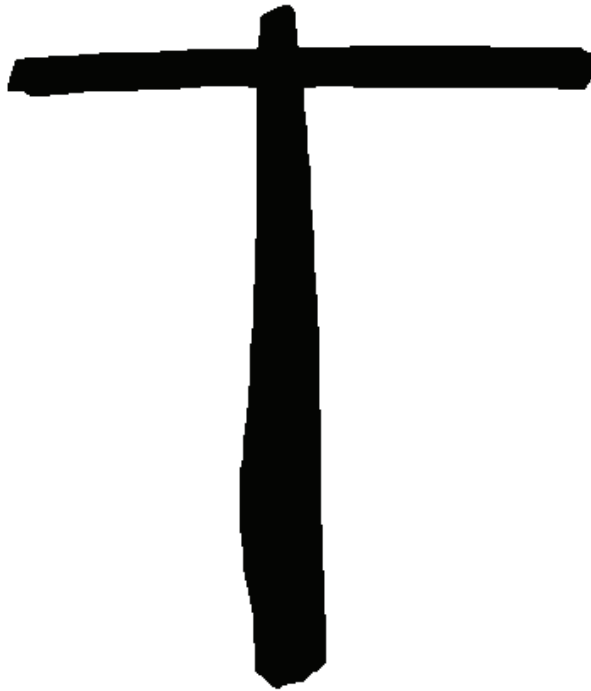


**The Third Order**  
**Society of St Francis**  
*(European Province)*



**Obedience**  
**Listening Closely**

Tom Keighley

Assisi Booklet Number 5

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# **Obedience**

## **Listening Closely**

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## **Foreword**

To discuss obedience may seem a strange thing to do in our modern age. It may sound like harking back to a previous era when our society was still openly governed by a sense of what was right and wrong. Despite how times have changed and how individual expectations have increased, for members of the Third Order of the Society of St Francis (TSSF), obedience remains a central principle of our lives together. Perhaps because of how times have changed, it became apparent to the Order that it was worth doing some work in this area to have some further thinking and guidance for members' reflection on the subject.

This document is the result of nearly three years' work by our current Provincial Formation Guardian and numerous members, including his predecessor, to produce such material. It is not a learned paper, though there is much study behind it, and neither is it a simple read to be enjoyed and then shelved. Rather, this is a document that attempts actively to engage the whole Order in further work. The hope is that individual tertiaries will both explore it for themselves and also that it will be used by Local Groups for their on-going prayer and reflection about how to live the Franciscan life together. It has insights and challenges that members will benefit from returning to at frequent points along their Franciscan journey.

The document interprets obedience as listening closely. It could just as easily have been described as 'holy listening', but that might have obscured what the Order hopes will happen with this document. What is offered is the opportunity for renewed effort to work together as brothers and sisters to support each other in our journey of continuing formation, and also material to inspire and sharpen our skills in listening both to each other and to the Holy Spirit. The vision and hope is therefore that the content and wisdom in this document will enable and support this to happen throughout the Order.

As Minister Provincial I wish you every blessing in your study and reflection on this document. Should you feel inspired to craft a response, I and my fellow Chapter members would welcome hearing from you.

Pax et Bonum

Joanna Coney  
Minister Provincial of the European Province TSSF

## **Preliminary comments**

As in all things Franciscan, it is right to start by giving thanks. This work was only possible because of the contributions of many members of the Third Order of the Society of Saint Francis from all over the European Province. Some forwarded short comments, others more considered contributions. Yet others formed small groups and spent time praying and working together to decide what to contribute. To all of them, the Order owes a debt of gratitude.

In particular, there were two sources of contribution that made the author's work more meaningful and purposeful. The first was those members of the TSSF in the Study and Prayer Group who not only sent material for consideration, but also devoted twenty-four hours from their busy lives to work at Freeland so as to clear the ground and help to achieve a real focus for the work. As individuals, they have continued to offer observations and support ever since. The second major source of support has been Verena Tschudin, the West London Area Formation Guardian. Her expertise as an editor has brought clarity and logic to the paper that it would otherwise have lacked.

To all those who have devoted time and effort to this paper, my personal thanks and an admission; that any errors or shortcomings are all mine to lay claim to!

## **How to use this document**

It has become clear in undertaking this work that documents, such as this one, need to be viewed from different perspectives. For some, such papers are for personal prayer and reflection; for others, they are ideal material to work through in a group. It is hoped that the document appeals to the widest range of interests and approaches in the Order.

