

EMBRACING THE PRESENT-DAY EXCLUDED

(International Congress of Justice and Peace, Uberlandia-Brazil, 2006)

*Br. José Rodríguez Carballo, ofm
Minister General*

I confess that it is not easy for me to write or speak about the topic. I am very afraid or, better still, I get into a real panic when I think that the crisis we are going through, while understanding it as an opportunity and a difficulty, leads us at times to gloss over the insecurity and the uncertainty in which we live and the deficit of life with words and discourses, which initially, at least, are beautiful and innovative, but which very soon are changed into themes so that, before being tried in a vital way, they sound to us as being old and obsolete, because they have little or nothing to do with our actual life.

Pedro Casaldáliga says that we need “*to think also with our feet*” so that our reflections do not lead us to confuse practice with what we think (there is, at times, a great difference between them) and our words become *hollow*, and that they should also become *walking words*.

With fear and trembling, but with a deep sense of gratitude on my part to those who organised this Congress and to all those who responded to my invitation, I will speak thinking especially of that change of mind (conversion) which would lead us, like Francis, to embrace the present-day excluded, contemplating the face of the poor, crucified Christ in them.

For that reason I will begin with the process which led Francis to embrace the leper and to go among them, and then pause to take a look at our life and the path we have to take in order to approach the present-day excluded. I think that this reflective journey is sufficiently justified by the simple fact that we are meeting during the first year of preparation for the celebration of the VIII Centenary of the foundation of our Order, dedicated especially to the theme of discernment.

“Lord, what do You want me to do?” (3Comp 6)

We do not know precisely the date of the conversion of the son of Pietro Bernardone. It is usually placed in the year 1206. Francis had been searching for some time, “*he awaited the Lord’s will*” (LegMj 1, 3). In that existential situation, Francis asked time and time again: “*Lord, what do You want me to do?*” (cf. 3Comp 6; LegMj 1, 3), and then insistently (cf. LM 1, 3): “*Enlighten the darkness of my heart...*” (PrCr 1). As a conclusion to this long process, he himself, at the end of his days and making a summary of his life, confessed: “*The Lord gave me, Brother Francis, to begin doing penance in this way: for when I was in sin, it seemed too bitter for me to see lepers. And the Lord Himself led me among them and I showed mercy to them. And when I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body. And afterwards I delayed a little and left the world*” (Test 1-3).

Francis thus crowned what we could well call the “first stage” of his process of conversion which lasted the rest of his life, as can be easily deduced from his Writings and from the testimony of his biographers; for, as Celano would say, “*it is difficult to leave familiar things behind, and things once instilled in the spirit are not easily weakened*” (1Cel 4).

This event, this encounter with the leper, however, cannot be seen in isolation, but must be read in close relation with five other encounters: the encounter with himself (cf. *3Comp* 4, cf. *LegMj* 1, 2; cf. *AnP* 5; *3Comp* 6; *ICel* 6), the encounter with the poor (cf. *3Comp* 3), the encounter with the Crucifix (cf. *3Comp* 13), the encounter with the Gospel (cf. *3Comp* 25) and the encounter with the brothers (cf. *3Comp* 27). All these encounters lie at the basis of his vocation or, to be more exact, of the response Francis gave, at a first moment, to the call which the Lord made to him and which took place during a slow, very slow, process. Any one of the encounters would be unintelligible, or at least incomplete, without the others.

On the other hand, the Lord responded to the existential question of Francis in each of these encounters. In fact, reading an encounter in relationship with the others, it is as if, in response to the question of Francis, “*Lord, what do You want me to do?*”, the Lord were to respond: Francis, I want you to meet yourself and to go repair my Church, which, as you can see, is threatened with ruin, by living the *forma vitae* of the Apostles, in fraternity, with the poor, marginalised and excluded and living like them.

Here we have the essential elements of the Franciscan “*forma vitae*” closely united to each other: To live in the way of the first disciples of the Lord, in fraternity and in full communion with the last of men and with the excluded. It is a *forma vitae* which, to embrace it, needs a profound encounter with oneself by frequenting the “cave” (*ICel* 6), going back over one’s steps (cf. *3Comp* 6).

