

The Mission

Proclaiming the Gospel to every creature

In the first two Lenten meditations we have explored some decisive stages in Francis's spiritual journey. The first led us to the heart of his conversion: not simply an act of will, but a profound transformation of his sensibility wrought by grace, capable of turning bitterness into sweetness and giving him a new perspective on himself and on reality. The second showed us how this conversion did not remain an inward and isolated event: the Lord gave him brothers, and fraternity became the tangible setting in which this experience took shape.

The third meditation invites us to take a further step. Conversion and fraternity are not the end point: they find their fulfilment in mission. What Francis received – a transformed sensibility, the joy of his brothers, the discovery of a God who loves by giving Himself – cannot be kept to himself, but is called to reach out and touch the lives of others.

The journey we will undertake is divided into five phases: the primacy of witness over the word, in accordance with the Franciscan insight that Christ is not proclaimed first and foremost, but is made known through a transformed life; the style of allowing oneself to be welcomed, even before wishing to offer anything; the art of waiting for the other's questions, without anticipating unsolicited answers; the fruitfulness of the encounter, as shown by Francis's journey to the Sultan of Egypt; and finally the evangelical paradox of submission, which is not weakness, but the highest form of love – the very same with which God gives Himself.

1. Generating Christ

Very soon, within the early Franciscan brotherhood, being together and praying together gave rise to something unexpected: the desire to share with others the experience and proclamation of the Gospel. What had already happened to the first disciples happened to the friars: after learning to be with Jesus, they felt they could not keep to themselves what they had received.

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands concerning the word of life ... we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us” (1 John 1:1-3).

First there is the communion of life, then the proclamation of salvation. First the contemplation of the Word, then the word that bears witness to His presence. One cannot truly speak about what has not yet taken root in one's own life.

Saint Francis knows the subtle temptation to say the right words without first letting them transform us, of passing on to others what has not yet come to fruition in us.

“It is a great shame for us, the servants of God, that, whereas the Saints have practised works, we should expect to receive honour and glory for reading and preaching the same” (Admonition VI, 3; *Franciscan Sources* 154).

To recount the deeds of the saints without allowing ourselves to be changed by their way of life risks being merely a way of admiring them from afar. We speak of them, yet we remain uninvolved. This is why patience is needed: to guard what we have seen and heard, to let it mature in prayer, until it becomes life even before it becomes a word.

“Blessed is the servant who treasures up in heaven the good things which the Lord shows him and who does not wish to manifest them to men through the hope of reward, for the Most High will Himself manifest his works to whomsoever He may please. Blessed is the servant who keeps the secrets of the Lord in his heart (Admonition XXVIII, 1-3, *Franciscan Sources* 178).

With these words, Francis warns against a very subtle temptation: using the things of God to seek approval or recognition. Even what is authentic, if revealed too soon, risks losing its truth: for this reason, Francis invites us to guard what we receive, allowing it to mature in the heart until it becomes life. The *Regula non Bullata* reaffirms and radicalizes this insight:

“However let all the friars preach by works. ... For the spirit of the flesh wants and strives much to have words, but little towards work” (Regula non Bullata XVII, 3.11; *Franciscan Sources* 46.48).

An episode, not recorded in the official sources but entirely consistent with the spirit of Francis, clearly illustrates this approach to teaching. One day, the saint asked Brother Juniper to accompany him to preach in the town. The two walked the streets in silence, stopping beside the sick, smiling at the children, and helping those in need. Not a word was spoken. On their return, Juniper asked: ‘My Father, what about the sermon?’ Francis replied: ‘We have preached it, my brother, we have preached it’.