In consequence, a great deal of time has gone into developing the material so that it can be used in different ways. The following are only some of them:

- Some of the text has been indented from the main body of the writing, using a different font. These are the sections that could be considered as summaries of the text around them. It may be that some members will either only want to read those texts, or may want to read those first before setting about the rest of the paper
- Each section concludes with some questions for reflection. These are not comprehensive, but are 'hooks' for those who welcome such aids. They are divided into questions for individuals and questions for groups. It is not intended that members work through the sections as written out. Some may wish to delve in and out. Rather, the intention is that each section will be accessible on its own and therefore individuals and groups should feel free to use the material as they see fit
- Obedience is one of those issues that we need to revisit regularly in our Franciscan journeys. One of the stimuli for the work was concerns raised in Local and Area Groups about the tension between following Francis as an individual in contrast to being part of a community i.e. the TSSF. One way of using this document is as a mechanism for examining the life of the Local and Area groups to ensure that we are living life in community and not just a collection of individuals

As our Minister Provincial has written in the Foreword, feedback on this document, both in terms of content and style, would be very welcome. It will help in the formulation of future papers in the TSSF.

Tom Keighley, Provincial Formation Guardian TSSF  
Feast of Elizabeth of Hungary 2009



## **Obedience – Listening Closely**

*When Saint Francis encouraged the formation of The Third Order he recognised that many are called to serve God in the spirit of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience in everyday life (rather than in a literal acceptance of these principles as in the vows of the Brothers and Sisters of the First and Second Orders). The rule of The Third Order is intended to enable us in the duties and conditions of daily living, and for us to carry them out in this spirit. (Principles Day 4)*

*The primary aim for us as Tertiaries is therefore to make Christ known. This shapes our lives and attitudes to reflect the obedience of those whom our Lord chose to be with Him and sent out as His witnesses. Like them, we, by word and example, bear witness to Christ in our own immediate environment and pray and work for the fulfilment of his command to make disciples of all nations. (Principles Day 6)*

### **Introduction**

In daily life, one could go a very long time without obedience being mentioned, but obedience is central to the nature of Franciscanism, and might be described as part of the charism, or spirit, of being a Franciscan tertiary. Each tertiary addresses this issue during the novitiate, and each member's personal rule identifies how each individual will respond to the Order's expectation of obedience. Despite this, the issue of obedience is largely sidelined.

From time to time, Area Formation Guardians, on behalf of the Area Teams, are faced with the difficult challenge of members who are technically 'disobedient'. This can take one of four forms:

- Failure to submit an annual report
- Failure to make an annual renewal
- Failure to contribute financially to the Society
- Failure to have a spiritual director

These requirements are unequivocal, as they are in the Statutes of the Order. However, no doubt occasionally every member has failed in one or more of these requirements for reasons that were pastorally appropriate. The issue therefore includes consideration of degrees of deliberation: how much the failure to meet the requirements of the Statutes is a wilful rejection of the requirement, in contrast to the problem of dealing with the unexpected events of life. The subject of obedience may also extend to issues that are not laid out so explicitly but would include:

- Non-attendance at meetings
- Issues of life-style.

The Order has provided guidance on the management of all these matters in the *Area Team Handbook*, but there remains a felt need to reflect deeply on and pray about the meaning of obedience for the Order in this twenty-first century of the Christian era. The question has arisen if the understanding of the notion of obedience has changed so much that some new thinking is required and new guidance be offered to members. This Assisi paper therefore follows on from that produced by Hugh Beach in 1993 (at the request of Provincial Chapter) and is designed to help members to reflect on this subject and engage in some work, both personally and in the their Local and Area Groups.

*This booklet provides four reflections on obedience:*

- 1. The nature of obedience as listening*
- 2. Obedience as community and Trinity*
- 3. 'Minorness', or what it means to be 'lesser'*
- 4. Pride as the core of disobedience*

*These topics provide a framework that has allowed the different aspects of obedience in the life of TSSF to be addressed. They reflect the nature of the concerns about obedience in the Order at present.*

None of these topics are simple notions to comprehend, but they are central to the calling of tertiaries. In order to facilitate working with the material under these headings and throughout the booklet, each section ends with some suggested questions individuals may wish to ask themselves, and some activities groups might engage in.

## 1. The nature of obedience as listening

The first section on obedience as listening attempts to clarify the nature of Christian obedience as a response to the call of Jesus. This has been explored in four subsections that look at significant issues for Franciscans. They are:

- Mission
- The Cross
- Poverty
- The culture of the age

Much has been said about the derivation of 'obedience' from the Latin *audio: I listen*. On its own, the first syllable *ob* means 'for' or 'by reason of'. In compound words, it may simply strengthen the word it qualifies: for example, *ligere* meaning to bind, becomes *obligere* meaning to bind fast, place under obligation. Sometimes *ob* may twist the meaning somewhat: *iactus* means a throw, but *obiectus* means a barrier in the way (as when we *object* to something). *Esse* means to be, but *obesse* means to be a nuisance to; *audiens* means hearing, listening, while *oboediens* means obedient, i.e. carrying out the (legitimate) command heard, even if sometimes it is inconvenient. This history of the term's origin places the meaning for anyone in religious life into a particular context. The concern is less the doing of particular deeds, but the understanding of what it is that one is being called to, and the process by which the response to that call is discerned. The childish experience of attempting to conform in order to demonstrate compliance is close to the reverse of what is being sought.

