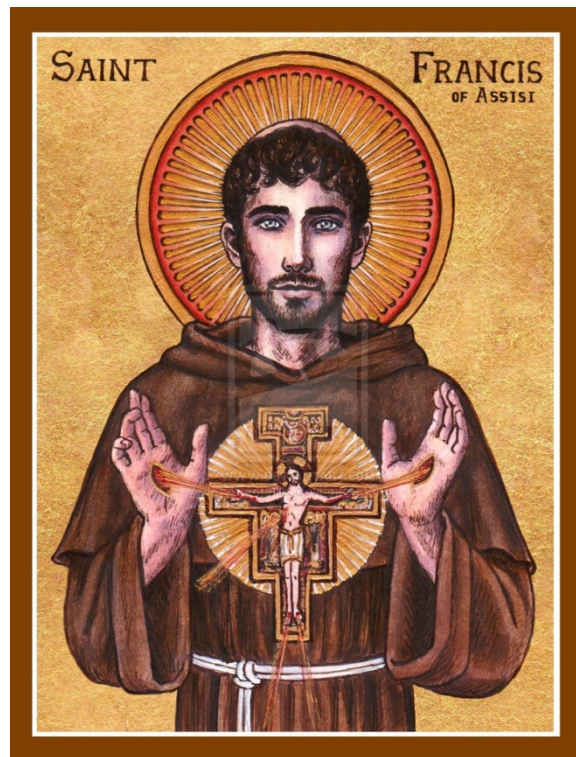


Words and Deeds

We are called to bear witness to the Gospel both by speaking about the faith and by living it with joy

By: Supreme Chaplain to the Knights of Columbus Archbishop William E. Lori
Article found in the June 2018 edition of Columbia Magazine



MOST OF US are familiar with a saying attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach always, and when necessary, use words.” Some, including those who have carefully studied St. Francis’ life and writings, doubt that he actually said that.

This doesn’t mean that the saying is wrong. After all, one of the most effective ways to spread the faith is to live the faith with integrity and joy whether we are in public or in private. But good example, important as it is, is not enough. Words are almost always necessary — let me illustrate why this is so.

Most readers of this column are married. What if you complained that your spouse never said the words “I love you”? If your spouse responded, “I don’t have to — I show my love to you every day,” I’m going to guess you wouldn’t be satisfied with such an answer. Husbands and wives need to say “I love you.” Wouldn’t life at home be better if, every day, parents told their children of their love and vice versa? Just saying so makes a difference — especially on a day when nothing has gone right.

So too, when it comes to the Lord and the Gospel, we are sometimes tempted to use the words ascribed to St. Francis of Assisi as a cop-out.

NO MORE EXCUSES

We tell ourselves that if we lead good lives we’ve done our part to support the Church and its mission. No need to engage in discussions about religion, which can sometimes be heated. No need to challenge those who no longer practice the faith, including members of our own immediate family. “Why harangue them?” we ask ourselves. “It’ll do more harm than good.”

Well, let’s take haranguing off the table. Pestering and berating those who do not take their faith seriously is not likely to succeed. But we are called to speak about the faith to others with accuracy, confidence and joy. St. Paul puts it this way: “For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ But how can they call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach?” (Rom 10:13-14).

Thinking about St. Paul’s words, one might say, “Great! I’m off the hook. I’m a layperson, not a priest. I don’t have to preach. Priests are supposed to do that.” My reply: “Not so fast!” Didn’t St. Peter exhort the whole Church, “Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope”? (1 Pt 3:15).

His words were not limited to priests and religious; they were addressed to every member of the Church.

Nevertheless, we may still be reluctant to speak about our faith to others. After all, fewer people these days identify themselves as believers. Some feel they can get through life just fine without God or at least without any form of organized religion. Others think that all institutions, especially large ones such as the Catholic Church, are corrupt and out of touch. So, we ask ourselves, “What can I possibly say to such people?” In a recent meeting, a colleague lamented how difficult it is to spread the Gospel in the current cultural climate. Another colleague agreed but added, “Spreading the Gospel in the pagan culture of the Roman Empire wasn’t exactly a picnic!”

