

# Mendicant Friars – Justice and Peace

*Wilfrid McGreal, O.Carm.*

When people ask us Carmelite brothers, “Who are you? What do you do?” we reply “we are friars – we are mendicants.” Being mendicant is an integral part of our calling as Carmelites; it recalls our origins and also has serious implications for our work for justice, peace and the integrity of Creation.

Carmelites are part of that Renewed Energy that touched the Church and Society in the latter part of the twelfth century. Twelfth-century Europe experienced a significant growth in prosperity and, flowing from that, cities grew and culture flourished. Literacy was no longer the preserve of a clerical elite; a growing merchant and professional class had access to learning while vernacular languages began to flourish.

This newly confident Society began to ask questions and the Church found itself challenged and, to some extent, outmanoeuvred. A desire grew for religious teaching that would help people encounter Christ in his humanity and, above all, bring the basic tenets of Christianity to the people where they were.

An awareness began to grow that the Christian calling was not meant to be withdrawal from the world, but rather an involvement. Allied to this viewpoint was rediscovery of the energy behind the origins of Christianity, namely the early Church and in particular the apostolic community at Jerusalem. The notion of a vigorous, generous community where people shared their personal gifts and possessions was allied to a commitment to evangelism. The perspective emerged of an active engagement with society as preachers who lived gospel values, especially poverty.

As people gained access to the Scriptures through a growth in literacy, first-hand study of the Gospel enabled fresh and radical interpretations to be proclaimed. The earthly life of Jesus, his humanity – and above all his poverty – was the inspiration, and something to be imitated. People began to see the possibility of embracing a life of poverty so that they could devote themselves to a life of service, prayer and mission to their neighbours and those hungry for such teaching. It was seen as possible to live a life of commitment without withdrawing to some lonely place. However, the leaders of the Church were not quick to see the value and virtuality of these new perspectives.

The reason for a lukewarm reaction to the new movements lay in the strictures of the Church and the lack of education among many of the clergy. A rural world was still envisaged and too many clergy were barely literate (there was little formal programme for training clergy).

What was happening was eventually to be grasped by Pope Innocent III: an articulate laity from the new urban society was wanting to live the fullness of the Gospel message. The radical living of the Gospel, which involved a voluntary embracing of poverty, was given shape by the *Waldensians* and the *Humiliati*. These late twelfth-century laity who began to live the ideals of the Jerusalem Church were the forerunners of the friars. They created a context for the mendicant movement in the Church.

The *Waldenses* or the poor men of Lyons were inspired by Waldes, a banker who took the Gospel injunction of “sell everything and give to the poor” literally. Having settled his possessions on his wife Waldes became a wandering preacher supporting himself by begging. Soon he attracted disciples who all vowed themselves to absolute poverty.

Waldes and his followers were dismissed as illiterate but that only meant they could not read the Latin of the schools. They did have Provençal translations of the Gospel and the *langue d'oc* was spoken in northern Spain, southern France and north Italy. The fact that Waldes and his followers insisted on preaching incurred the wrath of the Church authorities and no amount of protestation of orthodoxy could protect them from the charge of heresy. Pope Lucius III, influenced by the Archbishop of Lyons, condemned the *Waldensians*, driving many of them into conflict with the Church; however, some of the “poor men” remained in the Church and gradually allied themselves with the *Humiliati*. This movement, that was strongest in Northern Italy, was given support by the new pope, Innocent III, who was motivated by shrewd intelligence and pragmatism. Again poverty, simplicity and penitential practices marked this movement which anticipated many features of the friars. The group attracted recruits from the aristocracy and the new middle classes with communities ranging from Milan to Verona. Some of the *Humiliati* were married, pursuing trades or professions but living a penitential ‘life’; others lived in community and devoted themselves to preaching. The clergy condemned these lay preachers but the pope recognised the value of what they were doing. His decision was revolutionary but also pragmatic. The *Humiliati* were orthodox in their teaching and provided a counter balance to the teachings of the *Cathars* whose dualism – and what was at bottom anti-life teaching – was perceived as a threat not just to the Church but to Society itself.

The other group of poor Christians were the hermits and pilgrims who made their way to the Holy Land. Again they were inspired by their reading of the Gospel, wanting to experience the places where Jesus had lived his mission. Such pilgrims were often hermits and again ready to preach, sharing their experiences with the people they encountered. Renunciation and penance were again the energy that inspired such pilgrims. As Carmelites we can recognise in these poor men, enthused by the Gospel, the profile of those who were to live on Mount Carmel, pilgrims who put down roots in the Holy Land, no longer anxious to return to Europe.

It was at this stage out of the religious turbulence and growing prosperity of Western Europe that the movement known as the *friars* was to emerge. At the heart of that movement was a layman, Francis of Assisi, with a powerful but simple vision: evangelical perfection, and perfection that would be aided by complete destitution. What interests us today is the influence of that vision and how far its essence can still touch the life of the Church and Society today. [On the historical background to the mendicants see C. H. Lawrence, *The Friars: the impact of the early mendicant movement on Western Society*, (London: Longman, 1994).]