Br Ramon (1994) wrote that there are several sorts of obedience:

- Slavish obedience: commanded by a tyrant, with penalties for refusal, which needs to be resisted
- Military obedience: which has to be unconditional
- Legal obedience: is necessary in civilized society
- Wisdom obedience: the counsel of a guru or master

- Loving obedience: the essence of the Gospel (pp 72-73)

Jesus said, 'If you love me you will obey my commandments' (John 14.15). He reversed the saying in John 15.10, 'If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love'. Obedience is the acceptance of our vocation as lovers: lovers of God and lovers of human beings. However, this does not answer the question of how we obey Christ, which does not seem very obvious to many people, given all the competing voices for ethical and institutional behaviours. Is it possible to speak of obedience in a way that is not stuck on ethical or moral precepts? What is different about the expectations of TSSF when compared with those of the institutions in which individual are involved through work or leisure, and indeed, those of the wider church?

*TSSF is an integral part of the Anglican Church, a component of the western Christian church. Some people would suggest that the church has been overly simplistic about the subject of obedience, having done rather too much of its thinking about obedience (and disobedience) under the category of God's will and our will, suggesting that the pursuit of the human will is evil and the divine will is good and therefore assuming a distinction and separation that Francis would challenge. The Franciscan focus is incarnational, which sees the whole of creation as made in God's image. This challenges Franciscans, and especially tertiaries living in that world, to find ways of integrating the different expectations of obedience from the different sources, while understanding what is different about the call to obedience as a member of the Society. The following sub-sections on obedience as mission, as a response to the cross, as a response to poverty, and finally in response to the culture of the age, provide material that may enable some answers to emerge to the question of how to be obedient as a member of the Third Order.*

## 1.1 *Obedience as mission*

Obedience as mission may seem a strange title, but it reflects the first Aim of the Order 'To make our Lord known and loved everywhere'. This is the first demand on the obedience of a tertiary. The questions that arise include how to hear what the Aim means, and therefore what it might mean for the individual. Being called to address this Aim is one of the main reasons for joining the Order: to help in the mission that Jesus started, that is, to bring others to know God. This may feel very uncomfortable, as many surveys on Christian attitudes attest. Indeed, Myra Shackley (1998), points to the discomfort felt by members of the Third Order in undertaking anything that might be perceived as active evangelism. Denise Mumford (2009, p.30) confirms from her own smaller study that there is marked reticence among members of the Order when notions of evangelism arise. Most Tertiaries reported being happy to live a life that they hoped showed the love of Christ through them, and therefore attracted others to know more about this God that they worshipped, rather than engaging in explicit evangelical initiatives. This approach fulfils the supposed injunction that Francis gave to a novice, 'Preach always, and if all else fails, use words.' Sadly there is no known exact source for this quotation, but like many things attributed to Francis, it captures something important about the Franciscan charism.

The first Aim of the Order and Francis' apocryphal teaching make the point that tertiaries are called to be involved in 'the work of God', which may most aptly be designated by the Latin word *missio*, hence the English word 'mission'. Understanding that the call is to take part in the work of God begins to answer one of the questions raised by some members, 'just who are we being obedient to?'

ARCIC (The Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission) has struggled longer than most with the question of obedience. Its Report (ARCIC 1994) is clear that

obedience is to the Word of God and explicitly links this to a 'missionary imperative'. Tertiaries of SSF will immediately hear echoes of the Principles. Day 6 reminds us that tertiaries pursue obedience that 'we, by word and example, bear witness to Christ in our own immediate environment and pray and work for the fulfilment of his command to make disciples of all nations.' The point is that obedience is different to simple obeying of orders. It is an explicit call to study and reflect on the life of Christ and shape one's own life accordingly in order to draw others to Christ. It is not a straightforward, once-for-all decision, but a life-long attendance on the words of Francis' master and ours. It is an on-going formation of spirit and behaviour, as individuals seek to become ever more like the God they are called to follow. The ARCIC Report is a reminder that the Third Order is part of the wider universal church, the body of Christ on earth, called to be obedient to the undertaking of God's work.