For Francis, placing greater trust in witness than in words is not a strategic choice: it is the consequence of a profound theological conviction that must be brought to light. Christ is not a piece of information to be conveyed, but a mystery that dwells within humanity and asks to be recognized so that it may

emerge in life. The Gospel is not communicated as mere news; it is given as a life that slowly takes shape. In the Letter to the Faithful, Francis offers a surprising and very concrete vision of Christian life, in which the believer assumes a threefold relationship with Christ: that of the spouse, that of the brother, and that of the mother. The boldest – and perhaps the most original – is precisely the latter:

“[We are] spouses, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are spouses when the faithful soul is joined to our Lord Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. We are brothers to Him when we do the will of the Father who is in Heaven; mothers, when we carry Him in our heart and body through divine love and pure and sincere consciences and when we give birth to Him through a holy manner of working, which should shine before others as an example” (2 Letter to the Faithful 50-53; *Franciscan Sources* 200).

To generate Christ does not mean to speak well of Him or to convince others with effective words. It means allowing his presence to truly change the way we live, until it becomes visible to others as well. It is the experience a mother lives: first she carries her child within her, gives him time to grow, and only then brings him into the world. So it is with faith. First, Christ takes root within us, in silence, in prayer, in our daily choices. And only afterwards can he become visible on the outside, in our actions and in the way we relate to others.

When the mystery of Christ manifests itself in us, something can begin to stir in others too. Not because we have spoken the right words, but because a new and different life has been made visible in us. The Gospel bears fruit in this way: not first and foremost through what we say, but through what our humanity is able to express through the silence and effective action of the Holy Spirit.

2. Allowing oneself to be welcomed

At the beginning of his journey, Saint Francis gathers the friars together, talks to them at length about the kingdom of God and then sends them out two by two onto the streets of the world:

“Go, dearest brethren, two and two through different parts of the world, announcing to men peace, and repentance for remission of sins; and be patient in tribulation, sure that the Lord will fulfil His purpose and promise. To those who question you answer humbly, bless them that persecute you, give thanks to them that revile and slander you, because for these things an eternal kingdom is preparing for us” (1 *Celano*, XII, 29; *Franciscan Sources* 366).

These words are not an invention of Francis, but closely echo the commission with which Jesus had sent out His disciples (cf. Luke 10:1–12). The

Gospel recommends a simple way of life: setting out without security, with “no purse, no bag”, entering houses wishing them peace, staying, “eating and drinking what they provide” (Luke 10:4, 7). And it adds a crucial detail: the disciples are sent to the places where Jesus “was about to come” (Luke 10:1).

This profoundly changes the way of understanding the mission. The disciples do not take something that is lacking, but prepare a meeting that Jesus Himself wishes to bring about. Not everything depends on them: what they cannot do, the Lord Himself will accomplish. We are not the centre of the proclamation, but the face of God, which we can, with simplicity, make transparent and accessible.

Jesus’ instructions contain a logic that overturns many of our habits. The disciples are sent out without protection, “as lambs in the midst of wolves” (Luke 10:3), with the sole task of bringing peace and accepting what is offered to them. Only afterwards – and within that very welcome they have received – can they say: “The kingdom of God has come near to you” (Luke 10:9). The sequence is clear: first allow oneself to be welcomed, then proclaim.

It is not a question of bringing something from outside, as if to fill a complete void, but of recognizing the good that is already present and giving it a name. This sequence – first being welcomed, then proclaiming – contains an important lesson. Those who allow themselves to be welcomed make a gesture of vulnerability which, on the surface, appears to be a relinquishing of initiative. In reality, it reveals the deepest meaning of the Gospel: to accept receiving means recognizing that the other person is not merely a recipient, but also someone from whom one can receive something. It means taking their humanity seriously, their capacity for good, their readiness.

In this way a new space is created, in which the Gospel does not appear as something imposed from the outside but as the recognition of a presence that is already at work. For this to happen, genuine poverty is necessary: to present oneself without having everything and without controlling everything, to accept that one is also dependent on the kindness and sensitivity of others, and to realize that the kingdom of God is already present, in a hidden way, even in the lives of those who do not yet know it.

This poor and unassuming way of being profoundly challenges our understanding of evangelization. Over the centuries, we have risked treating it as unidirectional: approaching others with a didactic, and at times even judgemental, attitude, ready to fill in what is missing and to reduce everything to our own categories.

