

**"The Gospel Challenges Us"**  
**Reflections from Bahia on Evangelization**  
**OFM Plenary Council**  
**June 6-25, 1983**  
**Salvador, Bahia**  
**Brazil**

## INTRODUCTION

**"What we have seen and heard,  
we are telling you" (1 Jn 1,3)**

1. Brazilians refer to the state of Bahia as "The Land of Happiness." The Plenary Council of 1983 came to the city of Salvador, where the friars first came in 1500. We came to reflect on the working paper, "Evangelization and Mission in the Order," within a Third World context and in Latin America where, as Father General put it, "so many creative and innovative developments in evangelization and mission have been taking place."

2. We were introduced to a city of glaring contrasts. Modern office buildings tower over structures centuries old. Scattered among high rise condominiums are hundreds of pockets of squalor. Of the city's million and a half people, 600,000 live in *favelas*, and these are but a small percentage of the millions trapped in such slums in Brazilian cities. Statistics from Brazil serve as an example of the poverty suffered in many countries: 1% are very rich, 4% rich, 15% middle class, 40% poor and 40% destitute.

3. We walked through *favelas* of makeshift shacks, open sewers, stench, sick children and parents without hope. We talked to the people and to friars and others who live and work there. Many of the people have been driven into the city by drought or expulsion from their land. They come seeking work where there is no work. Their attempts to better their lives are frustrated. Against the backdrop of such destitution; these reflections are made.

4. What we saw in Brazil mirrors the poverty we know exists in all other parts of the world. We listened to each other describe from our own countries – north, south, east and west – similar slums, unemployment, underdevelopment, violence, repression, and the misery left by natural calamities. Stories of forced abortions, unjust imprisonment, present-day martyrs and some of the 15 million refugees who wander about our world have been on our minds and in our prayers during our sessions.

5. We have attempted to do as Pope Paul VI asked in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, "to look at the concrete social, economic and political reality in which people live." Even though we have seen poverty before, once again it has been a jarring experience, helping us to see, we hope, with the eyes of Jesus and Francis. We have reflected on the realities we face, the Gospel and our Franciscan mission. With faith and conviction we are telling you what we have seen and heard, and what we have discovered anew – our need to be evangelized ourselves before we can evangelize anyone else.

6. Friar Cardinal Aloisio Lorscheider spoke to us of the conversion of the Brazilian bishops in taking a strong stance on the side of the poor – a preferential option for the poor which is not popular with the government nor with many of the wealthy. Their action has taken definite and effective shape in realistic and measurable pastoral planning throughout the country. At the heart of these plans are 100,000 Basic Ecclesial Communities, from which we too can learn.

7. Friar Leonardo Boff provided us with theological foundations and insights for the liberation theology of Latin America and reminded us as friars, "We do not have to create a liberation theology. What we must do is simply live out our minority, our Gospel poverty – our Franciscan identity."

8. At the opening of the 1981 Plenary Council, John Vaughn, our Minister General, said very simply: "Our vocation sends us to announce the Gospel to the nations. . . . **People are waiting** for us to denounce war, the arms race, world hunger and injustice; they are waiting for us to do something about what we pray for and preach . . . they wait for us to mediate the Gospel values to the culture and society of today."

9. In his opening talk at this Plenary Council he repeated his plea: "We have the information. We have the documentation. We have . . . the inspiration of so many friar-apostles who have gone before us. What we seem to need today is . . . imagination and stimulation . . . . We can do great things under God and with the help of his grace – but we must get up and be doing!"

10. Our message, "The Gospel Challenges Us," is one response to his words. We believe it is one step in our own evangelization. We believe we have the Good News! In our reflections we offer a bit of that Good News to you – in so many parts of the world – as you live and work among God's people.

11. We are grateful to the poor who are our teachers. We are grateful to those who so joyfully serve the poor and abandoned. And finally we are thankful to be able to offer you, our brothers, these insights which are rooted in the Gospel and our Franciscan charism and can be used for our own evangelization and the evangelization of this world which we love.

## CHAPTER 1

# OUR MISSION IS EVANGELIZATION

12. We came to Brazil knowing that we have been invited by the Spirit of God to be evangelizers and given the task by you, our brothers, to reflect on how to do this more effectively today. We looked to the world we must evangelize and attempted to discern the signs of the times. We looked to the Scriptures and to our Father Francis.