*The obedience shown by tertiaries is part of the same continuum that Jesus initiated when he called the first apostles with the words, 'Follow me'. This required a personal individual response, but also one that had a purpose, set by Jesus and not by the individual. The purpose was to form the body of Christ on earth, hence the words from the cross at San Damiano that Francis heard: 'Rebuild my church'. Francis was listening, but not closely enough. His response was literally to rebuild churches. It took time for Francis to realise that the rebuilding was of something greater; it was a call to help to rebuild the body of Christ. The difficulty that Francis had in understanding his calling is significant because it reveals to the followers of Christ how challenging it can be to discern the meaning of Christ's call to us, and therefore to determine what part the Third Order and individual tertiaries should play in obeying the call to mission.*

A cause of deception, or the corruption of understanding, when trying to discern the meaning of such calls, is using only one tool, or metaphorically speaking, using only one spiritual sense. Day 6 of the Principles places obedience in direct relationship to poverty and chastity, our two other spiritual senses. Poverty is taken as stewardship of resources that implies not only an avoidance of waste and moderation in expenditure and life style, but also a concern for other people's lack of such resources and a commitment to address this. Similarly with chastity: the understanding of this is about not using others for wilful pleasure or gain. It places an emphasis on the sanctity of the whole of creation.

The significant thing however, is not the individual virtues of poverty, chastity and obedience, but what they mean in combination. While each directs the individual's life to different aspects of 'proper' living, in combination they become a trinity with one message. All three virtues point to the experience of freedom. Pursuit of poverty releases tertiaries from attachment to material goods. Respect for chastity frees tertiaries from the wish to control and subjugate. Obedience frees tertiaries from the tyranny of self-will. Obedience therefore is one of the three ways laid before tertiaries that lead to the freedom that makes individuals the free servants of God. It is only by seeking these freedoms that Franciscans can truly achieve the object of SSF, which is to serve God, and the mission to which such service calls.



## **Items for reflection and discussion:**

### **As an individual:**

- **How do you interpret and respond to this Aim of the Third Order?**
- **What does bringing people to the knowledge and love of God mean to you?**
- **If notions of evangelism make you feel uncomfortable, what in your life-style and way of being will bring people to Jesus?**

### **As a Group:**

- **How do you help each other to hear the call to do God's work?**
- **What does the mission of the Third Order's Aim mean for the life of the Group?**
- **As a group, what do you do to advance the mission of God?**

## 1.2 Obedience and the cross

The Franciscan call to obedience is a call to mission and to undertake the work of God on earth. This includes following Jesus to the cross. John Moltmann's seminal text *The Crucified God: the Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (1974) brings all Christians, and especially Franciscans, back to a fundamental challenge to the followers of Christ. How do Franciscans hold the cross in such veneration when it is the symbol of such abject and total suffering? Francis' call and Clare's life of prayerful worship took place in front of the cross of San Damiano. Moltmann states:

*'The cross is not and cannot be loved. Yet only the crucified Christ can bring freedom which changes the world because it is no longer afraid of death.'* (p.1)

This describes the tension all Christians face, and especially Franciscans, with the centrality of the cross to the Franciscan calling. The object of the Third Order is captured in John 12.24 (Day 1 of the Principles) 'Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."' It is a reminder that it is only through death that the freedom of obeying God's mission can be chosen.

Obedience is a type of death, but a death that brings new life. In dying, Christ chose to obey the call of his Father. The key word here is 'chose'. It was a free act, as the story of Gethsemane reveals. However, Moltmann draws readers on to reflect on how God on the cross was apparently abandoned by God, and to ask how this relates not just to personal salvation, but for societies faced with demonic crises, whether these crises be the Holocaust, the Gulag, the Long March, or Rwanda. Tragedies of these dimensions are often beyond the comprehension of individuals, but everyone will have their own human catastrophe to reflect on. It raises questions about what it is to be human, and the

experience of repeated deaths. These can take several forms: either imposed as friends and relatives depart to their eternal rest; jobs are lost or accidents cause physical limitation; or they are freely chosen in daily life as moments when the work of God can be done through the denial of self in some way. What we know from the death of Christ – freely chosen as an act of loving obedience – is that it is the sure way to life after death and resurrection.

*The tragedy of the twentieth century that sadly seems to be continuing into the twenty-first is that the developments in science and technology have been used not just for the benefit of communities, but too often also for their extermination. This points to issues of power and domination that run counter to the Franciscan vocation. Unless obedience is seen in terms of self-sacrifice, with echoes of Isaiah's suffering servant, then the natural tendency is to seek self-interest. The obedience of tertiaries is a form of the same obedience that Jesus showed to his Father. Such obedience could have legitimately chosen another path, but which in choosing to be Franciscan in the form prescribed by SSF, is choosing to die to self so that God may be more truly present in the world. The cross therefore is not a symbol to be loved as much as a question; a question that Francis also struggled with. The cross asks all Franciscan whether they love God enough to be transformed into symbols of the living cross, as was Francis in his stigmata.*

What Moltmann is asking readers to struggle with is what happens when death is not a voluntary self-giving, as in the case of Jesus. For Franciscans, whose very calling commits them to a life in the public realm, the challenge is how to distinguish between the free response in obedience to the call of God, no matter how much personal dying is involved, and the impositions of corporate evil. The death of Jesus on the cross was a public event. The cross challenges

Franciscans to take their obedience to the call of Christ into the public arena. Like concerns about evangelism, this may make tertiaries feel uncomfortable, but the call to be Franciscan is to care about the whole of creation. The cross makes it clear that doing nothing is not an option.

