

## **SOLITUDE and CONTEMPLATION**

*"The desert does not mean the absence of men, it means the presence of God." Carlo Carretto.*

The following statements (slightly abbreviated) formed the conclusions of "Solitude and Communion", a book that influenced Brother Ramon in his seeking periods of solitude and contemplation:

*"The Solitary is separated from all, and is at the same time united to all."*

*"The Solitary living geographically apart helps those living in society to realise the solitary dimension in their lives."*

*"The Solitary remains in obedience to the head of the Community."*

The discernment of Spirits is of the greatest importance in the recognition of the genuine vocation to solitude.

### **Franciscan Solitude**

This is a huge subject on which many books have been written. Francis himself was very torn between the Contemplative and the Active life, and it was only after prayer and consultation with others that he undertook his travelling and preaching ministry. All his life he felt the need for periods of Solitude, there were the forty day Retreats he undertook and the times when he emerged from major experiences of solitude with startling new vision and a power that affected the whole Church; the beginning of his ministry at San Damiano and of course the Stigmata at La Verna.

If we are following Francis we should all experience times of Solitude, and for many of us this will be during a silent retreat. Many people living alone find they have solitude thrust on them. The purpose of Solitude is to be alone with the Lord, and then to emerge with a renewed vision for our lives and greater understanding of the Lord's will for our work in his Kingdom.

SSF, CSF and TSSF are mainly Active, rather than Contemplative Orders, and the majority of First Order Brothers and Sisters have houses where they talk, work, pray and go out into the world. But within each of these Orders there are a few who are called to a more contemplative lifestyle. There are currently three such members of CSF: Gwenfryd Mary, Patricia Clare and Catherine Joy, each of whom is officially attached to one of the active houses, though resident apart from it. The late Brother Ramon's example is well known, and other members of SSF have experimented with the contemplative life for shorter periods. There is also Glasshampton, a place of silence, solitude and reflection, and there are the Sisters of the Second Order at Freeland.

### **Contemplation and TSSF**

While it is highly unlikely that anyone would consider joining TSSF who was so completely committed to Solitude as to be totally unable to comply with the *"in company with"* requirements of our vow, an increasing number of Tertiaries are feeling drawn to a life of partial solitude. There are many different ways of solitude within the same community, and it would be wrong to try to prescribe a particular path for solitaries and contemplatives in TSSF. One or two general conclusions may be drawn: much depends on the person's family and work situation, and on whatever responsibilities he or she has.

Many people with a solitary and contemplative vocation still remain active in their Third Order Communities as Convenors, Novice Guardians and so on. Very few feel called to complete withdrawal from TSSF activity. All are called to a greater depth in prayer and intercession, to a greater awareness of the needs of the world and their neighbours.

Any Tertiary who, with his or her Spiritual Director's blessing, wishes to pursue a more solitary lifestyle, especially one involving reduced attendance at meetings, should in the first instance contact the Area Formation Guardian who can give advice, according to the guidelines of the Area Teams Handbook, both to the Tertiary concerned and to the Area Minister and the Local Group Convenor.

A new Rule of Life should be drawn up, mentioning how many meetings will be attended, meetings with the Spiritual Director and what kind of Report to make. Annual renewal remains essential, and would be the minimum attendance acceptable, assuming the Tertiary is physically able to attend an Area meeting. The Rule should be for one or two years with amendments as and when necessary.

Someone going into solitude and contemplation should expect the support in prayer of the Church and the TSSF Community and will increase intercession for the Church and for fellow Franciscans: a genuine vocation to solitude and contemplation always involves intense spiritual warfare and times of real testing.

Within the Third Order a periodic newsletter is circulated to those who are called to this life. Many find this a great support. Once a decision has been made to follow this calling, it is helpful if the Tertiary contacts the current editors.