Francis, as we well know, did not understand it in this way at first, for as the Seraphic Doctor says, he still did not know the plans of God for his person (cf. *LegMj* 1, 2, 3). He thought of the material construction of the hermitage of San Damiano and put his hands to the work (cf. *3Comp* 13). But little by little the Lord enlightened his heart, showing him “*how he should behave*” (*ICel* 7), so that very quickly he came to understand that it was a question of a radical change of life. That change necessarily passed through such a transformation that what he had loved and desired up to then, he would despise and abhor from then on. It was only in this way that what had seemed bitter to him could be transformed into sweetness (cf. *3Comp* 11). Only in this way could be a “leaven”, a transforming agent in the Church and in the world and could repair it from within.

Christ, the founding and fundamental option of Francis

What was the founding option in the life of Francis? What is at the back of Francis’s embrace of the leper? Is it simply a social or humanitarian option or is it, fundamentally, a Christological option? To respond to these and other similar questions let us turn back a moment and start again from the texts.

Before asking “*Lord, what do You want me to do?*”, Francis heard the Lord say: “*Francis, who can do more for you, a lord or a servant, a rich person or one who is poor?* To which Francis replied: “*A lord and a rich person*”. The Lord answered him: “*Why, then, are you abandoning the Lord for a servant and the rich God for a poor mortal?*” (*LegMj* 1,3)

We see that at the beginning of the vocation of Francis there was only and exclusively what the biographers would call “divine clemency” (cf. *LegMj* 1,3) or “the gift sent to him from heaven” (*ICel* 5). He himself would recognise it clearly on speaking about his encounter with the leper: “*The Lord Himself led me among them...*”. It is the experience of every vocation. Jeremiah could say: “*The Lord seduced me...*”, while Amos would confess: “*The Lord took me from behind the flock...*” (*Am* 7, 15). The same thing happened with the first disciples: “*... and He said to them: Come, follow me*” (*Mt* 4, 19). At this initiative, as in the case of the prophets or of the first disciples,

Francis quickly responds “*This is what I want, this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart*” (1Cel 22).

What Bonaventure says after telling us about the dream Francis had when on the way to Pulla is significant. At the invitation of the Lord: “*Go back to your own land*”, Francis, the Seraphic doctor says: “*When morning came, he returned in haste to Assisi, free of care and filled with joy and, already made an exemplar of obedience, he awaited the Lord’s will*” (LegMj 1,3). It was a vocational initiative on the part of the Lord, a generous and rapid response on the part of the Poverello. How significant what Celano tells us is. Francis, after hearing the Gospel in the Porziuncola –the biographer says–, “*overflowing with joy, hastened to implement the words of salvation*” (1Cel 22).

On the other hand, on the basis of his vocational response, in this first phase of his conversion, I think it can be said with certainty that it was precisely the option to follow the Lord instead of following the servant; to follow the rich God instead of following a poor man. His option was an option of faith; his basic option was an option in favour of the Lord who very soon would come to be everything in his life, “*My God and my all*”: “*All good, supreme good..., richness to satisfaction*” (PrG, 1ff).

The embrace of the leper on the part of Francis or, better still, the “*going among them*”, was not a simple gesture of compassion, closeness or solidarity. For the Poverello it was much more: It was an embrace of the poor, crucified Christ, for, as St. Bonaventure says: “*in the sweetness of his pious heart, he turned back to Christ any need, any lack he might notice in anyone*” (LegMj 8, 5). To embrace the leper is to embrace a form of life similar to that of Christ, just as it would be revealed to him on listening to the Gospel in the Porziuncola (cf. 1Cel 22). To embrace the least is, for Francis, inseparable from the embrace with the Lord and with the form of life of “*highest poverty*” which embraced the Son and “*His poor mother*”. But, at the same time, the “*embrace of the leper*” is inseparable “*from the embrace of the brothers*” (the fraternal dimension of our life) and from the embrace of the “*poor priests*” who “*live according to the form of the Holy Roman Church*” (the ecclesiastical dimension of our vocation and mission). In other words, we could well say that any option in favour of the “lepers” and “excluded” has to be made on the basis of a transformed heart, which makes it possible for us to live “*sine proprio*” (2 R 1, 1) and in communion with the brothers and the Church. The Lord who led Francis among the lepers was the same Lord who gave him brothers and revealed to him that he had to live “*according to the form of the Holy Gospel*” (Test 14) and the same Lord who gave him “*so much faith*” in the priests who live according to the form of the Holy Roman Church.