### **Items for reflection and discussion:**

#### **As an individual:**

- **What does the cross mean to you?**
- **In what way do you seek to die to yourself?**
- **What is your understanding of Christ's death on the cross?**

#### **As a Group:**

- **What role does the cross play in the life of the group?**
- **How does the group help its members in questions of self-denial?**
- **Does the group have a role in local community issues, or ways of supporting individuals who do?**

### **1.3 Obedience and poverty**

The challenge of the cross is complex and unending. It is a call to achieve freedom of choice through the sacrifice of self-will. This freedom has not sat easily within the institutional structures of the church. Too often church history reveals demands for self-sacrifice that reflect an ignorance of the needs of God's people that they have every right of being fulfilled. A response to this emerged in Latin America in the 1950s, known as liberation theology. Unsurprisingly, it had a Franciscan at its centre, Leonardo Boff.

The catch-phrase associated with this development is 'Preference to the poor' and has entered the church lexicon worldwide. It arose from the work of Bishop Gustavo Gutierrez, and together with Boff he set out a rationale for the disposal of personal and institutional wealth and the redistribution of clergy people in religious orders so as to help poor people to achieve their human rights. Their Roman Catholic Church categorised them as Marxists and sought their expulsion from Holy Orders. Boff was banned from ministry, including preaching and publishing. Despite draconian measures to constrain them, this group of clergy and religious continued to re-shape the church within the 'base Christian communities', a structure operating outside of the constraints of a parish, which pursued political, social, economic and educational reform, using the resources of educated clergy and religious to enable this. Such a message was not welcomed by the hierarchy.

This approach challenged the teaching of the church, the way it interpreted the Bible and especially the Gospels, and the institutional frameworks within which it worked. The argument was that the church was incapable of hearing (and by implication, being obedient to) the call of Christ, as expressed by the voices of less affluent, less educated, and less mainstream communities. Influential in this thinking was Paulo Freire (1996), who demonstrated the link between

power and education. His thesis was that education created culture and that those who decided what was appropriate to provide as education were in reality creating the culture. He noted that it required influence to change the content of education and therefore areas of learning were excluded because there was no-one to advocate for them. The question became what was excluded, and what emphasis was given to what was included, and how and why those decisions were made. It demonstrated that powerless and excluded people were likely to become invisible in social and policy terms. This explains why subjects such as race and gender have been presented in particular ways. It also explains specific approaches to obedience because obedience is learned and is therefore culturally determined.

Why is this important for tertiaries here and now? This development is important in any theological consideration of obedience because it makes clear that obedience has corporate and societal components, as well as personal ones. Kathryn Tanner in *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (1992) has demonstrated why institutions are not self-critical and why they resist change. Tanner's work sums up the problems any church-based organisation faces. She asks churches to understand how power emerges through control of culture by deciding what is appropriate and how things get done. If the focus of obedience is God, then those who speak for God determine the culture of worship and style of life, and all too often they seem to be aiming for inappropriate degrees of conformity. The consequence of this is the exclusion of minorities.

To return to the example of Francis, the challenge he faced was a mediaeval society with well established norms of behaviour embedded in a culture set by the civil authorities and the church. It was exceptionally legalistic and both the state and the church had independent court systems. When Francis finally resolved the problems with his father, it was to the bishop he went and therefore to the church's authority,

and it was the church authority that trumped that of the state. He used the culture of the day to achieve freedom from his father's demands. However, he was still trapped in the culture of his day, and it was only the eventual kissing of the leper that brought true freedom. The significance of this is immense. Today, leprosy (Hanson's disease), is eminently treatable when the proper drugs are available. In Francis' time, a diagnosis of leprosy resulted in the priest reading the prayers used at a funeral over the person and his or her subsequent exclusion from the city. As far as the society of the day was concerned, the individual was dead. For Francis to seek out a 'community of the dead', to eat and drink with them and then kissing them, was a prophetic statement about the need to ignore the non-Christ-like elements of the culture in which he lived. His was an act of liberation similar to that implied in the 'preference to the poor'.