The words of Jesus and the witness of Saint Francis seem, however, to point to a path that is simpler and yet more demanding: allowing oneself to be welcomed, recognizing what in the other is already close to God, and offering them the chance to come to the fore. Evangelizing, from this perspective, means telling others – even without saying a word – that it is wonderful that they exist, that their lives have value. Not simply to confirm them in who they are, but to

accompany them in recognizing, little by little, the truth and beauty they carry within, without rushing to lead them back to our own ideas.

The Kingdom does not grow through proselytism, at times too forceful, but when the way we relate to others allows those we meet to express the best of themselves and, in this way, to open themselves to the revelation of God. It is there that the Kingdom becomes close and accessible. There is nothing spectacular about this way of proclaiming, but there is something profoundly true.

Pope Francis expressed this with great clarity:

“All of them have a right to receive the Gospel. Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone. Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but by attraction” (Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 14).

To grow by attraction: this is what happens when our presence does not stifle the freedom of others, but awakens it; when our proclamation does not weigh heavily, but opens up a space. Perhaps this is precisely what the world is waiting to recognize in Christian communities: places where the quality of the Kingdom becomes visible and spreads – with discretion and strength, with courage and respect.

3. Awaiting questions

The respect and esteem with which Francis approaches others – recognizing in every person a presence of God already at work – make true dialogue possible. It is not merely a matter of knowing how to speak, but first and foremost of knowing how to listen. And, when the time comes, of knowing how to communicate the words of hope that come from God.

Evangelization, from this perspective, does not mean giving immediate answers, but knowing how to wait for the questions to emerge. It is an inner attitude, even before it is a way of communicating: it springs from the conviction that God confirms and completes our humble witness. If this is so, there is no need to be hasty. Those who trust in this way of God – who is happy to be represented by us – know how to wait and make room for others.

The Franciscan sources preserve an episode that illustrates this way of proclaiming the Gospel with great simplicity. At a hermitage above Borgo San Sepolcro, some friars lived, whilst in the nearby woods brigands were hiding, often coming out to rob passers-by. Sometimes they would come to the hermitage to ask for bread, but the friars had stopped giving it to them because of their aggressiveness.

One day, Saint Francis, passing by that hermitage, learnt of the situation and proposed something unexpected to the friars:

“Go, get some good bread and good wine, take them to them in the woods where you know they are, and call out to them: ‘Brother brigands, come to us: we are the friars and we bring you good bread and good wine!’ They will come to you at once. Then you shall spread a tablecloth on the ground, place the bread and wine upon it, and serve them with humility and joy until they have eaten. After the meal, proclaim the words of the Lord to them, and finally make this first request of them for God’s sake: that they promise not to strike anyone nor to harm anyone physically. For if you ask for everything at once, they will not listen to you; but, won over by the humility and charity you show them, they will promise it to you” (Compilation of Assisi 115; *Franciscan Sources* 1669).

The friars obeyed. The robbers came, ate, and listened – and at the end, some of them entered the Order, others changed their way of life, and others at least resolved to no longer commit acts of violence.

This episode illustrates something very real: you cannot ask someone to change their ways before you have allowed them to experience hospitality, respect and trust. If we make demands too soon – even those that are morally correct – our invitations fail to reach the other person’s heart. First, we must create the space for the desire and the call for a change of life to arise. Only then can what is said be truly heard.

It is the same approach Jesus takes. When he meets Zacchaeus, He asks him for nothing; He does not lecture him on ethics. He simply says to him: “I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5). It is that encounter—unprompted and unexpected—that stirs in Zacchaeus to the desire to bring about a transformation in his life.

The Acts of the Apostles narrate a scene that sheds even more light on this passage. In chapter eight, Philip meets an Ethiopian official on a deserted road who is reading the prophet Isaiah without understanding. He does not immediately set about explaining the text. He approaches, walks alongside him and asks him a very simple question: “Do you understand what you are reading?” (Acts 8:30).