Liberating prophecy in order to embrace the present-day excluded

Our embrace of the “leper” and our option in favour of the excluded, if all the dimensions of our life, pointed out above, are taken into account, will be authentically prophetic attitudes in a world such as ours, deeply divided between North and South, between the few who have almost everything and the many who have almost nothing; for they will speak of a God, the God of Jesus of Nazareth, impassioned with mankind, of a God who sees the suffering of so many excluded and who listens to the cries of them all (cf. Ex 3, 7. 9).

Prophecy is a gift which must be accepted and responded to. The consecrated life “*takes the shape of a special form of sharing in Christ’s prophetic office*” (VC 84). As Friars Minor we fully

participate in this function. And so we are called to liberate prophecy by accepting it as a gift with an open and generous heart and responding to it, that is, putting the said gift at the service of the Church and of the world. Only in this way will we be fully in tune with the passion of God for His people, enthused by His project and disposed to give everything for Him and for his “preferred” people.

But let us say it once again: This prophecy which is expressed through the word, which announces hope and denounces injustice, only has power if it is born of a profound solidarity and of a testimony of life centred on the Kingdom, of a profound communion with God and with His project and, at least in our case, of a profound communion of life in fraternity and of a profound communion with the Church and with those who “*live according to the form of the Holy Roman Church*”. Only in this way will our “prophetic word” be capable of reaching the hearts of people, opening them up to new horizons in their life and questioning the egotistic defences which each one has been building. Only in this way will our “prophetic voice” be able to guide the people of the Church in order to remind them of the most authentic of the projects of Jesus, obscured, at times, in the midst of structures, institutions and also, it is clear, by incoherence. Only in this way will our prophecy speak to the world denouncing injustice and calling all men and women of good will to unite their hearts and their efforts in constructing that “new world” according to the plan of God.

The present-day excluded

Our humanity is a “crucified humanity” and many, very many, are the crucified who make up the world of the excluded. While the capacity of the world to create wealth has increased and there have been great advances in the awareness of society of the dignity and rights of people and peoples, and communications between peoples and the possibility of sharing resources have been facilitated, we cannot deny that the rhythm with which wealth increases also increases the desire to control it on the part of those who have the power, not only financial, which causes the excluded to be increased in number.

Forming part of the world of the excluded are::

- The marginalised of our society, the men and women who sleep on our streets, on the benches of stations and public parks, whom we leave out in the cold because they do not integrate into our systems and we end up cutting them off (“if you do not integrate yourself into the system, the system will end up cutting you off”).
- The millions of unemployed, young and old, without work, disoriented...
- The millions of chronically ill (suffers from AIDS, depressed, handicapped) and the millions of drug-addicts, who have no other alternative but death.
- The multitude of old, abandoned people; the multitude of beaten and abused women; the multitude of street children, deprived of their childhood, obliged to beg, work or sell their bodies in order to survive.
- The poor countries unable to develop, stripped of their cultural identity, stripped of their natural resources, stripped of their freedom...

All those who live in financial misery are excluded through the denial of their participation in the fruits of the work of humanity, through denying them participation in the goods which God gave as the patrimony of all; but equally excluded are those who live in moral and spiritual misery through finding themselves in personal and social structures of sin; the many men and women who live in social misery, in situations where the fundamental rights of the person are not respected; all those who live in existential or ontological misery, unaware, perhaps, of the place and space which they should occupy as people. All these form part of the world of the excluded and a great number of them, if not all, are victims of greed, exploitation and oppression. To all these groups of excluded

we must add the world of those who exclude themselves because of the thousands of situations through which they are going.

This world of the excluded, is growing daily, sowing the world with 1,800 million human beings who live in extreme poverty and 1,500 million illiterates (out of 5,000 million inhabitants of the planet), and the earthly globe is irrigated with the blood of 35,000 children who die of hunger each day.

Our embrace of the excluded

We, as Friars Minor, have been called, as Moses was in another time, to do all we can to “*liberate them*” and to take them out of this situation of exclusion in which they find themselves (cf. *Ex 3 10*). We have been especially called, as Francis was, to embrace them and to practise mercy towards them (cf. *Test 2*).

