

“Out of the fullness of the heart his mouth spoke.”

Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Phil. 2:3-4)



Many of us have heard some variation of a saying attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, “Preach the Gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.” While a moving sentiment, it is apocryphal—no evidence in the early documents indicates Francis uttered that. Our saint was indeed convinced of the importance of the friars witnessing by their behavior, deeds, and lifestyle. We also know Francis valued quiet time for contemplation and prayer. Nevertheless, when it came to preaching the gospel, he did not hesitate *to speak*.

Francis’s first biographer, Thomas of Celano, reports, “Though he often preached the word of God among thousands of people, he was as confident as if he were speaking with a close friend. He used to view the largest crowd as if it were a single person, and he would preach fervently to a single person as if to a large crowd... Sometimes he would be filled with such great eloquence that he moved the hearts of his hearers to astonishment.”¹ Celano adds that, on one occasion, when Francis spoke before Pope Honorius and an assembly of cardinals,

He was speaking with such fire of spirit
that he could not contain himself for joy.
As he brought forth the word from his mouth,
he moved his feet as if dancing,
not playfully but burning with the fire of divine love...²

And lest we think Francis was preoccupied with public speaking, consider one additional comment from Celano:

The brothers who lived with him know
that daily, constantly, talk of Jesus was always on his lips,
sweet and pleasant conversations about Him,
kind words full of love.
*Out of the fullness of the heart his mouth spoke.*³

So Francis preached to crowds. He talked fervently to individuals. He had pleasant conversations about Jesus. These observations by his earliest biographer communicate to us something about Francis’s style of ministry, a style that has remained influential in the Franciscan tradition ever since. In an article published in *The Cord* back in the 1990s, Fr. Michael Blastic, OFM, writes, “Franciscan ministry attempts to discover the inner logic of things as intended by God.” He adds, “One way of approaching this Franciscan style of ministry is by employing the metaphor of conversation—Franciscans minister by ‘engaging in conversation,’ by looking at the wider world of humans’ life experiences and engaging that world with the story of Jesus through attention to, care and respect for the concrete individual engaged at that moment.”⁴

What does this mean for us? A “ministry of conversation” should come naturally to Secular Franciscans. Anyone who has ever entered a Secular Franciscan gathering would immediately note that sharing, talking, and listening—conversations—are regular and expected expressions of life in fraternity. In this way we make manifest our Rule, which urges us “to seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue”⁵ Moreover, our Constitutions state, “Secular Franciscans proclaim Christ by their life and words.”⁶ Every conversation over the course of a day, whether an ardent exchange or a passing smile, is an opportunity for ministry.

However, Fr. Blastic enjoins us to remember that Franciscan conversation is more “than a mere speaking of words. Conversation implies exchange, a sharing of thought and feeling, a familiarity and close association with another, and even a style of life.”⁷ For our conversations to represent authentic Franciscan ministry they cannot be empty words, idle chatter, or gossip. Nor can they be so focused on an agenda or on winning an argument that the person engaged—*the concrete individual*—is disregarded or seen as interchangeable. A true conversation must involve our entire self—mind and heart, life and words—brought to focus on addressing another “to whom we attend with attention and respect.”⁸

In the end, the ministry of conversation is about love. It is a specifically Franciscan way of evangelizing the world, of promoting peace among our neighbors, of producing worthy fruits of penance. It is an apostolate every Secular Franciscan can engage in. We live in a society and at a moment in history when such an apostolate can truly make a difference. May our conversations imitate those of Francis: Out of the fullness of our hearts, let our mouths speak.

From the OFS Rule and General Constitutions

- Mindful that they are bearers of peace which must be built up unceasingly, they should seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue, trusting in the presence of the divine seed in everyone and in the transforming power of love and pardon.... [*Rule*, 19]
- ... Secular Franciscans proclaim Christ by their life and words. Their preferred apostolate is personal witness in the environment in which they live and service for building up the Kingdom of God within the situations of this world. [*Constitutions*, 17:1]

For reflection and meditation

With regard to Article 17 of the Constitutions, how do you see the ministry of conversation as part of the apostolate of “personal witness” in the environment in which you live?

¹ Regis J. Armstrong, OFM Cap., et al., editors, *Francis of Assisi, Early Documents, Volume 1, The Saint* (New City Press, 1999), 245.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 283.

⁴ Michael W. Blastic, OFM, Conv., “The Conversation of Franciscans: Ministry in Cosmic Context,” *The Cord*, 46.2 (1996), 56.

⁵ *Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order*, Article 19

⁶ *General Constitutions*, Article 17.1

⁷ Blastic., 57.

⁸ Ibid., 61

Image: St. Francis of Assisi and the Young [Friar] Returning from a Preaching Tour. From "Bibby's Annual 1936", (J. Bibby & Sons, Ltd., Liverpool, 1936).