



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 13 January 2010

The Mendicant Orders

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

At the beginning of the New Year let us look at the history of Christianity, to see how history develops and how it can be renewed. It shows that saints, guided by God's light, are the authentic reformers of the life of the Church and of society. As teachers with their words and witnesses with their example, they can encourage a stable and profound ecclesial renewal because they themselves are profoundly renewed, they are in touch with the real newness: God's presence in the world. This comforting reality namely, that in every generation saints are born and bring the creativity of renewal constantly accompanies the Church's history in the midst of the sorrows and negative aspects she encounters on her path. Indeed, century after century, we also see the birth of forces of reform and renewal, because God's newness is inexhaustible and provides ever new strength to forge ahead. This also happened in the 13th century with the birth and the extraordinary development of the Mendicant Orders: an important model of renewal in a new historical epoch. They were given this name because of their characteristic feature of "begging", in other words humbly turning to the people for financial support in order to live their vow of poverty and carry out their evangelizing mission. The best known and most important of the Mendicant Orders that came into being in this period are the Friars Minor and the Friars Preachers, known as Franciscans and Dominicans. Thus they are called by the names of their Founders, respectively Francis of Assisi and Dominic de Guzmán. These two great saints were able to read "the signs of

the times" intelligently, perceiving the challenges that the Church of their time would be obliged to face.

A first challenge was the expansion of various groups and movements of the faithful who, in spite of being inspired by a legitimate desire for authentic Christian life often set themselves outside ecclesial communion. They were profoundly adverse to the rich and beautiful Church which had developed precisely with the flourishing of monasticism. In recent [Catecheses](#) I have reflected on the monastic community of Cluny, which had always attracted young people, therefore vital forces, as well as property and riches. Thus, at the first stage, logically, a Church developed whose wealth was in property and also in buildings. The idea that Christ came down to earth poor and that the true Church must be the very Church of the poor clashed with this Church. The desire for true Christian authenticity was thus in contrast to the reality of the empirical Church. These were the so-called paupers' movements of the Middle Ages. They fiercely contested the way of life of the priests and monks of the time, accused of betraying the Gospel and of not practising poverty like the early Christians, and these movements countered the Bishops' ministry with their own "parallel hierarchy". Furthermore, to justify their decisions, they disseminated doctrine incompatible with the Catholic faith. For example, the Cathars' or Albigensians' movement reposed ancient heresies such as the debasement of and contempt for the material world the opposition to wealth soon became opposition to material reality as such, the denial of free will and, subsequently, dualism, the existence of a second principle of evil equivalent to God. These movements gained ground, especially in France and Italy, not only because of their solid organization but also because they were denouncing a real disorder in the Church, caused by the far from exemplary behaviour of some members of the clergy.

Both Franciscans and Dominicans, following in their Founders' footsteps, showed on the contrary that it was possible to live evangelical poverty, the truth of the Gospel as such, without being separated from the Church. They showed that the Church remains the true, authentic home of the Gospel and of Scripture. Indeed, Dominic and Francis drew the power of their witness precisely from close communion with the Church and the Papacy. With an entirely original decision in the history of consecrated life the Members of these Orders not only gave up their personal possessions, as monks had done since antiquity, but even did not want their land or goods to be made over to their communities. By so doing they meant to bear witness to an extremely modest life, to show solidarity to the poor and to trust in Providence alone, to live by Providence every day, trustingly placing themselves in God's hands. This personal and community style of the Mendicant Orders, together with total adherence to the teaching and authority of the Church, was deeply appreciated by the Pontiffs of the time, such as Innocent III and Honourius III, who gave their full support to the new ecclesial experiences, recognizing in them the voice of the Spirit. And results were not lacking: the groups of paupers that had separated from the Church returned to ecclesial communion or were gradually reduced until they disappeared. Today too, although we live in a society in which "having" often prevails over "being", we are very sensitive to the examples of poverty and solidarity that believers offer by their courageous decisions. Today too, similar

projects are not lacking: the movements, which truly stem from the newness of the Gospel and live it with radicalism in this day and age, placing themselves in God's hands to serve their neighbour. As [Paul VI](#) recalled in [Evangelii Nuntiandi](#), the world listens willingly to teachers when they are also witnesses. This is a lesson never to be forgotten in the task of spreading the Gospel: to be a mirror reflecting divine love, one must first live what one proclaims.

The Franciscans and Dominicans were not only witnesses but also teachers. In fact, another widespread need in their time was for religious instruction. Many of the lay faithful who dwelled in the rapidly expanding cities, wanted to live an intensely spiritual Christian life. They therefore sought to deepen their knowledge of the faith and to be guided in the demanding but exciting path of holiness. The Mendicant Orders were felicitously able to meet this need too: the proclamation of the Gospel in simplicity and with its depth and grandeur was an aim, perhaps the principal aim, of this movement. Indeed, they devoted themselves with great zeal to preaching. Great throngs of the faithful, often true and proper crowds, would gather to listen to the preachers in the churches and in the open air; let us think, for example, of St Anthony. The preachers addressed topics close to people's lives, especially the practice of the theological and moral virtues, with practical examples that were easy to understand. They also taught ways to cultivate a life of prayer and devotion. For example, the Franciscans spread far and wide the devotion to the humanity of Christ, with the commitment to imitate the Lord. Thus it is hardly surprising that many of the faithful, men and women, chose to be accompanied on their Christian journey by Franciscan or Dominican Friars, who were much sought after and esteemed spiritual directors and confessors. In this way associations of lay faithful came into being, which drew inspiration from the spirituality of St Francis and St Dominic as it was adapted to their way of living. In other words, the proposal of a "lay holiness" won many people over. As the [Second Ecumenical Vatican Council](#) recalled, the call to holiness is not reserved to the few but is universal (cf. [Lumen Gentium](#), n. 40). In all the states of life, in accordance with the demands of each one of them a possibility of living the Gospel may be found. In our day too, each and every Christian must strive for the "high standard of Christian living", whatever the class to which he or she belongs!