MESSENGERS OF HOPE

Like those who went before us, we may experience ridicule and rejection when trying to share the Gospel. But let’s not forget two things. First, the Lord promised he’d never leave us (cf. Mt 28:20). In the power of the Holy Spirit, he walks with us and empowers us. Second, in spite of the hard veneer of our culture, people are desperately searching for meaning and trying to make sense of their lives. Let us be confident that the Lord and the Gospel have something critically important to say to such people. He really does want us to be his messengers of hope and joy. For in becoming one of us and in dying to save us from our sins, the Son of God has shown us the ultimate meaning and destiny of our lives.

Maybe we hesitate to speak of our faith to others because we feel unprepared. We may feel that our formation in the faith was inadequate, that there are “holes” in our religious education. Or we may feel that we are not sufficiently advanced in the

spiritual life to invite others to consider, or reconsider, the faith. So, we'd rather leave spreading the Gospel "to the experts" — that is, to priests and religious.

The fact is, though, we all have to do our part. We need to equip ourselves for the work of spreading the Gospel. We don't need a theology degree, but we do need to pray every day, read Scripture prayerfully, take part in the Mass attentively, go to confession regularly, and know and love our faith more deeply. As we speak about the faith, our deeds have to match our words; it's no good to speak about the faith and not to live it. And if we are living the faith, we should be willing to speak of it¹.

St. Francis of Assisi

Article found on catholicexchange.com, October 2017

St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), one of the best-known and most loved saints of history, was the son of a wealthy merchant in the Italian town of Assisi. He was a carefree youth who enjoyed parties and extravagance. He was repulsed by lepers and didn't want to help them as some of his wealthy friends, such as Clare of Assisi, would.

After he returned from a war, Francis became convinced of the need to find a deeper meaning in life. He gave away his and his father's riches, much to the anger

¹ [The Knights of Columbus offers us a head start with tremendous resources for growing in prayer, our understanding of the faith, and charity. It also offers us a fraternal atmosphere, which encourages us to both live our faith and bear witness to it. In fact, this is one of the principal reasons why Father McGivney founded the Knights. Aided by his example and prayers, may we bear witness to Jesus in both word and deed!]

of his father, and rejected wealth, trying to live out the Gospel completely in a joyful and humble manner.

He heard Christ speak to him from the crucifix of San Damiano, telling Francis to rebuild His Church, which was falling apart. Francis sold some goods from his father's warehouse and used the proceeds to reconstruct the dilapidated church of San Damiano. His angry father disowned and disinherited him, and Francis embraced his new life of poverty.

His simple and sincere faith attracted many followers, and in 1210 Pope Innocent III authorized Francis and his companions to travel about Italy, preaching the Gospel. The pope's favorable decision is said to have been influenced by a dream in which he saw Francis supporting a crumbling church. Francis went about rebuilding church structures, but his mission also included rebuilding the Church, the people of God, through preaching and ministry to the poor of body, mind, and spirit.

Francis and his followers — the Friars Minor (later called the Franciscans) — devoted themselves to poverty, chastity and obedience, living a life of penance and preaching. Their efforts contributed to a major spiritual renewal in thirteenth-century Italy. In 1212 Francis aided his friend St. Clare of Assisi in establishing an order for women based on the same vows of the Franciscan order. Several orders of St. Francis of Assisi now exist, including an order for lay people, the Secular Franciscan Order (SFO).

Francis is especially known today for his gentleness and his great love for all God's creation, especially animals and nature. It is Francis who originated the practice of commemorating the Birth of Christ with the nativity scene.

Though never ordained a priest, Francis was blessed with many spiritual gifts, particularly the stigmata — the wounds in the hands, feet, and side suffered by Christ on the Cross. During his last two years of life, when he was half-blind and seriously ill, Francis remained joyful and humble; he died at the age of forty-four, surrounded by his beloved friars in the little church of the *Portiuncula*. He was canonized just two years later.

Men lose all the material things they leave behind them in this world, but they carry with them the reward of their charity and the alms they give. For these they will receive from the Lord the reward and recompense they deserve. — From a letter of St. Francis of Assisi

When I stand before the Lord, how full of charitable works and gifts to the poor will my hands be? What one act of charity can I perform today to show my love of God and neighbor?

Closing Prayer

~Saint Francis' Prayer before the Crucifix at San Damiano~

Most High, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me

true faith, certain hope and perfect charity, sense and knowledge,

Lord, that I may carry out Your holy and true command. Amen.

"So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love." 1 Corinthians 13:13