Francis was visionary and charismatic; how his vision, his ideal was eventually lived out has been seen either as a betrayal or the necessary condition for the development of a permanent organisation. Francis is famous for his voluntary act of renunciation giving up wealth for a solitary life of prayer, penance and poverty. He was undoubtedly influenced by the *Waldensians* and *Humiliati* but he saw radical poverty as an aid to his work of proclaiming the Gospel. He envisaged a fraternity based on the life of Christ and the disciples as depicted in the Gospel. He wanted a literal following of Christ’s life on earth and this is expressed in the *First Rule*: “The brothers shall appropriate nothing to themselves, neither a place nor anything, but as pilgrims and strangers in this world, serving God in poverty and humility, they shall with confidence go seeking alms. Nor need they be ashamed, for the Lord made himself poor for us in this world, this is that summit of most lofty poverty which has made you, my most beloved brothers, heirs and kings of the kingdom of heaven.”

Francis asked his followers to renounce not just personal property but also corporate property. He wanted to live in total dependence on the providence of God “naked to follow the naked Christ” (Saint Jerome).

The pope authorised Francis’ initiative and soon his *little brothers* included men from all walks of life: aristocrats, academics and artisans. Francis preached repentance, moving away from feuds and hatred, and building peace. For Francis nature was the great picture book of God’s love and abundance. Francis never wavered in his belief in absolute poverty but after his death, as his followers became a universal missionary enterprise, compromise was realised as churches were built and priories founded. However the friars lived on the edges of the new towns and cities, dependent on the generosity of the people for survival, but also close to those they wanted to evangelize.

While Francis was inspiring a new way of living the Gospel in Italy, Dominic was creating an order of preachers who were organised and educated but also committed to poverty. For Dominic the mission of preaching and a democratically constituted community mattered, but his way of living again valued radical poverty.

Dominicans in their missions were ordered to travel on foot which meant they kept contact with the people. The communities of brothers – friars – caught the popular imagination and while the church establishment viewed their arrival with misgiving they never wanted for patrons.

Land was available in the new suburbs while royal patronage was also forthcoming. The size of the churches built for the friars was not meant to indicate power or prestige but rather a large space to accommodate the crowds who came to hear the friars preach. The friars preached peace and reconciliation and gave the people a sense of hope and purpose. Holiness was something that could be achieved in married life and being involved in society; it did not entail withdrawal from life into some remote place. Such preaching moved people to repentance and as a result people turned to the friars as confessors who would provide understanding. The idealism and simplicity of the early friars made them popular teachers, as they were perceived as being sensitive to people’s needs.

The commitment to preaching and helping people in their spiritual journey prompted an awareness among the friars of the need for learning and education. The friars soon became involved in the universities, some in pursuit of learning and others who had come from academic backgrounds returning to the schools.

However the friars did not see university life as a profession or a career path; rather they saw the disinterested pursuit of truth as a high Christian value. Teaching was not a step on the road to benefice, but rather a service to the community. Friars were happy to go from one place to another, teaching and sharing their experiences. Because they were free from purely material considerations they had the freedom to pioneer Greek and Hebrew studies and be open to innovations. The great schoolmen of the Thirteenth Century, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure and Albert, were as much mystics as academics, and others like Tauler and Eckhart were as happy preaching in the market place as they were researching in a library.

While the friars first and foremost spoke to the growing populations of the new towns their commitment and integrity appealed to the wealthy and even the powerful in society. Benefactors were quick to come forward, donating land, paying for the building of churches and community lodgings. The friars obviously made an impact and such practical support enabled them to consolidate their apostolic activities.

Kings were also impressed. Henry III of England and Louis IX of France were both promoters of the new mendicant orders. Friars were in demand as preachers and were often entrusted with delicate diplomatic missions. The friars appealed because they seemed to combine integrity and intelligence. However the friars did not seem beholden to their royal patrons and when outspokenness was called for they could respond with vigour and candour. Adam Marsh, one of the early English Franciscans, was candid enough to earn the fury of Henry III who had also been criticised by the Dominican Roger Bacon. King Louis of France, who was also faced with tough speaking from friars, was more inclined to reflect rather than rant.

The later Middle Ages saw the friars struggling to live up to their ideals. Sometimes poverty suffered, while often the freedom involved in the lifestyle of mendicant preachers was abused. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* paints a less than flattering picture of a friar, while Langland's *Piers Plowman* saw a terrible fall from grace amongst the mendicants. Whenever a reform movement took place among the friars, the emphasis was on a deeper commitment to community life and the living out of poverty. Community and common ownership went hand in hand. Too often friars evaded community life by becoming chaplains to the powerful and losing touch with community living.

When we look at the Sixteenth-Century Reformation in Western Europe there was a significant involvement by friars. Many genuinely wanted to reform the Church and not to break up its unity. Such reformers were involved in university life and were caught up in the ferment of ideas that spread through Europe, helped by the recent invention of the printing press. The climate was not favourable to any official openness and to new ideas, since the Papacy lacked the creative intelligence of a pope Innocent. The popes in the early Sixteenth Century were, in the main, caught up in political struggles, and religious uniformity was by and large a concern of kings, princes and the emperor. However, if anything did contribute to a general malaise in the Church it involved wealth and the flamboyant use of resources.