*In considering obedience therefore it is necessary to examine how well an organisation looks beyond the centralising culture inherent in its structure and processes and begins to explore if it is being appropriately obedient by being conscious of what is Christ-like behaviour and what is not. Difficult questions about social class, race, gender orientation, etc. are obvious issues, but more fundamental ones about literacy, degrees of social competence and even financial capacity need to be addressed. The question is not simply about the demand for conformity, but whether or not the radical call of Francis to step outside the demands of a local culture and pursue what is truly Christ-like is being facilitated by the way in which the life of the Third Order is pursued. This opens an organisational critique that will illuminate whether or not TSSF is sufficiently conscious of the impact of its corporate decisions. Liberation theology is the tool that lifts the lid on organisational behaviour and should be the lens through which tertiaries examine their own obedience and*

*conformity to following the cross, reflected in the lives of Francis and Clare.*

### **Items for reflection and discussion:**

#### **As an individual:**

- **When you hear conversations or news reports about the poor and about poverty in society, how do you react, and why?**
- **What is your understanding of the culture in which you live? How would you describe it and what are its advantages and disadvantages?**
- **Who are the people you think are excluded in society and how do you respond to them?**

#### **As a Group:**

- **Do the norms of the Third order enforce inappropriate conformity or provide structure and support to challenge the non-Christ-like?**
- **In what way can the group support its members in responding to the needs of the excluded?**
- **What changes in culture (defined as 'the way things get done around here') in the Local and Area Groups might be pursued?**



#### **1.4 Obedience and the culture of the age**

If liberation theology encourages a review of corporate practice in church organisations, the culture of the age brings the focus back to the individual. Technically, this is referred to as post-modernism and it operates in two significant ways. The first is to throw into doubt any explanation of events based on a meta-narrative. This means that all-encompassing frameworks of understanding or belief lose validity. This is important because the Gospels and the Christian faith are classic examples of meta-narratives. This leads to the second way, which is that every individual's perspectives are given equal value. Gone is deference to position or person or learning and everyone's personal insights and judgements are given equal validity.

The significance of this for tertiary today could be that this is the largest challenge to any previous understanding of what obedience means. Most people get through life without deep consideration of the far reaches of modern philosophy. However, the development of post-modernism has had such an impact on thinking and behaviour that it is impossible to ignore its implications. The denial of grand narratives, and the supremacy of the individual have been enough to leave all Christian denominations doubtful about post-modernism as a philosophical development. The modernism that preceded it is still a major influence on our thinking, focusing on rationality, evidence and logical argument. This was largely how Christian thinkers operated. It gave grounds for a unity of approach and explained the need for hierarchies and for following certain set paths of behaviour. Post-modernism puts all this up in the air.

In examining obedience as listening and reflecting on it in the light 1) of the missionary aim of the Third Order, 2) the context of the apparent contradiction of the cross, 3) its significance when trying to read the signs of the times, and 4) the culture in which we find ourselves, the rise of the individual and the challenge to the ways in which individuals thought in the past

is significant. While the majority of individual tertiaries might feel little wish to unravel the complexities of these contending philosophies, members of the Order cannot avoid the consequences of such thinking.

*One element of this has been an increasing tendency to see being a tertiary as an individual journey. This is very post-modern, even if the individuals are unaware of it. Equally, in an era when individual views seem to have a credence all of their own that need no external ratification or confirmation, it becomes clear why some tertiaries see group meetings as being of limited relevance. These are fundamental challenges to the understanding of what it means to be a member of TSSF and indeed of being a Christian. Central to the Christian calling to follow Christ is to be part of a community. This is reflected in the need for communal worship. Without gathering together around the Eucharistic table, no matter how virtuous a life is lived, is not a Christian one. It is one of the central components of baptism that no matter what the individual wish is, the key moment is recognition by the Christian community of the person as one who has died through the symbolic use of water, in order to live again in Christ, in His body on earth, the church.*

*Membership of the Third Order takes this a step further. There are many people living a Franciscan life-style and perhaps most of them see no reason to request the opportunity of public profession of that life-style in an organisation. To seek recognition of such a life-style in TSSF is acceptance of the community nature of the life and the expectations that go with it. There is a challenge here for tertiaries as the cultural norms drag people away from the acknowledgement of a greater picture and the story that goes with it, while placing ever greater emphasis on the rights of individuals. There is a*

*need to recognise that what is being offered is counter-cultural i.e. runs against the drift of society around us.*

This points back to the need for serious work in this area during the novitiate. New members will need to be helped to understand that some current ways of thinking may not be appropriate in this setting. Novices will need to explore their relationship to the Christian story in more depth than was perhaps the case in the past. It is no longer safe to assume that novices come with the scriptures well absorbed and that there is appropriate assent to the expectations held out by the church in terms of understanding of what it means to be a Christian and what that means in terms of way of life. Conversely, the Third Order may wish to unpick the implications of this new way of thinking for its own way of working, and what it might mean to attract new members in this situation. The focus on the individual would have resonated strongly for Francis with his own early wishes to be the glamorous knight. One can see his equivalents in the media every day. It may be that obedience in TSSF in this setting is a prophetic message to the church and to the wider society. It may be that it is in this context that the charge to 'rebuild my church' has its fullest meaning. By working to demonstrate what an obedient community represents in the post-modern context, it might be that the people whose life we touch will be able to remedy the weaknesses in their own communities. However, it will be impossible to offer vision to others if we have not removed the blocks from our vision.