Being kind, embracing them, is to understand and alleviate the unhappiness of others, considering it, in a certain way, to be our own. It is said of Francis that he knew how “*to be sick with the sick and afflicted with the afflicted*” (*3Comp 59*). To embrace the excluded, to be kind to them, is not a vague sentiment, but a relationship of two beings, which is so profound that they are led to share and feel the same fate. Because Francis was kind to the lepers, he went among them, lived with them and served them in everything “*For God’s sake he served all of them with great love. He washed all the filth from them and even cleaned out the pus of their sores*” (*1Cel 17*).

How is it possible that one can make the fate of the other, the fate of the excluded, his own? Reading the Franciscan Sources it is easy to discover that the source of the kindness which Francis had “*for anyone with a bodily affliction*” (*LegMj 8, 5*), lies in his admiration for “*the kindness of the Lord*” towards him (*1Cel 26*) and in the continual contemplation of the Lord who was “*kind and compassionate*” towards all (*Jm 5, 11*) and which led Him to send us His Son, who took our fragile flesh in the womb of Mary and “*bore the suffering of the cross*” (*Adm 6,1*).

In our case also, profound kindness towards the other, which is not only superficial and for show, will start out from this experience which I do not hesitate to call the mystery of the mercy of the Lord towards each one of us. This experience alone will transform our existence to the point of making us lepers with the lepers, poor with the poor, excluded with the excluded; to the point of going among them, living with them and serving them, for this is what “being kind to” and “embracing them” really means.

Many have been, and are, the Friars who, during our 800 years of history, have embraced and embrace the excluded. Times have changed and the ways to embrace the excluded have also changed; but we recognise, with gratitude, that there has never been a lack of Friars who have practised Francis’ embrace of the leper by embracing the lepers of their own times. Today, this embrace can be exemplified in what follows:

- Friars who work in inter-religious dialogue in countries where Christians are a majority and in countries where the disciples of Jesus are persecuted.
- Friars who form part of inter-cultural fraternities, giving witness to the fact that people can live together despite their differences.
- Friars, of all ages, living in situations of conflict and violence, and deeply inserted among the people; when others go, they, being able to go, remain and risk their lives, in many cases even to martyrdom, as signs of radical solidarity with the excluded.

- Friars who collaborate in the different areas of solidarity, in defence of human rights, seeking, in many cases, the transformation of social structures.

What separates us from the excluded

The examples of Friars who embrace the excluded could be multiplied. I know many Friars who work with lepers, with AIDS sufferers, with drug-addicts, with the homeless... However, between our desires to embrace the excluded and their application in presences and projects in favour of them, we discover, in many cases, a distance which pains us and questions, in some way, the radicalism of our option for the Kingdom “above all else” and of the option we say we have for the poor, a distance which impedes the ideal being incarnated into practical projects.

There are obstacles of a structural nature. Some are born of the neo-liberal economic system and its culture which are penetrating our minds and influencing our attitudes and criteria, thus impeding us in assuming an evangelically critical position, without which it is impossible to take prophetic action. Others arise from the very structures and style of organisation of our Entities, which are frequently excessively rigid and do not correspond to the demands of our times. They make it difficult for the creativity which the responses to the new challenges require. On the other hand, the economic model of the majority of our Entities and the very formative processes often do not help us to live as “companions and friends” of the excluded. Rather do they create “protected” spaces which impede a real solidarity with these people.

Other significant obstacles and blockages to prophecy are born of the consecrated life itself. The following, among others, seem to be important:

- Fear, which has various faces: fear of taking risks in the plan of the institution and of the mission; fear of facing up to the new and different; fear of losing power; fear of the insecurity which the commitment to the excluded could bring us.
- Our own divergences and internal conflicts which paralyse the prophetic action of the group and of some of its members with a prophetic vocation.
- The lack of real collaboration between the different Entities.
- The style of life of some religious communities which distances them from the people.

But what most separates us from the excluded and impedes us in embracing them is, very often, our style of life. We separate ourselves from the excluded:

- When satisfaction with enough ceases to be a virtue and, it seems, greed takes its place.
- When we do not feel comfortable being poor or being with them, but rather do we define and measure ourselves by what we have or by what we count for.
- If we assume with complete naturalness what is due to us, not only the necessary or even the good, but the best.
- If we give in to the temptation to seek security and to accumulate “grain in our silos”, contrary to the gospel warning, in order to protect ourselves, as we try to justify it, against the time of want.
- When the natural changes of places and of some levels of consumption are not accompanied by a change in the network of friends and social relationships.