## **Resources**

*"Solitude and Communion"*, Allchin, Fairacres Publication No. 66

*"A hidden Fire"* by Bro Ramon SSF

*"Handbook of the Religious Life"* Canterbury Press, 2004 edition

See also the Area Team Handbook "Contemplatives" and "Housebound and Elderly Tertiaries"

## **RETREATS**

Our Rule of Life as members of the Third Order requires us, where possible, to make a Retreat once a year.

### **What is a Retreat?**

A Retreat is a time of going apart, when during times of prayer and reflection we can listen to the voice of the Lord. A Retreat is not a Pilgrimage or a Reading or Study week, though there may be aspects of retreat in all of these. Ideally the retreatant should prepare for the Retreat in prayer and by consulting with his or her spiritual director.

### **The Place:**

There are many different kinds of Retreat Houses and Spirituality Centres, and it is useful to do some research to find the place that will suit you.

- How far is it?
- What is the access like?
- Is there car parking?
- Facilities for people with handicaps?
- Is there quiet?

- A garden?
- What is the level of simplicity or luxury?

### **The Type of Retreat:**

We are asked to go from time to time on a "Franciscan" Retreat. A consensus of opinion suggests that this would be a Retreat at a First or Second Order house, or a Retreat that has a specifically Franciscan theme, or one that is lead by SSF, CSF or a member of TSSF. Above all a Retreat in Assisi or La Verna would be a once in a lifetime experience for many.

For most Tertiaries living busy lives in work and Church a time of shared silence is an enormous blessing; it is astonishing how one can relate to other retreatants during a mostly silent retreat, and it really helps the individual make progress in prayer and listening to the Lord.

However, some isolated Tertiaries desperately need a time for fellowship and conversation.

### **Activities?**

Some people find painting and other retreats that use creative skills helpful.

### **Guided or unguided Retreats?**

Perhaps one should try both. Individually guided Retreats (IGR) are very popular, but can be expensive.

It is useful to take advice from friends and from your Spiritual Director.

### **Information about Retreats:**

One of the best sources of information is other Tertiaries in your Local Group or Area, the Area Formation Guardian and the Area Retreats Secretary, if there is one:

- The Retreats section of the Chronicle.
- The Winter 2003 Chronicle.
- Your Diocesan Retreat House.
- The Retreat Association (with among others) The Association for Promoting Retreats The National Retreat Movement. The Methodist Retreat and Spirituality Network

### **Alternatives:**

For people constrained by work or family demands, a quiet day organised by the Local Group, or one at home, may provide an answer. Arthur Lloyd-Davies wrote an excellent article on this theme in the Winter Chronicle 2003. If an elderly or infirm Tertiary would find it helpful, a few from the Local Group might spend a day with him or her enjoying a structured time of prayer, silence and talk.

### **Finance:**

Some Retreat Centres are expensive, and it is useful to consider the question of simplicity in the context of your retreat. Some Local Groups hire a holiday cottage for a weekend and do their own (simple) catering. There are many other possibilities.

*The Knox Dick Fund is there to help those who could not otherwise afford to go on Retreat, and it is hoped Tertiaries will make more use of it.*

### **A FRANCISCAN RETREAT?**

Francis did not give us any rule for the conduct of retreats for Tertiaries, and there is no definition of what a Third Order Retreat should consist of, though we are recommended to undertake a Franciscan Retreat about once in three years. The following remarks concern Retreats that have a specifically Franciscan atmosphere and content; there are many other kinds of Retreat that Tertiaries may find helpful at a given stage of their Christian pilgrimage.

### **Francis' "Rule for Hermitages" might give us a few pointers.**

*"Let those who wish to stay in hermitages in a religious way be three brothers or, at the most, four; let two of these be "the mother" and have two "sons" or at least one. And let them always recite Compline of the day immediately after sunset and strive to maintain silence, recite their hours, rise for Matins and seek first the kingdom of God and His justice. And let them recite Prime at the proper hour, and after Terce, they may end their silence, speak with and go to their mothers. The "sons" may not talk with anybody except their "mothers" or the Minister and his Custodian when it pleases them to visit. The "sons" may however assume the role of "mothers" taking turns for a time."*

Francis wrote this rule for his Brothers who were engaged in the active life, but who needed a time of withdrawal and increased time for prayer. The "mothers" and "sons" are the brothers who happen to be on retreat and who might be in some way equated with a spiritual director or retreat leader. The suggestion for us is that participants should be free for a time during the day to meet and share experiences of prayer and God's word, either in a group, or one to one or with the Retreat Leader. This could form an important part of an otherwise silent retreat.