## **Items for reflection and discussion:**

### **As an individual:**

- **How aware are you of being part of a community in the Third Order?**
- **What challenges does the culture of individualism present to your faith and life as a tertiary?**
- **What contribution do you make to the building up of community in the Third Order?**

### **As a Group:**

- **How does the group integrate new individuals into its life and help them to understand the nature of community and obedience?**
- **The Bible was central to Francis' way of life; what role does it play in the life of the group?**
- **How can the group act as a model of community for the church?**

## **2. Obedience as community and trinity**

The first section of this booklet has focused on the meaning of obedience in the religious life, especially for Franciscan Tertiaries, by highlighting the significance of listening. The process of understanding what one listens to is discernment, i.e. how one decides that what is being listened to and heard is genuinely from God. The problems associated with obedience and discernment were seen in particular in the complexity of the call of the cross, the significance of poverty, and the often perverse influence of the modern age and its culture. This led to the identification of the importance of community in this process.

The stimulus for this booklet was the problem of instances in which community in TSSF is being breached. It is clear that these breaches have gone beyond the stages that can be managed using the excellent pastoral advice offered in the Area Team Handbook. The instances encountered were of tertiaries clearly feeling that following the 'Community Obedience' was unnecessarily burdensome. Novice tertiaries are guided to the development of a personal rule that can support them rather than challenge them. Yet, in working with some tertiaries, it became clear that the joy and happiness achieved through compliance with the Principles and Statutes of the Order was no longer part of their lives. One tertiary wrote, when reflecting on the question of obedience, that her experience of sharing the Franciscan experience with people in other denominations and other Orders and other communities of Franciscans had led her to the realisation that, 'one's own rule should bring joy and lightness'. Clearly, those who are breaching the expectations of the community, and therefore of their rule, are not finding community obedience something that brings 'joy and lightness'. By reflecting on some examples of community obedience, what is involved in such obedience might be illuminated.

Mary Beth Bux (2007) reflected on the charism of her congregation when she went through the selection/election process to become the General Councillor for her Order, the Roman Catholic Third Order Regular of St Francis. This is an important parallel for TSSF as the Third Order Regular has much in common with the TSSF way of life. Bux considered first the spirit of the original founders and their notions of leadership as service and leaders as obedient to the needs of their followers. Second, she called to mind the role of an Order and the nature of its witness in a dis-ordered world. This led her to consider the significance of religious life as public witness, based on total commitment. What motivated her discernment process was ongoing reflection on what it meant to be a Franciscan in her Order.

Central to Bux's discernment process was questioning what it was that members of the Order were obedient to. She discarded the sharing of a common house or undertaking a common task, and instead identified the focus of obedience as the 'common heart'. She explains that:  
*'If this 'common heart' is to be witnessed by others, it requires the daily work of forming community and coming to terms with the ways in which the whole of the Gospel is not being promoted. It is in the living of what is heard in daily reflection on the Gospel and in mutual correction concerning the ways in which we are not being mirrors of the Gospel values we profess'. (p.432)*

These words echo much that has been written already. The tertiaries' obedience is not revealed in active evangelism but in what is observed by others in the individual tertiary's life style. Bux also identified a concern about the failure to live by the Gospel. She believes that it is the community that calls the members of the Order to address this: the 'mutual correction' she highlights. Bux is quite clear that obedience only exists in community, and identifies Francis' calling together of the brothers into explicit community from time to time to ensure engagement with each other. She recognises

that this is the Franciscan mechanism for ensuring mutuality of purpose and sustenance of service. Bux finds in Clare the reminder that obedience centres therefore on maintaining community. She concludes that,

*'Franciscan obedience in love involves the whole community and places great expectations on both member(s) and leader(s). It encompasses everything one promises to live and more. It shows the depth of respect to all. And finally it witnesses to the world that grace does indeed exist'. (p.438)*

The point is firmly made that it is only by giving oneself into community that the life of a Franciscan can be lived. This giving of oneself, done with the respect identified by Bux, is a high form of courtesy. It is realised when that which is difficult to do is done as a form of giving to one's sisters and brothers, and in return, through grace, they give back the constituents of the Franciscan life that tertiaries long to live. In this context obedience becomes something that is exchanged between one another.

