

Scotland's Third Order Franciscan Spiritual Journal



July 3rd 2008 - Newsletter 8

Dear Brothers and Sisters of St Francis in the Third Order,

The San Damiano Principle

I have frequently been tempted, (and indeed succumbed!) to join various organisations. Clubs, Associations, yes and Religious or Spiritual Groups. Those who understand about personality types are inclined to suggest that there are joiners and there are non-joiners. (I am not referring to skill with wood...no New Testament allusion intended!) Being a compulsive joiner often is accompanied with being 'a quitter'. Likewise, just in case there's any self-satisfaction being 'brewed up' here, non-joiners may also simply be 'hedging their bets! Some years ago, I wanted to join a group associated with Charles de Foucauld, one of the great Christian ascetics of the 20th Century. On reflection, I soon realised that there was some sycophancy in this - the desire to have some taste of the imagined heroism in the great soul. A dangerous fantasy? Perhaps. Is that the reason, I became a tertiary?...to 'touch the hem' of Francis' garment (or habit)? Perhaps! Perhaps, I should have good look at the motivation for becoming a tertiary. Please remember that I can only describe such motivation from my own view point.

Karl Barth, arguably one of the greatest theologians of the 20th Century, described Christians as belonging to the 'Church of Esau' or the 'Church of Jacob'. Esau, if you recall, stayed with his family,

whereas Jacob, because of his manipulative behaviour was eventually exiled. Barth used his image of the Church of Esau for Christian 'insiders'. The Church of Jacob was his image for those on the edge, who were 'outsiders'... If I think of myself as an 'insider' [what else would I be as a Bishop?], I am in danger of the idolatry of pride: belonging to the secure social structures of Christendom. If I regard myself as an outsider, which I frequently would rather be (!), I fall into the equally dangerous idolatry of feeling 'pure' from, unsullied by the stains of being an insider...

I wonder, just wonder, sometimes whether being a tertiary has provided a more interesting, involving and challenging Christian pathway than my local Church. After all, it seems that a culture has become much more attracted to 'events' that to the seemingly pedestrian discipline of adherence and membership. We Tertiaries do describe ourselves as 'outsiders'. But I have to be careful, in a strange, convoluted way this is simply another route to becoming a different sort of insider.

One of the stories associated with the last moments of Francis' life, was of Bernard asking why Francis looked so low, when he had throughout his life spoken of death as his 'sister'. 'You have, my dear brother Francis, thousands of followers. Why do you look so low?' 'Because, dear Bernard', Francis replied, 'I have not come to form a new Church but, by following the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to rebuild the one that He has founded.' I treat this as a cautionary tale for myself, at least.. Being a tertiary is about rebuilding the local Church or Churches, which I might call the 'San Damiano



principle! Renewal, rebuilding, restoration, rebirth... Start with the small and listen to the development of your vocation as a tertiary from there.

The dispirited priest of San Damiano, just below the walls of the city of Assisi, although initially happy for Francis to replace a few stones in the dilapidated Church, thought Francis had become dangerously interfering, when he discovered that Francis raised money for stone and materials by selling some of his father's merchandise without asking him! This was obviously going to be a little more than a 'make-over'. Francis got going! He risked getting it wrong even at that point. There was an abandonment of self-consciousness and reputation, which, I suppose only, comes to those who had the single-heartedness of a saint...

It is all too easy to regard the local church as pedestrian, not very exciting, and where there is parochial factionalism to splutter and leave them to it. Of course, there are churches throbbing with ideas and powerful community life, responding sacrificially to local needs. I have the temptation to be attracted by excitement, which may indeed feed me but is that my tertiary vocation? The challenge is quite stark. How do I gently and yet prophetically stimulate the local church to think in terms of life-style, without intruding and being rejected? But....

If Francis were to ask you to take him to where the 'lepers' [the outcasts] are in your local district where would you take him and how would you involve your local church, if it was not already so? Then what you imagine Him to ask you to do?

The Third Order is not primarily there to provide me with a means to develop my own spiritual life, whatever I might mean by that. It is there so that I can be Christ-like for others. The local

Church is broken, some more than others. The San Damiano principle keeps me focused on the task of the Body of Christ with all its failings and not on my own perfection.



To use a rather disturbing but beautiful invocation from the Spanish poet, Miguel de Unamuno: 'May God deny you peace, but give you glory! Amen.'

Here is an extract from letter I have received from Sarah in response to the last Newsletter about simplicity::

".....I am sure God and St Francis never meant us to live in 'guilt city' but to take time and space and view our actions through the life of Jesus whom we seek to follow....I have noted within myself a lack of generosity and kindness when others have not used MY chosen means of 'connectedness' (internet, emails etc) which is swift and fast and often without grace 'straight to the point'.

When smokers are trying to give up the habit – some are encouraged to use the money saved to buy something they would like to aid and sustain them in their endeavours. Would it help if you earmarked your 'personal savings' towards some reparation/restoration into the world that would enable you to 'sing your song'...."

with the love of God,

with the love of God,

+Martin

Bishop of Argyll and The Isles

If you have anything to share on this issue, please email me or write to me and I will draw the responses together for the next

N e w s l e t t e r .

alexandermartin.shaw@virgin.net