We are expected to attend the Offices and so pray with our fellow Tertiaries. Most Retreats will have a priest either as Leader or a participant or on the staff of a retreat house, so a daily Eucharist will almost always be available. This was not always the case for four brothers in a hermitage, who may well not have had a priest of their number. We should maintain silence where possible, unless the group agrees to meet to share experiences. This is common practice in many retreats and should be the main experience in Franciscan retreats, though there are other kinds of retreat (with icons, with painting) where there is a place for talk.

### **What is specifically Franciscan in a retreat?**

#### **Content.**

A Retreat lead by a First Order Brother or Sister or a member of the Third Order may not necessarily have much Franciscan content. The Retreat giver may speak on passages of the Bible that concern prayer, healing or justice etc and not deal with any aspect of Francis and the Franciscan way. But Francis did not point to himself, only to God so that the Brothers could seek first the Kingdom of God. The content of a Franciscan retreat should always point through Francis to Our Lord, so feeding and nurturing our Franciscan vocation.

Above all, a Retreat should be a joyful experience, especially one that is Franciscan in experience and content, during which we seek the Lord in the path of St Francis.

**The Place.** The first hermitages to which Francis sent his Brothers for their retreats were of the most extreme simplicity; how would Francis have reacted to some of the Diocesan

retreat houses with their considerable comfort, large meals and bars? These houses have to make money by offering conference facilities to businesses, and as a result their prices are often beyond what many Tertiaries are happy to pay. Having a retreat in a Franciscan Community is usually more affordable, guarantees some degree of silence, and lets retreatants experience the life of the Brothers and Sisters.

Perhaps the best Retreat any Tertiary could experience would be one at Assisi or La Verna so one can pray in the places Francis and Clare prayed. This is something every Tertiary should aim to do once in his or her lifetime.

There are many different ways of experiencing a retreat; some people are obliged to remain in their own home, and set aside time for extra prayer and study. Some local groups go away together, hire a cottage or a residential centre and do their own catering.

If a Group organises its own retreat then the content can be agreed beforehand and will probably tie in with any particular course of study decided for the year by that group, and it will help members of the group to get to know one another better. It is astonishing how people interact when praying together in silence.

Individually Guided Retreats (IGR) are becoming more and more popular, but can be expensive.

It is not practical to publish in detail in the Chronicle the content of a retreat; the retreat giver may not have finally decided on the format, and there may be a change of retreat giver at fairly short notice.

A Franciscan retreat should ideally be lead by a Franciscan for Franciscans (subject to the wishes of the organiser) with specifically Franciscan input.

### **Subjects for a Franciscan Retreat**

There are many possible themes that a retreat giver or a local group could choose to work on, with of course the proviso that we are looking through Francis to our Lord.

The Prayers of Francis – the Canticle of the Sun, the Prayer of St Francis inspired by the Our Father, the Divine Praises Stories from the life of Francis Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation Francis and Scripture – the use of the imagination in reading Scripture.

Our Rule of Life; The Eucharist; Simplicity; Obedience etc; People's own faith stories; Papers prepared for General Chapter; an imaginative and contemplative reading of a passage of scripture, sometimes known as *Lectio Divina*

### **A Brief Checklist**

- Have you prepared for the Retreat in prayer and perhaps in study?
- Have you discussed it with your Spiritual Director?
- What do feel you need in this Retreat?
- Is the content of the Retreat Franciscan?
- Is the place suitable:- Simplicity? Quiet? Access?
- Can you cope with extended periods of silence?