13. In our world, full of hopes and aspirations, we see a desire for community, peace, justice and the promotion of human dignity together with a desire for the satisfaction of basic human needs. At the same time society is plagued with atheism and religious indifference, conflicting ideologies, wars, racism, oppression, and an ever widening gap between rich and poor. Faced with such a world situation, what do we have to offer?

14. Jesus tells us: "The Spirit of the Lord has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, the recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people" (Lk 4, 18-19). This is the mission of the Church to reveal Jesus and the kingdom he proclaimed. He wants to free all humans from sin and all that oppresses them so they can enjoy the fullness of his life – a life of justice, peace, hope, joy and love.

15. On our part, accepting Jesus' way demands *metanoia*, personal and communal conversion, as we seek to penetrate cultures with Gospel values. We must be more and more evangelized ourselves, freeing ourselves from sin and from any part we might have in injustice and oppression, from all that in any way hinders us from receiving and proclaiming God's love at work in the world. "

16. Searching to be better evangelizers, we look to Francis who brought new insights and emphases to his times.

**Brotherhood** – When some in the Church condemned those outside her fold as heretics, and even sent armies against them, Francis proclaimed the good news that they are our brothers and sisters.

**Peace** – When city warred with city and society was divided by the feudal system, he proclaimed the good news of peace.

**Poverty** – When riches were sought after as a god, he proclaimed anew the good news of the "blessedness" of the poor.

**Minority** – When the goal of many was power and might, he proclaimed the good news of being little ones.

**Ecology** – When some feared nature, and others sought to subject it to their uses, he proclaimed the good news that the earth was our sister/mother, and all creation one family to be treated with respect.

**Presence** – When some religious secluded themselves from the people, Francis wanted his friars to be near ordinary people, present to the *minores*.

**Holy Spirit** – When the Church was highly institutionalized, Francis was conscious of the role of the Spirit and never tired of reminding his brothers to be "men of the Spirit," and told them that the Holy Spirit is the true Minister General of our Order.

We see these same emphases as important in our times and will briefly reflect on them in the following chapters.

**17.** As Friars Minor, then, we are called to be an "evangelizing vanguard," in a Church which must be continually re-incarnated and renewed. Accordingly, we must be especially alert and sensitive to the movements of the Holy Spirit, both within and without the Church. Besides ministering to the faithful, we see a need to reach out in our own societies to those yet untouched by the Gospel and to those alienated from the Gospel as traditionally presented. By our presence we will try to help them interpret their experience and encourage the good that we find. If it seems to be God's will (RnB 16, 7), we will explicitly proclaim the Lord. Moreover, to those local Churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America in great need of assistance, we ask our friars to respond generously. Three billion people have yet to hear the Gospel. We have a great opportunity and challenge to bring the vision of Francis and at the same time to be enriched by these cultures.

**18.** This Plenary Council, therefore, calls on all the friars:

- 1) to let Christ evangelize us.
- 2) to seek nourishment in the scriptures, in the Eucharist, and in various forms of common and private prayer, which will give life and vitality to our evangelization (LG 11, AG 8, SC 10f.).
- 3) to have "the spirit of the Lord and the working of his grace" (RB 10, 8) in order to evangelize authentically.
- 4) to preach the Gospel to the faithful and with them to find new and creative ways of bringing the Good News to the unbelievers and unchurched Christians of our societies.
- 5) to support our friars who "by divine inspiration" go to live and dialogue with Islam and other living faiths.

## CHAPTER 2

# SENT AS BROTHERS

**19.** Today greed, racism, oppression and war divide peoples. But the seeds of hope, of new life can be seen in groups which promote solidarity especially on the international level, and in movements which promote human rights, ecumenism, trade unions, unity among youth and practical sharing with people in developing countries.

20. Such solidarity, sharing of life and work, is characteristic of a family, and this is what we humans are, all brothers and sisters, children of the same God in heaven. Jesus became our brother to unite all things in heaven and earth. He invites every person to become part of the family of God. To establish that family is the focus of our efforts.

21. Francis modeled his life on Jesus and imitated him in treating all people and creatures as family. He saw those who come to follow him as a gift from the Lord, and the Lord himself revealed to Francis that they should live as brothers (Cf. Test. 14).