In short, when our words in favour of the excluded are “learned” words which have little or nothing to do with our lives, becoming, therefore, “empty” words, when we use and instrumentalise

them, when we make an ideology out of their defence. In all these cases we separate ourselves from the excluded.

Building bridges between us and the excluded

We cannot be satisfied with pointing out what separates us from the excluded. We have to take up the challenge and see what we have to change or, better still, how WE have to change in order for the gift of prophecy to be liberated and we can embrace all the excluded.

In this context I would like to make my profound conviction clear. Changes do not come about simply because “we have decided” to change. Profound changes are the result of an openness to the Spirit of the Lord which speaks to us through the Word, which makes itself present in the discernment of the fraternity, which guides us by means of the questions which contact with the excluded arouses in our heart. Change requires spiritual consistency which we lack at times. Perhaps we should seek the ultimate reason for which it is so hard for us to change. On the other hand, changes cannot be faced without a serious analysis of our own and surrounding realities, because it cannot be done blindly or without taking into account our own resources.

Having made this background affirmation, I now underline some changes which impose themselves if we are to build bridges between ourselves and the excluded.

- We need a realism which forces us to become aware of our own limitations (age, numbers, etc.), but which do not impede us in discerning with prophetic freedom the style of life and the “missionary” presences which correspond to the announcement of the Kingdom.
- At this time, particularly if we think of the first year of the preparation for the celebration of the VIII Centenary of the foundation of our Order dedicated to discernment, we are called on to encourage reflection on the essential elements of our “form of life” and, at the same time, on the “signs of the times” and the “signs of places” in order to respond better to the challenges which come to us from our charism and the cry of the excluded and, in this way, be able to assume the task of an authentic “re-foundation” of our Order.
- In a spirit of interior freedom and of affective and effective “itinerancy”, we must make the effort to move to new places of mission (the new areopaghi), which the Pope points out to us, disposed towards the abandonment of some of our present ministries. We should allow ourselves to “be seduced by the forgotten cloisters, the inhuman cloisters where the beauty and the dignity of the person are continually sullied” (*LgP* 37), to go out to the frontiers and to move to the peripheries, which have always been signs of prophetic vitality in the Franciscan life and of its fidelity to the charism which Francis left us.
- We must promote a real insertion of our fraternities among the people and give space to the poor in them in order to be closer to the people.
- We have to strengthen our conviction that God is Father of all, that His love is open to all and that He welcomes all, especially in those areas where we meet people of different religious traditions. This awareness will dispose us to dialogue and to collaboration and will multiply our capacity to respond to the situation of exclusion which is lived by so many people in our world.
- We must encourage inter-cultural and international communities which would invite us to share our faith and the cultural patrimony of each one in the light of the Gospel.
- It is necessary to have a new concept of poverty which would lead us to live it for the good of the poor, a poverty which would lead us to become involved and to work for the just distribution of the goods of the earth.
- We must try harder to form fraternities which would be an alternative to consumerism: fraternities which would administer their resources, always poor in our case, for the benefit

of the dispossessed and excluded; fraternities which would put their considerable material (not only financial) and spiritual resources at the service of the excluded in order to be able to accept them, speak for them and influence the rich in their favour.

Convictions

We find in our Fraternity, today also, many Friars who continue to embrace the present-day “lepers” and “excluded”. But, at the same time, we feel the weight of the obstacles in ourselves and in our fraternities which distance us from them. Something has to change in order to be able to live the prophetic dimension of life in favour of the poor and excluded more radically. In the Word of God and in our legislation we find a new call to unite ourselves to the mission of Jesus and to His style of carrying it out by taking on more demanding projects of solidarity with the excluded. This is the time to make more explicit our convictions, which should orient our life and how we should wish to express them today through practical projects. We will surely discover “great novelties”, but they will be able to help us towards a “renewed awareness” that the prophetic dimension is essential to our life and that it requires great audacity and creativity today in order to create practical ways to express it. Here are some that are common to the reflection which the consecrated life in general is carrying out at present:

