

Francis and Dominic inspired a vast renewal

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MENDICANT ORDERS: PROFOUND ECCLESIAL RENEWAL

VATICAN CITY, 13 JAN 2010 (VIS) -

Benedict XVI dedicated his catechesis, during the general audience held this morning in the Paul VI Hall, to the mendicant orders that came into being in the thirteenth century, focusing on the most famous: Franciscans and Dominicans founded, respectively, by the Italian Francis of Assisi and the Spanish Dominic de Guzman.

"The saints", said the Pope, "guided by the light of God, are the true reformers of the life of the Church and society. Teachers by their words and witnesses by their example, they are able to promote stable and profound ecclesial renewal".

Saints such as Francis of Assisi and Dominic de Guzman "were able to read the 'signs of the times', and discern the challenges the Church of their time had to face". One of these challenges was the expansion of groups and movements of faithful who, though inspired by a legitimate desire for authentic Christian life, often placed themselves outside ecclesial communion". These groups included the Cathars or Albigensians who revived such ancient heresies as "disdain for the material world, the negation of free will and the existence of a principal of evil comparable with God".

Movements such as these proved successful, "not only because they were well organised, but also because they denounced a disorder that really did exist in the Church, caused by the un-exemplary behaviour of various members of the clergy".

And yet the Franciscans and Dominicans showed "that it is possible to live evangelical poverty without separating oneself from the Church". They rejected not only the possession of material goods but also refused the idea that the community could own lands and estates, living "an extremely sober life in order to remain close to the poor and placing their trust in Providence alone.

"This individual and community lifestyle of the mendicant orders", the Holy Father added, "united to their complete adherence to Church teaching and authority, was much appreciated by the Pontiffs of the time, ... who gave their complete support to these new ecclesial experiences, recognising in them the voice of the Spirit".

"Today too, though we live in a society in which 'having' often prevails over 'being', we are still receptive to examples of poverty and solidarity", Pope Benedict observed, and he recalled how Paul VI had affirmed that "the world is willing to listen to teachers when they are also witnesses. There is a lesson that must never be forgotten in the work of spreading the Gospel: we must ourselves live what we announce, be mirrors of divine charity".

The mendicant orders likewise responded to the widespread need for religious instruction felt at the time, preaching and "dealing with topics close to people's lives, especially the practice of the theological and moral virtues, using concrete and easily understood arguments".

Because of the importance of the mendicant orders, lay institutions such as the guilds and civil authorities often consulted them. Thus Franciscans and Dominicans became "the spiritual animators of mediaeval cities, ... putting into effect a pastoral strategy that was adapted to the transformations of society". At a time in which the cities were expanding they built their monasteries in urban areas and travelled from place to place "abandoning the principle of stability which had characterised monastic life for many centuries". To this end they adopted a new form of organisation, "giving greater importance to the order per se and to the superior general" as opposed to the autonomy which individual monasteries had enjoyed until then. "Thus they were better prepared to meet the needs of the universal Church".

Another great challenge of the age were the "cultural transformations", which gave rise to lively debate in universities. The friars did not hesitate "to enter the universities themselves, as students and teachers, erecting study centres" of their own "and profoundly influencing the development of thought".

The Holy Father concluded: "Today too there is a 'charity of and in truth', an 'intellectual charity' that must be brought into play in order to illuminate minds and associate faith with culture. The commitment shown by Franciscans and Dominicans in mediaeval universities is an invitation to us to remain present in the places where knowledge is produced in order to throw the light of the Gospel, with respect and with conviction, on the fundamental questions that concern man, his divinity and his eternal destiny".