

Words and deeds

Most of us are familiar with a saying attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach always and when necessary use words.” Some, including those who have carefully studied St. Francis’ life and writings, doubt that he actually said that.

This doesn’t mean that the saying is wrong. After all, one of the most effective ways to spread the faith is to live the faith – and to live it with integrity and joy – whether we are in public or in private. But good example, important as it is, is not enough. Words are almost always necessary.

This is true in our lives, and for the Lord and the Gospel. We tell ourselves that if we lead good lives, we’ve done our part to support the Church and its mission. Nothing further need be said. No need to engage in discussions about religion which, in any case, can sometimes be heated. No need to challenge those who no longer practice the faith, including those who are members of our own immediate family. “Why harangue them?” we ask ourselves. “It’ll do more harm than good.”

Pestering and berating those who do not take their faith seriously is not likely to succeed. But we are called to speak about the faith to others with accuracy, confidence and joy. St. Paul puts it this way: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how can they call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach?” (Rom 10:13-14)

Thinking about St. Paul’s words, one might say, “Great! I’m off the hook. I’m a layperson, not a priest. I don’t have to preach. Priests are supposed to do that.” But I’d reply, “Not so fast!” Didn’t St. Peter exhort the whole Church, “Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope”? (1 Pt

3:15). His words were not limited to priests and religious. They were addressed to every member of the Church.

Indeed, spreading the Gospel in the current climate is not easy. Like those who went before us, we may experience ridicule and rejection. But let's not forget two things. First, the Lord promised he'd never leave us. In the power of the Holy Spirit, he walks with us whenever we are "on mission" and, if we're open, he empowers us.

Second, in spite of the hard veneer of our culture, many people are desperately searching for meaning. People are trying to make sense of their lives. Let us be confident that the Lord and the Gospel have something critically important to say to such people. Let us be confident that the Lord really does want us to be his messengers - messengers of hope and joy. For in becoming one of us and in dying to save us from our sins, the Son of God has shown us the ultimate meaning and destiny of our lives.

Together, as an archdiocese and a family of faith, we are currently preparing ourselves for our journey toward missionary discipleship. And part of our preparation, it seems, includes the need to equip ourselves for the work of spreading the Gospel.

We don't need a theology degree, but we do need to pray every day, read Scripture prayerfully, take part in the Mass attentively, go to confession regularly, and know and love our faith more deeply. And as we speak about the faith, our deeds do have to match our words. It's no good to speak about the faith and not to live it. And if we are living the faith, we should be willing to speak of it.