22. When people saw the friars, they described them as men of God who showed an honest concern, a smiling face, mutual respect, gentleness and love (Cf. I Cel. 38; An. Per. 25). Their very lives gave witness to the Good News. They not only believed and proclaimed, but more importantly' in their lives together and with the people they **experienced** the Gospel values of Jesus Christ. If we really desire to evangelize today, people must first see in us those same values that were obvious in the lives of the early friars.

23. Our lifestyle as brotherhood can be an example to a world hungering for community and longing for a new and more humane society. The Plenary Council, therefore, asks the friars:

- 1) to find models of both initial and ongoing formation based on our experience with the poor and help us live a life of constant conversion to the Gospel and the poor.
- 2) to recognize and promote the gifts each brother has received from God.
- 3) to give witness to brotherhood as the best form of evangelizing: "By this shall all know that you are my disciples" (Jn 13, 35; Cf. EN 69). Our brotherhood invites others to share what we are, what we have and what we do.
- 4) to take advantage of the greater mutual concern and sharing that can take place ,in small communities and to support renewal that seeks to realize these same values in our larger friaries, so that we can be prophetic models for more communitarian local Churches.
- 5) to cooperate wherever possible in our ministries, but especially in the apostolate of the press, radio and television as powerful means of proclaiming Gospel values.
- 6) to foster community among the entire Franciscan family, the First, Second and Third Orders.

## CHAPTER 3

### MINORES AMONG THE POOR

24. Especially in the Third World most people suffer inhuman, poverty: hunger, disease, illiteracy unemployment and slum living. Immigrants and refugees are left at the margin of society. Millions are politically oppressed, many tortured, even killed. (The Church has a growing list of new martyrs.) Each year 30 million die of hunger. Women are treated like objects and humiliated. The majority of people are excluded from social, economic and political progress. They enjoy little or no justice. No home, no land, no job, no money, no freedom – they are tempted to despair.

25. Also the richer countries in East and West have their poor "marginalized" - immigrants, minority groups, the unemployed, the handicapped and the politically and religiously persecuted. Even among the "haves" an increasing number are lonely, mentally ill, victims of alcohol or other drugs.

26. Sadly, the developed world is marked by consumerism, which values persons for what they produce and possess. By means of mass media consumerism spreads also to countries in process of development and creates fictitious needs and undermines values.

**27.** Already in the Old Testament and especially in the New, God's compassion for the poor is explicit. Jesus gave poverty its deepest meaning in his own person: in his birth, life and death on the cross. He identified with the poor (Cf. Matt. 25, 40). In word and action he proclaimed the power of being powerless. Far from marginalizing the poor, Jesus put them at the center of his life and ministry. In sending out his apostles, Jesus demanded that they go in poverty (Cf. Lk 10). Mary his mother also lived as one of the poor (Lk 1, 46f; 2 L Fid. 5; U.V.C. 1; RnB 9,5).

**28.** Francis found Christ through the poorest of the poor, the leper. The love of the Father was made real for him through the poor Infant of Bethlehem and the Suffering Servant at Calvary. Francis lived and worked with lepers and the poor to share their "blessedness." He rejoiced in their lowliness and disinterest in power, their tremendous confidence in Providence and their freedom. We Franciscans, too, will find Jesus in being for the poor, with the poor and living as the poor do. Thus, it is through our poverty and minority that we are evangelized and evangelize.

**29.** Our following of the poor Christ (Cf. RnB 9, 1) will lead us to live with the poor as *minores*, living the same life with them, in solidarity with them, little and humble and powerless like them. In this way as we are evangelizing, we are being evangelized by them.

**30.** We must frankly acknowledge, however, that presently we often live far removed from the poor. Especially in this regard, we must evangelize ourselves again and again. We will truly become poor when we share their anxieties, insecurities and basic needs. As poor brothers among the poor, deprived of power, we will have to trust in the providence of God. Unsure of many things, we will be open to a dialogue of life with the people around us.