Convictions

1. Prophecy is a constitutive element of the Consecrated Life and of our *forma vitae*. I think that the awakening of awareness about the prophetic dimension of our life is a gift of the Spirit, which we have to accept and to which we must respond.
2. The preferential option for the excluded and the “lepers” of our days has to be considered as something fundamental in our life. The poor evangelise us and help us to discover the face of God and to renew our fraternities. Closeness to human groups considered to be “surplus” in our societies continues to be an urgency for all consecrated and particularly for us Friars Minor.
3. I am fully convinced that openness to the excluded goes hand in hand with openness to the God of Jesus, full of clemency and rich in mercy. Giving priority to the Lord in our lives is a condition for embracing the excluded in a gospel and Franciscan key.
4. I feel that the need for formation in and assimilation of an integral spirituality, nourished by a contextualised reading of the Word of God is urgent in order to renew us and to enable us to fulfil our prophetic mission and to create fraternities which would be signs of the Kingdom, open to the reception of and solidarity with the poor.
5. I see that it is necessary for us to get involved in inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue for I consider them decisive elements in formation to the Franciscan life of the future.
6. Without renouncing our many and good assistential works, we have to commit ourselves more to the promotion of a culture in which the dignity of the excluded is really respected.
7. It would be important to analyse and reflect on our own experience of inclusion within our fraternities as that would help us to not exclude others in the Church or in society in general.
8. We need to open up to greater collaboration with the laity and with the other members of the consecrated life, and, in particular, with the Franciscan Family.

Lines of action

1. Highlight the primacy of the Word of God in our lives, read and shared in a new listening in the Spirit and with the poor.
2. Review, from the option for the poor, our style of life, our works and financial structures. Let us recognise the need to make some significant decisions in this direction which would help us to live a certain precariousness and total disposition for mission.
3. Take care in financing works of the Church and of the Order in countries with fewer financial resources so that the Friars do not create a social class that is distanced from the life of their own people.
4. Support our fraternities of insertion with a clear Franciscan identity. Participate actively in the solidarity networks existing in society, contributing to the maintenance of their dynamism and to raising the hope of the people.
5. Collaborate with other consecrated people in order to promote the presence of the consecrated life in the alternative world forums and in the centres of decision making, where the future of humanity is determined.
6. Make ourselves present where human life and dignity are most threatened and study the possibility of creating, in collaboration with other consecrated people, some platforms which would allow us to give effective responses to some dramatic situations in which the excluded live.
7. Give privilege to closeness to and accompaniment of immigrants in our excluding societies. Promote the formation of inter-cultural and international communities which could be powerful signs of communion in a divided world.

Conclusion

Dear Brother Congress Members: We are doing a lot for the excluded. For that we must thank the good God, who arouses in the hearts of the Friars the desire to make the Kingdom of God present among the excluded, and also the Friars who carry out such work, for their generosity and commitment. But the challenges which are presented to us are also many. In this situation:

- Let us open up to the Spirit. Openness to its inspiration will show us new horizons and make our life increase.
- Let us open up to the Spirit. Its grace will bring it about that the words of this Congress will be bearers of life for ourselves and for the Friars of our fraternities.
- Let us open up to the Spirit. It will liberate prophecy, despite our smallness and our fears.
- Let us open up to the Spirit. It will give us the audacity and the creativity of Francis.
- Let us open up to the Spirit. It will spur us on to enter in among the present-day lepers and to show kindness to them.
- Let us open up to the Spirit. He will change the bitterness into sweetness of soul and body.
- Let us open up to the Spirit and put ourselves in motion towards those who rightly expect our presence at their side.

Appendices

Enlightened by the Word and by our legislation

Called to discern (cf. *LgP* 7) “*between what comes from the Spirit and what is contrary to it*” (*VC* 73), called to examine everything in order to hold on to what is good (cf. *1Thess* 5, 21), it is time to allow ourselves to be enlightened by the Word, strengthening, on the personal and fraternal levels, the prayerful and contextualised reading of it. As in the case of Francis, the Word is also for us the star which guides us towards new locations, the power which permits us to give witness, through the commitment of our lives, to the option for the Kingdom and for those to whom it belongs in the first place: the poor and excluded; the inspiration to know to be, in every context, the word of consolation, of annunciation, of reconciliation, of hope and of denunciation; the foundation on which a fraternity, which would be a real sign of the new fraternity of the Kingdom, can be built.