At that point it is the other man who opens up: “How can I, unless some one guides me?” (Acts 8:31). Then the eunuch asks Philip another, even deeper question, based on the text he is reading: “About whom, pray, does the prophet say this?” (Acts 8:34). Only after these questions have been raised does Philip begin to tell him about Jesus, in a few brief words. At this point, it is the eunuch himself who asks: “What is to prevent my being baptized?” (Acts 8:36).

What is particularly striking in this account is this: the proclamation takes up little space, whilst everything else – the journey together, the listening, the questions – is what truly prepares the encounter. The way in which one comes to speak of Christ is just as decisive as the words that are spoken. Evangelizing does not mean filling the silence with answers, but accompanying people until

they can recognize and express the questions that open their lives to Christ's salvation. Those questions, in fact, are already a place where God is present and at work.

There is, however, an even deeper aspect. Philip does not remain on the sidelines: he goes down into the water with the eunuch. This gesture conveys something essential. One cannot accompany someone in the faith without being personally involved. And this involvement stems from a willingness to share one's own weakness and one's own need for salvation. Even those who are already baptised, in fact, need to return continually to the source of their life in Christ, to allow themselves to be renewed and to remain actively engaged on the path of conversion. Only in this way can what we say truly touch the lives of others.

When words arise from real experience, they reach others. When, on the other hand, they remain abstract and impersonal, they convince no one. Not even us who speak them. Proclaiming the Gospel means approaching the lives of others with respect and recognizing that, within the complexity of their lives, there is already a search for meaning, for goodness, for truth.

Witnesses to the Risen One are not people who have all the answers. They are men and women who have learnt to listen to their own questions and to live with their own light and shadow, allowing themselves to be taught by Christ every day. Thus, with humility, they set out anew each day to walk as disciples, sharing the burdens of life with others.

4. Encountering the other

From a young age, Francis' nature was that of one who felt the need to give his life for something great. The words of the writer J. D. Salinger, in his novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, seem particularly apt for him: "The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one". When the poor man of Assisi met the Lord Jesus, this heroic impulse did not disappear, but changed direction: it became a desire to give his life for the Gospel. This desire led him in 1219 to set out for the Fifth Crusade, reaching the Christian encampments at Damietta, a port city in Egypt on the Nile Delta, right in the midst of the siege of the city, at the height of the clash between the Crusader army and that of the Sultan.

During a truce, Francis crossed the front lines with a companion and presented himself before the Sultan of Egypt, Al-Malik al-Kamil. The sentries captured him, mistreated him and chained him, but he did not back down and asked to be taken before their lord. What happened next surprised everyone: what seemed the beginning of a martyrdom turned into a meeting marked by respect and hospitality. As Thomas of Celano recounts, the sultan recognized Francis as a man of God, listened to him attentively and, upon taking his leave, had him escorted safely back to the Christian camp, even asking him to pray for him, that the Lord might show him the path most pleasing to Him (cf. 1

Celano 57; FF 422-423). The account of another chronicler, James of Vitry, also confirms that Francis was recognized as a “man of God” and had inspired respect even in one considered an enemy (cf. *Franciscan Sources* 2226-2228).

How can we interpret this episode? At first glance, little seems to happen: the Sultan does not convert and Francis does not find the martyrdom he sought. And yet, it is precisely in this encounter that something important takes place. Francis does not present himself with a speech to deliver, but with a way of being: simple, poor, defenceless. He does not seek to impose his own ideas; he stands before the other just as he is.

And this attitude changes everything. The Sultan is not struck by particular words, but by what he sees: a man who truly lives out what he believes. In Francis, he recognizes a person in whom the poverty and humility of Christ are made visible. The Sultan does not feel attacked or challenged, but welcomed by his unexpected guest. For this reason, in turn, he opens up: he listens, he respects, he even shows himself to be generous.

At that moment, a conversion does not take place in the sense we usually expect, but something just as real is born: a genuine encounter between two men, different in faith and history, who manage to stand before one another without fear. It is precisely this way of encountering one another that leaves a mark on history and, over time, also becomes a way of relating that makes possible dialogue between different religions, without anyone having to impose themselves on the other. Francis does not renounce his own faith, but approaches the other in such a way as to enable him to express the best of his own humanity. In this encounter, neither prevails over the other, but two men recognize one another in their dignity.