**31.** This vision of necessity changes our Franciscan stance in the world today, as many local Churches in Latin America have done by making a preferential option for the poor. Therefore the Plenary Council asks the friars:

- 1) to live with the poor, so that we can see history and reality from their point of view.
- 2) to refuse to buy or possess unnecessary goods in order to give prophetic witness against growing consumerism.
- 3) to learn from the poor the spirit of solidarity and authentic fraternity which is frequently difficult for us in our friaries – often larger than needed and too comfortable.
- 4) to conscientize ourselves and people about the unjust system of socio-economic, political and cultural domination of millions of people in the Third World by the super powers and richer countries in east and west, multinationals and transnationals, and to promote a new economic and political order which will bring greater justice to our world.
- 5) to take a prophetic stance against all oppressive totalitarian regimes.
- 6) to bring the Gospel wherever the poor are organizing in favor of integral liberation – be it popular organizations, labor unions or other social awareness programs designed to lift people to a position where their rights are recognized and understood.

## CHAPTER 4

# INSTRUMENTS OF JUSTICE AND PEACE

**32.** The previous chapter referred to the injustice the poor suffer in being deprived of basic rights. Along with other human beings the poor also suffer the injustice that war causes. The contrasts between rich and poor exist in cities and countries, and even between the northern and southern hemispheres.

**33.** "The arms race, the great crime of our era, is both the result and cause of tensions among our fellow nations," the Bishops of Latin America declared at Puebla. "Because of it, enormous resources are allotted for arms purchases instead of being used to solve vital problems" (67). Pope John Paul II at Hiroshima forcefully proclaimed that in our world peace is a vital part of evangelization. "It is only through conscious choice . . . that humanity can survive!"

**34.** We are conscious of the violence of war. We are not as conscious of the violence that injustice causes. When a child starves to death, that is violence. In Brazil the Church and others are helping to raise consciousness about this kind of violence – the violence of hunger, removal from land, imprisonment, torture and unemployment. The suffering of violence – direct and indirect – is a way of life for many people. To watch your children grow up with no future is violence.

**35.** God wills justice and peace for all his children. Great opportunities are offered us for doing this today through advances in communication, science and technology. Instead nations devote their resources to producing more and more weapons, without realizing the tragic consequences. In some countries people are made to believe that they are in a permanent war against subversion. In reality arms are most often used to maintain the domination of a few by repressing the democratic rights of the majority. Every day the cry of justice comes from those being harassed, exiled, imprisoned, tortured and even killed in broad daylight. Such a situation of repression and fear is already driving some people to take up arms in self-defense. Throughout the world the precarious balance of terror renders justice and love impossible. To maintain and justify such inhuman and un-Christian situations, nations use doctrines such as national security. They forget that security will not result from the possession of arms, but rather from mutual assistance among nations and peaceful coexistence.

**36.** To destroy each other – and our planet – cannot be the destiny God intends for the human race. We hear Isaiah: "I will keep my promise of peace forever!" (Is. 54, 10). Jesus himself promised: "Peace is what I leave with you, it is my peace that I give you" (Jn 14, 27). Confronted by the fact that \$1.44 billion is spent each day on armaments – while 40,000 children starve to death daily – our world must find ways for Isaiah's admonition to be realized, i.e. turn our swords into plowshares (Is. 2, 4), and use this immense amount of money (\$500 billion per year) for the needs of our human family.

**37.** Francis understood from his own experience of God as his Father and Creator of the world – and his experience of Jesus as his brother – that only love can protect and defend every created being. Francis himself served as a peacemaker on many occasions. He admonished his lay followers not to bear arms for any reason, thus bringing an end to the many wars of his time and place. His was perhaps the most successful peace movement in human history.

**38.** Being peacemakers is a vital part of our Franciscan life and our evangelization of the world. The Plenary Council, therefore, calls friars:

1) to pray to be men at peace with God and all peoples, to make prayer and fasting part of our efforts for peace, to support movements which seek peace in our society, to be personally involved in such movements.

2) to support non-violent efforts for peace, to offer support to conscientious objectors to war – especially nuclear war – to stand by those imprisoned for their convictions and efforts in behalf of justice and peace.

3) to develop a pedagogy of peace especially for the youth of our schools and seminaries.

4) to find ways to eliminate injustices among ourselves and, in spite of our differences, to live in peace together in our friaries as witnesses of the peace of Christ.

5) to involve friars full time for justice and peace where possible and support those friars already engaged in this work in Justice and Peace offices of the Order and Provinces.