There are innumerable texts which could spur our prophetic dynamism. Concentrating only on the Gospels, the following texts speak to us with force:

- *Lk* 4, 16ff, which presents to us the identity of Jesus and of His mission. The anointing by the Spirit enables one to proclaim the liberating love of God and to realise signs which would make it explicit. We find those which Jesus did in the gospel accounts. Today, these signs would be, above all, the presence and commitments which do not seek recompense of any kind, but are motivated only by the burning desire to have the miracle of liberation and of the new fraternity of the Kingdom realised.
- The texts which present to us the openness of Jesus, which led Him to overcome the ethnic and social barriers: the cure of the Syrophenician woman (*Mk* 7, 26ff), the encounter with the Samaritan woman (*Jn* 4,1ff), the story of the good Samaritan (*Lk* 10. 29ff).
- The accounts which explain the attitude of acceptance which Jesus showed before the people who were suffering some form of exclusion: His action in favour of the woman found in adultery (*Jn* 7,1ff), the meals he shared with the publicans (*Lk* 5, 27ff), the cure of the lepers and the reception of the children (*Mk* 10,13ff).
- The proclamation of the Beatitudes (*Lk* 6,20-23; *Mt* 5,1-12) which reveal the alternative vision of reality which characterises the Kingdom of God.
- *Jn* 13,1-15, which presents the Lord washing the feet of His disciples and asking them to do the same.

These texts open up the very core of the life and mission of Jesus to us: He came to give life so that all would have life and have it in abundance (*Jn* 10,10). This text condenses in a wonderful way the meaning of the call to solidarity with the excluded. In the encounter in solidarity with the excluded brother or sister there is a communication of life which makes us grow and makes the gift of God increase in the excluded.

But our legislation also serves as a foundation for the building of bridges between us and the excluded, whatever his concrete situation may be. I limit myself to quoting only the articles of the GGCC which appear to me to be most significant:

- “The Friars, as followers of St. Francis, are bound to lead a radically evangelical life, namely: to live in a spirit of prayer and devotion and in fraternal fellowship; they are to offer a witness

of penance and minority; and, in charity towards all mankind, they are to announce the Gospel throughout the whole world and **to preach reconciliation, peace and justice by their deeds; and to show respect for creation**” (Art. 1, 2)

- “Mindful that they have been created in the image of the beloved Son of God, the friars are to praise the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit **along with all their creatures**; the are to restore all good things to the Lord God Most High and give him thanks for everything” (Art. 20, 1)
- “The friars are to live in this world as **promoters of justice and as messengers and agents of peace**, overcoming evil and doing good (Art 68,1).
- “The Friars **shall proclaim peace** by word and cherish it so deep in their hearts that no one is stirred to anger or scandal, but rather that everyone is called back to peace, meekness and kindness through them” (Art. 68, 2).
- “Following closely in the footsteps of Saint Francis, the Friars **are to maintain a reverent attitude towards nature**, threatened from all sides today, in such a way that they may restore it completely to its condition of brother and to its role of usefulness to all mankind for the glory of God the Creator” (Art. 71).
- “Since a large part of mankind is still in bondage to need, injustice and oppression, **the Friars**, along with all people of good will, **are to devote themselves to establishing a society of justice, liberation and peace in the Risen Christ**. They are to investigate carefully the causes of each situation and take part in undertakings of charity, justice and international solidarity” (Art. 96, 2).

The option for the poor

- “After the example of Saint Francis, whom the Lord led among lepers, **each and every Friar is to give preference to the "marginalised", to the poor and oppressed, to the afflicted and infirm**; rejoicing when they live among them, they are to show them mercy” (Art. 97,1).
- “In fraternal fellowship with all the lowly of the earth and **looking on current events from the viewpoint of the poor**, the Friars are to exert every effort so that the poor themselves become more fully conscious of their own human dignity and that they may safeguard and increase it” (Art. 97,2).
- “The Friars are to strive to listen reverently to others with unfeigned charity, to learn willingly from the people among whom they live, **especially from the poor, who are our teachers**, and to be ready to enter into dialogue with everyone” (Art. 93, 1).

What are these texts saying to us? What attitudes and what gestures are they asking of us? Taking my presentation into account, what do we lack in order to embrace the excluded and what is surplus to our needs in this area?