into the *whole world*" to "proclaim the Gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:15). In obedience to the Spirit of the Lord and his holy activity (LR 10:8), friars take up this universal mission by accepting every corner of the world as our "cloister." It is in this world – with all its complexities, ambiguities, and challenges – that the brothers are called to live as witnesses. Far from rejecting the world as a place of perdition, we seek to find in it everything that is good and to prudently use the means and opportunities that the world offers to proclaim the Gospel.

When working with fellow members of the "wounded and muddy" Church (EG 49), friars are not afraid to get their "hands dirty," working as brothers with the wounded and fallen, especially with the most vulnerable in all societies (cf. FT 69-71). In particular, our charism as lesser brothers calls us to embrace "the Church of the poor," who still constitute the majority of human beings in our "cloister." Just as Christ became poor so as to enrich us with his poverty (2 Cor 8:9), so do we become "heirs and kings of the Kingdom of Heaven" (LR 6:4) by becoming poor, not only by living and working with the materially poor, but also with "the addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly who are increasingly isolated and abandoned, migrants and many others" (EG 210). Following in the footsteps of our Father Francis, we heed the words of Pope Francis, who reminds us that our life with the poor of any

type brings us closer to Christ in more than one way: “We need to let ourselves be evangelised by them. [...] We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them” (EG 198-199). Our commitment to the poor is not reduced only to material care, but also recognition of their spiritual needs: because “the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care” (EG 200).

The brothers approach everyone as followers of the Good Shepherd, who loves his flock, including “other sheep” who do not belong to the fold of the visible Church (Jn 10:16).

We do not hesitate to proclaim the Gospel with words to the non-believers (ER 16:5-7), yet we do so in a spirit of respectful dialogue between ourselves and others. Friars “listen reverently to others with unfeigned charity, learn willingly from the people among whom they live, especially from the poor, who are our teachers” (CCGG 93.1).

As heralds of the One who invites everyone to live abundantly (Jn 10:10), friars are attentive to the many facets of human life: scientific, political, economic, social, intellectual, and aesthetic, as well as religious and moral (cf. AG 9; LG 16; CCGG 93.2). Pope Francis has called our attention also to the effects of globalization, which – while bringing with it many advantages – has also occasioned numerous well-documented problems. Evangelisation that attends to the full spectrum of the human condition must be able to offer a Gospel vision of life that addresses the advantages and disadvantages of globalization and other significant changes in people’s lives.

While the call to missionary evangelization of culture must benefit from study and ongoing formation in the various aspects of human life, it most especially must be rooted in a spiritual-contemplative way of life. The contemplative dimension of our vocation should be dear to every brother, regardless of where he is or the apostolate in which he is engaged (cf. CCGG 31). In order to better present the Gospel and live it in a way that is adapted to various cultures and circumstances, the brothers listen to the Spirit who acts and speaks through those cultures and circumstances. It takes both study and prayer to be able to see that faith can be expressed and lived in diverse and legitimate ways in different cultures (cf. CIC 773, §3).

As friars share their life and ministry with others, they not only learn from them but also share with them our evangelizing mission. *Gaudium et Spes* made it clear that “the laity, who must take an active role in the whole life of the Church, are not only bound to penetrate the world with the Christian spirit but are also called to be witnesses of Christ in all things in the midst of human society” (GS 43). Subsequent popes have also emphasized this vital and particular role of the laity. We serve the Church and the world by working to ensure that our mission of evangelisation is shared with lay missionaries and evangelisers (cf. PCO 61). We also recognize that throughout the world women are often the ones who animate and keep Christian communities alive through catechesis, liturgical animation, the organization of groups, and the coordination of the community itself. Franciscan evangelization thus eagerly includes women as well as men as partners.

III. Witnessing to the Kingdom of God

Francis, Christ’s bravest soldier, went around the cities and villages,

proclaiming the kingdom of God and preaching peace. (1C 15:36)

As they seek to live according to the Gospel, the brothers bear witness as pilgrims and strangers that another, better world – the Kingdom of God – is possible. Indeed, through their words and actions they give evidence that “the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Mt 10:7), and they help others see God’s goodness in their midst. Following in the footsteps of Saint Francis, who rejected the violence and greed of his world, friars seek to implement the values of God’s Reign in our world. Ultimately, we learn to live in the Kingdom of God, also known as the Kingdom of Christ (Eph 5:5), by living “in Christ,” by whom we are transformed.

For this reason, we understand that “mission is not limited to a program or project, but it is sharing the experience of the event of encounter with Christ, witnessing it and announcing it from person to person, from community to community and from the Church to all the ends of the earth (cf. Acts 1:8)” (DAP 145). As Pope Benedict XVI noted in speaking to the Latin American bishops, “Discipleship and mission are like the two sides of a single coin...[T]he disciple knows that without Christ there is no light, no hope, no love, no future” (DAP 146). Thus, Pope Francis’s exhortation that “an authentic faith – which is never comfortable or completely personal – always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it.[...] All Christians, their pastors included, are called to show concern for the building of a better world” (EG 183). Evangelisation invites others to the same encounter with Christ that we have had, bringing about the transformation of the society through the transformation of hearts and minds. To the extent that Christ reigns within us, social life will become a place of fraternity, justice, peace and dignity for all (cf. EG 180).

Because evangelisation is an invitation to a way of life, the proclamation of the Gospel is only credible when it is seen in the lives of those who proclaim it. Only when our demeanor reflects the fruits of the Spirit, such as kindness, generosity, and compassion, treating people with respect regardless of their religion or origin – sentiments exemplified by Jesus and Saint Francis – is our claim to know the way to a better world worthy of belief. The evangelising value of actively listening to others to better understand them, living in accordance with values such as love, peace, justice, truth, integrity, forgiveness, gratitude, and promoting reconciliation and peace cannot be underestimated.