The importance of the Mendicant Orders thus grew so vigorously in the Middle Ages that secular institutions, such as the labour organizations, the ancient guilds and the civil authorities themselves, often had recourse to the spiritual counselling of Members of these Orders in order to draw up their regulations and, at times, to settle both internal and external conflicts. The Franciscans and Dominicans became the spiritual animators of the medieval city. With deep insight they put into practice a pastoral strategy suited to the social changes. Since many people were moving from the countryside to the cities, they no longer built their convents in rural districts but rather in urban zones. Furthermore, to carry out their activities for the benefit of souls they had to keep abreast of pastoral needs. With another entirely innovative decision, the Mendicant Orders relinquished their principle of stability, a classical principle of ancient monasticism, opting for a different approach. Friars Minor and Preachers travelled with missionary zeal from one place to another. Consequently they organized themselves differently in comparison with the majority of monastic

Orders. Instead of the traditional autonomy that every monastery enjoyed, they gave greater importance to the Order as such and to the Superior General, as well as to the structure of the Provinces. Thus the Mendicants were more available to the needs of the universal Church. Their flexibility enabled them to send out the most suitable friars on specific missions and the Mendicant Orders reached North Africa, the Middle East and Northern Europe. With this adaptability, their missionary dynamism was renewed.

The cultural transformations taking place in that period constituted another great challenge. New issues enlivened the discussion in the universities that came into being at the end of the 12th century. Minors and Preachers did not hesitate to take on this commitment. As students and professors they entered the most famous universities of the time, set up study centres, produced texts of great value, gave life to true and proper schools of thought, were protagonists of scholastic theology in its best period and had an important effect on the development of thought. The greatest thinkers, St Thomas Aquinas and St Bonaventure, were Mendicants who worked precisely with this dynamism of the new evangelization which also renewed the courage of thought, of the dialogue between reason and faith. Today too a "charity of and in the truth" exists, an "intellectual charity" that must be exercised to enlighten minds and to combine faith with culture. The dedication of the Franciscans and Dominicans in the medieval universities is an invitation, dear faithful, to make ourselves present in the places where knowledge is tempered so as to focus the light of the Gospel, with respect and conviction, on the fundamental questions that concern Man, his dignity and his eternal destiny. Thinking of the role of the Franciscans and the Dominicans in the Middle Ages, of the spiritual renewal they inspired and of the breath of new life they communicated in the world, a monk said: "At that time the world was ageing. Two Orders were born in the Church whose youth they renewed like that of an eagle" (Burchard of Ursperg, *Chronicon*).

Dear brothers and sisters, at the very beginning of this year let us invoke the Holy Spirit, the eternal youth of the Church: may he make each one aware of the urgent need to offer a consistent and courageous Gospel witness so that there may always be saints who make the Church resplendent, like a bride, ever pure and beautiful, without spot or wrinkle, who can attract the world irresistibly to Christ and to his salvation.

To special groups:

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from Denmark, Australia and the United States of America. My particular greeting goes to the many student groups present and to the faculty members. Upon all of you I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace!

Lastly, as always, I address the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds* present. Today's Liturgy commemorates Bishop St Hilary of Poitiers, who lived in France in the fourth century and firmly "defended the divinity of Christ" (Liturgy) and was a champion of the faith and a teacher of truth. May his example sustain you, dear *young people*, in the constant and courageous search for Christ; especially you students from the Diocese of Caserta, thank you for coming and thank you for your commitment to faith, I see and hear the strength of your faith; I encourage you, dear *sick* people, to offer up your suffering so that the Kingdom of God may spread throughout the world; and may he help you, dear *newlyweds*, to be witnesses of Christ's love in family life.

APPEAL FOR HAITI

I would now like to make an appeal for Haiti, in a dramatic plight. My thoughts turn in particular to the population severely hit, a few hours ago, by a devastating earthquake that has reaped a heavy toll of human lives, caused a multitude of homeless, displaced people and done untold material damage. I invite everyone to join in my prayer to the Lord for the victims of this catastrophe and for those who mourn their loss. I assure my spiritual closeness to all those who have lost their homes and to all the people tried in various ways by this grave disaster, as I implore from God comfort and relief for them in their suffering. I appeal to everyone's generosity not to let these brothers and sisters who are experiencing a time of need and sorrow go without our practical solidarity and the effective support of the International Community. The Catholic Church will not fail to take immediate action through her charitable institutions in order to meet the people's most urgent needs.

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