The true “miracle” that took place in Damietta is not the conversion of the Sultan. It is that, in the midst of war, two men found a way to truly meet one another and part in peace. Both remain true to their own faith, and it is precisely for this reason that their encounter is genuine. In that exchange, something happens that cannot be measured by the criteria of success or failure. Francis returns without any obvious results, but with a deeper awareness: the Gospel is not proclaimed to conquer, but to encounter. The other is not a target to be struck, but a threshold before which one pauses, waiting to be welcomed. Evangelising does not mean closing the distance at any cost, but crossing it without erasing it, cherishing the difference as the space in which God continues to act in the heart of each person.

5. Submissive to all

The journey to Egypt leaves a deep, silent and lasting mark on Francis. He does not speak about it in his writings – just as he will never talk about the stigmata - yet that encounter resurfaces in the years that followed in certain choices and in certain words he writes.

A first trace can be found in a letter he writes, ideally, to all the rulers of the world, asking them to have the praise of God proclaimed publicly every evening, so that all the people may be united (cf. Letter to the Rulers of the Nations, 7; cf. *Franciscan Sources* 213). It is an unusual proposal, which many have linked to a tradition he had seen and listened to in the East: that voice that, several times a day, calls the faithful to prayer. Francis does not copy, but he recognizes something good, embraces it and reworks it. The same occurs in *The Praises of God*, where the succession of God's names echoes a prayer still widespread in the Islamic tradition today (cf. *The Praises of God; Franciscan Sources* 261).

A very significant trait emerges from these details: in the encounter with the other, there is not only something to give, but also something to receive. From this awareness springs an attitude of radical openness towards the other, which Francis certainly integrated into his own understanding of the Gospel. In the *Regula non Bullata*, there is a short chapter instructing the friars on how they should live when among people of a different faith. Francis writes that they must be "subject to every human creature for God's sake" (*Regula non Bullata* XVI, 6; FF 43). It is a strong statement, which in the Testament becomes even clearer: "submissive to all". Before any word, before any proclamation, there is a way of relating to others: not by placing oneself above, but by choosing to place oneself below.

This expression can be misunderstood. According to the Gospel and in Francis's understanding, submission does not mean losing one's identity, nor resigning oneself in the face of the other out of weakness. It is a free choice of respect and dialogue. It means recognizing that the other is not a territory to be conquered, but a life to be encountered, respected and welcomed. Those who accept to place themselves in this way allow the other person to open up, to emerge, to reveal themselves for who they are. This way of being, in itself, is a profoundly evangelical act.

Fundamentally, it is the same movement with which the Son of God presented and offered Himself to the world. The hymn in the Letter to the Philippians says that Christ:

"emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7-8).

God did not impose Himself on humanity, but made room for it. He did not jealously guard His own greatness: He gave it away, so that others might receive it and live by it. This is the nature of love.

This is why proclaiming Christ from a position of superiority or control risks betraying the very Gospel we wish to communicate. Our authority does not stem from our role, but from a life that accepts entering into this dynamic of love. This is what Francis intuited when he called his friars "minors": assigning

them not a title, but a concrete way of being in the world. It is precisely this smallness, this lived humility, that makes the proclamation of the Gospel fruitful. When we do not impose ourselves, but leave space, something can happen: in others, but also within us. For every creature, when welcomed and not forced, can allow the good within it to emerge — that good in which, in a hidden way, the mystery of Christ is already present.

Almighty, eternal, just and merciful God, grant us wretched ones, for your love's sake, to do what we know you will, and always to will what pleases you, so that, purified within, enlightened within and set ablaze by the fire of the Holy Spirit, we may follow in the footsteps of your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the help of your grace alone may we come to you, O Most High, who in the perfect Trinity and in simple Unity live and reign and are glorified, almighty God for ever and ever.

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