Such a life also leads evangelisers to “openly [confront] the forces that threaten life, the structures that crush the most vulnerable in society and the economic projects that destroy and pollute the environment; [...] it also means living a radical and visible Franciscan religious life that is not afraid to embrace the causes of justice and the Gospel, even when faced with persecution, slander and defamation” (PCO 178-179).

A hallmark of Franciscan evangelisation remains a willingness to enter into interreligious dialogue, and the acceptance of individuals from diverse tradition, cultures, religions, and convictions. In areas where friars live with Muslims, “suitable training is essential for all involved, not only so that they can be solidly and joyfully grounded in their own identity, but so that they can also acknowledge the values of others, appreciate the concerns underlying their demands and shed light on shared beliefs” (EG 253). Likewise, dialogue must take place with believers of other religions, avoiding any actions or attitudes that might reflect a neo-colonialist spirit.

While the object of evangelisation has until recently been limited to the salvation of humanity, the Church now recognizes that the proclamation of the Kingdom of God must include all of creation as it continues to groan in anticipation of being set free along with the human race (Rm 8:21-22). In the spirit of Saint Francis, Pope Francis has repeatedly exhorted the Church to listen to the cry of the earth, wounded by the irresponsible use and abuse of the goods by humanity: “The earth, herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor” (LS 2). In light of the “hyper-connectivity” (FT 7) and the complexity of the world, in which the destiny of humanity and the earth are connected, Franciscan evangelisation is therefore “integral,” exploring theological and spiritual meanings and deepening scientific understandings through the studies of various sciences such as humanities, political-social sciences, and technologies.

IV. On the Road to Formation

Lord, what do you want me to do? (L3C 1:6)

In the life of Francis we see how the whole of life becomes a process of formation. The confrontation of everyday reality with the Gospel promotes ever-new experiences that serve as ever-new steps in the formation of the integral person. Francis’s way of introducing the brothers to the way of life in *minoritas* was characterized by acting in simplicity, orientating the brothers toward the word of God, living with a fraternal spirit, and evoking in every friar the desire to follow the footsteps of Jesus Christ. This “ongoing formation,” in which the friar is transformed as he seeks to live the Gospel, is the basis of his mission to evangelise. Thus, the first element of preparation for evangelizing mission must be the experience of living the Gospel as a Franciscan, in fraternity and minority. Thus, the entire initial formation program should be considered a preparation for evangelization.

As part of their initial formation, friars should be inculcated with the Order’s vision of evangelization and its mission (cf. CCGG 127, § 4). The brothers should be introduced to the Order’s documents on this topic, presenting the situation of the Churches as a whole and the activities of the Order, including all the challenges, difficulties, failures, and successes. They should also be given opportunities to participate in specific types of evangelisation within the Order, especially those related to the works of corporal mercy and the characteristic forms of evangelisation of the Franciscan entity to which the friar belongs. This vision of evangelisation should also include an appreciation for the indispensable role of the laity and the vital role of each member of the Church in its evangelising mission.

Throughout initial formation, diverse aspects of the evangelizing mission should be addressed (e.g., theological, catechetical, charismatic, scientific, practical). Care should be taken to maintain a balance among these aspects to promote a harmonious and comprehensive view of evangelisation, rather than one that focuses too much on one dimension at the expense of others. Initial formation should take into account teachings on synodality and how to meaningfully participate in the decision-making processes of their entity, the Order, and the entire Church.

Special attention should be paid to language and the way in which the Gospel is to be communicated, both with life and with words. The Second Vatican Council already called for this attention: “The ability to express Christ’s message in its own way is developed in each nation, and at the same time there is fostered a living exchange between the Church and the

diverse cultures of different peoples” (GS 44; cf. LG 22). The principles of Franciscan evangelization – including tone and openness – should be stressed so that friars come to appreciate and appropriate a respectful and humble approach to the proclamation of the Kingdom.

Wherever they are friars should be helped to understand the reality in which they find themselves. They should be introduced to the evangelization plan of the particular Church (if there is one). They should learn to listen to the people, the coordinators of the Catholic communities or, if they don't exist yet, the representatives of the communities. Formation will also include assistance in coming to see how the people live and trying to understand the culture, to discern in it the *semina verbi*. The disposition must always be to learn.

Friars should be helped to understand and use the *inductive method* of theological reflection. Pope Francis in his Apostolic letter “Ad Theologiam promovendam” has urged that such reflection “develop with an inductive method, which starts from the different contexts and concrete situations in which people are inserted, allowing itself to be seriously challenged by reality, to become discernment of the ‘signs of the times’ in the proclamation of the salvific event of the God-agape, communicated in Jesus Christ” (8). Regarding the skill and art of reading the signs of the times, friars should be further encouraged “to listen to young people and the elderly” (EG 108).

Beyond initial formation, all friars must accept their personal responsibility for ongoing formation, including development in areas that will help them grow as evangelising missionaries. Participation in various types of evangelization should continue and persist. At each stage of a brother’s life, various experiences of the reality of evangelisation should be offered to them (RF 91). Wherever there are deficits in a friar’s understanding of the various aspects of evangelization discussed in this document, aids for growth should be encouraged and made available.

We must also state the obvious: today, friars cannot ignore the immense evangelising potential of the various forms of social media. At least some brothers must be formed in the responsible and creative use of new technical and virtual means of communication.

Finally, missionary evangelisers at all stages of formation and of life must be attentive to personal, communal, and pastoral conversion. Pope Francis has warned us of the need for a “pastoral conversion” that will make all structures “more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself” (EG 27).