6) to be a voice for the rights of the unborn, but also for those born but without hope of a future.

7) to condemn loudly and clearly the armament race and all nuclear weapons which have already been produced.

## CONCLUSION

39. All that we have said to this point shows that we are still far from realizing what the Lord, the Church and the world expect from us as evangelizers. Accordingly, we must change in two ways:

- **by making a preferential option for the poor so that our evangelizing will come from the poor and be done with the poor.**
- **by stressing that our fraternities be more missionary and dedicated to proclaiming the Gospel without being shackled by outdated structures.**

40. The Provinces and other entities of the Order should take steps to inform their friars of the work of this Plenary Council and work out plans to carry out its message. This will require:

- **thorough reassessment of our methods of evangelizing ourselves and others.**
- **a more conscious participation in the local Church and culture in which we serve.**
- **conscientization and study meetings on this fundamental dimension of our lives – evangelization.**

41. Directors of Formation – especially in Provinces and Conferences – are asked to give immediate and due attention to evangelization and mission in both the initial and on-going formation of our friars. The importance of this, both in the content and style of formation, cannot be over stressed. Formation flows from reflection on our experience. The poor are our teachers.

42. This Plenary Council has already indicated how the Order must continue its study of evangelization. The next General Chapter must formulate a concrete plan for the Order. Similarly, Provinces are asked to formulate a plan of action for themselves and discuss these plans at Conferences of provincials.

43. We've described the realities we've seen and the problems our world faces. In our reflections we do not want to appear grim or lacking in hope. Above all, we want to be men of hope. Pope John Paul II has told us that friars must be messengers of hope for the Church. The example of friars past and present offers us much inspiration and basis for hope. We want to encourage our brothers already giving themselves generously to evangelization and those who have already made an option for the poor. We are grateful to all of you who at any of the various phases have shared in this reflection on evangelization. Through the intercession of Mary the Mother of the Church and our Father Francis, may the Lord make our efforts fruitful!

## POSTSCRIPT

A "working paper" entitled *Evangelization and Mission in the Order* was prepared for the Plenary Council by an international commission of friars. The first draft was distributed to the Order. A second draft was prepared based on the responses from the friars. This was the starting basis for the work of the Council. The Council members are very grateful to the preparatory commission and to all the friars who sent in responses. As the members of the Council looked at the responses, and surveyed its own possibilities, it became obvious that we could not prepare a comprehensive document on Franciscan evangelization and mission at this time. The time, resources and adequate theology were not available. Nevertheless, the members of the Council were able to take the working paper, reshape it and make it an apt vehicle for conveying its own reflections on evangelization. These are shared in this document: the final draft in a long process.

Helpful in the preparation of the final document and in addition to the talks given by Cardinal Lorscheider and by Leonardo Boff were other talks given by Bishop Matias Schmidt, O.S.B., on Basic Ecclesial Communities; Alfredo Schnüttgen, O.F.M., on the Apostolate to Fishermen; João Sanig, O.F.M., on Land Problems; Ranulfo Pelos, O.F.M., on Land Problems of Indians. All of these stimulated the reflection of the friars of the Council.

## DOCUMENTS

### Useful as background for reflection on evangelization in the Order

#### **Documents of the Church:**

- a) Vatican Council II: *Lumen Gentium, Ad Gentes, Gaudium et Spes.*
- b) Paulo VI: *Evangelii Nuntiandi: Evangelization in the World Today, 1975.*
- c) CELAM: *Medellin, 1968; Puebla, 1979.*
- d) International Congress on Mission: *"Toward a New Era of Mission: The Good News of the Kingdom of God to the Peoples of Asia," Manila, 1979.*

#### **Documents from the Order:**

- a) General Chapter of Medellin, 1971: *"The Franciscan Missionary Vocation in the Present World."*
- b) General Chapter of Madrid, 1973: *"The Vocation of the Order Today."*
- c) Letter of Minister General and Definitorium *"On Refugees," 1979.*
- d) First Franciscan Conference on Islam, Assisi, 1982.
- e) Congress of the Franciscan Family: *"Inter-Franciscan Message," Mattli, Switzerland, 1982.*
- f) Letter of Minister General and Definitorium: *"The Call of Africa," 1982.*