In the light of this historical background, what does being a mendicant, trying to live a simple life as a friar, mean today? Our present century is an age marked by globalisation, consumerism and an emphasis on choice. Our planet is divided, a planet with gross inequalities, increasingly scarce resources and too many people "excluded from that banquet of life." A culture that extols choice and then excludes most members of society because they have no money is fuelling conflict. Choice becomes a hollow concept in communities where children have to take their turn in having access to a meal.

Some fifty years on, it is clear that the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s was a watershed for religious life. Its documents on the Church and liturgy allowed a space for renewal that was further helped by renewal in biblical studies and in the reading of history. Marxism and the market were also realities that had significant impact.

The Marxist analysis of history brought a critical viewpoint that made many religious challenge the assumptions that shaped social and economic life. Catholic social teaching had also begun to analyse social structures and stressed the role of the worker over the profit motive and capital. In fact the Church's social teaching came to assert that private property is not an absolute right, but rather an aspect of stewardship. Property brings responsibilities and is not something that is for the exclusive use of an individual.

The renewal of interest in biblical studies and a desire by religious orders to return to the founding spirit had significant consequences. For Carmelites, a deeper reading of the *Rule of Saint Albert* helped the vision of the Jerusalem Community come to the forefront as a model for prayer and life. The living of poverty through freedom from possessions and a desire to share

gifts and life with others became a new energy and a reality. A deeper awareness of the Scriptures as a living word helped a rediscovery of that more reflective way of reading the Bible which is *Lectio Divina*. When the word of God is read in a contemplative and ruminative manner it soon leads those involved to making connections with life; with the very context in which they live. This especially, for Carmelites, has led to an awareness of the way of being a praying community in the midst of the people, and helps find a focus which provokes a generous involvement in the needs of the people who live alongside us.

Availability, service of the people, and sharing of resources are all ways that poverty can be lived as a Gospel-calling, and they are also ways that the calling of being mendicants can find expression in the Twenty-First century. The search for meaning, the longing for someone to listen and take one seriously, are desperate needs today.

Carmelites, if they are to be true to their calling, can respond in a significant way to such needs but the response will cost: the cost will be time, patience and commitment.

Medieval Carmelites were often guides and intimates of kings and other leaders in society. Records show that medieval friars could be forthright in their counsel and, like other friars, had a vision of society where burdens were shared. Today it is clear that our calling draws us to work for justice and the integrity of Creation. The new world order since the fall of Communism has done little to help the poor; in fact, inequalities and the HIV-AIDS pandemic leave an ever growing number of people vulnerable and exploited.

If we are truly mendicant “we will travel light”. “Travelling light” would imply not just a willingness to give up ownership of goods but also a commitment to taking risks as we work for the disadvantaged. Friars are not part of the hierarchy, nor have we any privileges or dependents. This leaves a freedom to be outspoken for justice and a readiness to accept the consequences. Often those who are on the fringe might well be rejected by society or seen to be not worth helping. Again prejudice or “economic” arguments can be adduced to excuse or avoid helping groups of people. Another factor can be the ambiguities of situations.

The challenge for Carmelites – and this is a cause for reflection as we engage as an Order with an NGO presence at the United Nations – is that many issues which relate to justice and the integrity of Creation are not clear-cut. A desire to help ‘refugees’ and ‘asylum-seekers’ runs up against the cries that such people are ‘economic migrants’. Some countries operate policies that at heart are racist but can be presented in the light of trying to manage scarce resources.

However, the contradiction is that money for weapons and war seems readily available despite whatever pleas of shortages had previously been stated. Working in such areas often means that we alienate many members of the establishment and we can also feel alienated. However, the prophetic part of our calling should prompt us to be outspoken and do all we can to help educate people about the realities of the situation and counteract misinformation. The media in economically developed countries often paint a picture of Europe, for example, being swamped by refugees, when the reality is that most refugees are to be found in Africa.

In the Old Testament, Elijah attacked the idols of his time and – moving from place to place – he tried to speak God’s word, defying the king and risking his life. For friars in the Twenty-First Century, there is a calling as we travel light to confront our contemporary idols and the negative consequences of globalisation. The response and the needs will differ according to where we live. Issues of justice in America, Europe and Australia are different from facing the barrel of a gun in Africa. However, the new media make us present to one another as never before. The information about current realities is an agenda we cannot ignore; it is a challenge needing the discernment of prayer and the Spirit. However, in a world where

combating terrorism so often overturns principles of justice and where the wounds of poverty continue to hurt, we as friars are being asked how our praying communities with our mendicant tradition can really serve our brothers and sisters. I believe our traditions do give us a foundation; and our willingness to be open to God's word will give direction. What is an energy and a freedom is our insertion in, and our living out, the mendicant way, freedom that comes from being ready to travel light.

The poor pilgrims that set out, journeying hopefully so many years ago, inspire us to continue the journey today in hope, and unfettered by unnecessary attachments.

Wilfrid McGreal, O.Carm.  
Faversham, Kent