Central to Bux's thinking is the fact that each individual comes freely to be a Franciscan without coercion or threat. Seamus Mulholland OFM, based at Canterbury, takes this further by focusing on what it is that makes for sisterhood and brotherhood from a Franciscan perspective. He identifies that it is entered into out of free choice and explains the Franciscan life as a way of helping others to find God. The Franciscan life is therefore a form of sacrament. This form of life is not an individual ideal, but a gift to be exercised in community. His reason for thinking this is the example of God's gift of brothers to Francis. This was God's gift of grace to Francis and so it is also to tertiaries. Like Bux, Mulholland is identifying life lived in community to be the essential component of the Franciscan life.

Mulholland (2008) is aware that the need to be in community can present a modern paradox that was identified earlier

when looking at issues of culture. He demonstrates this paradox thus:

How can 'my' living as a Franciscan, using the personal genitive pronoun (my), be appropriated in this manner?

If a tertiary agrees to live in a community, it is not a life personally owned and therefore the 'my' has no value or meaning;

it is as a tertiary in community that the Franciscan life is lived;

therefore, a tertiary is only living the Franciscan life when he or she is giving up the personal and individual, to live in community

*This form of argument highlights the central problem of obedience in the Order. It is only by surrendering the 'my' and acknowledging the free choice to be in the Third Order, that tertiaries can be truly obedient. The exemplar of such obedience is Jesus on the cross: by giving his life, he received it back. Mulholland wrote, 'This is the exemplar for Franciscan brotherhood and sisterhood: to possess by giving freely away, to give freely away what is possessed; to do so in the present moment; to do so in, for, with and as brother and sister. (p.111)*

*Bux and Mulholland focus on the centrality of community. In doing so, they are assuming a shared understanding of what it means to follow a Franciscan vocation. Election and release are key words in TSSF in this context. Individuals do not choose to live the life of a Franciscan tertiary, but offer themselves freely to live this life. The Order elects the individual to the Order after periods of prayer, reflection, study and discernment. The vocation is given, not chosen. It is recognised and confirmed by the community, not ascertained on the basis of individual assuredness. The converse of this is that individuals cannot simply walk*



*away from this 'election'. If they doubt their continued calling, further prayer and reflection is undertaken to discern whether 'release' can be granted. This too is not a personally determined choice, but something agreed by the community. The obedience therefore is not a response to a personal call, but discernment by the Order of an individual's vocation to join its ranks, or to be released from them. The 'my' has been removed; the common discernment enables obedience in community to be fulfilled.*

Once life as a professed tertiary commences, the life is lived in community through the mechanisms laid out for gathering and sharing. To Bux this is the central point, as it should be to all tertiaries. Mulholland could not be clearer about how the 'my' becomes 'ours'. This results in a sharedness that is reflected in the Order's meetings and other activities. This is challenging when tertiaries live their lives as a dispersed community. It is in seeking to fulfil the calling to be one in Christ and by choosing to follow Francis and Clare as the model of life to be adopted, that the community obedience emerges as a central element of that life. There is no doubt that individuals can follow a Franciscan way of life, much as Companions of SSF do, but to be a member of the Third Order is to engage with the way of life expected in the Order, and reflected in the individual's rule of life.

The model for this rests in a uniquely central place in Christian belief. It is the Trinity, the three persons in one God who choose not to exist without each other. They exist together because of God's compulsion to love: a love so great that its very existence has called the three persons of the Godhead into being. No one divine person dominates, all are obedient to the other; 'my' has no place in the Trinity. For Clare, the guardian of the Franciscan charism, God was love and all that she came to understand about God through her meditation on the cross led her to focus increasingly on the nature of the community of the Godhead (Delio 2007). In her

four letters to Agnes there is regular encouragement to gaze on the cross as a mirror, opening up to the Spirit of God as providing the route into the love of God.

In Clare's mind there seems to be an extra element to the Trinity. With the cross as the great outpouring of the love of God, the Spirit brings joy that such love has been shared for our salvation. For Clare, the faithful soul is not an innocent bystander, but through the incarnation of Christ and our own incarnation, we share in the work of Christ. Clare advises Agnes that she is a 'co-worker' of God, called to this work to help bring others to Christ. This places obedience in a special place. As Franciscans called to be part of God's work, and therefore part of the love of the Trinity, a tertiary's obedience is to God, but needs to be discerned in the way that the Godhead discerns, i.e. by listening to the other persons of the Trinity. This complex notion of community is reflected in tertiaries' requirement to live a life that will bring others to Christ. Tertiaries are part of the Trinity when engaged in such work.

Bonaventure, the great Franciscan scholar (died 1274), who brought much of the early Franciscan thinking together, developed Clare's thinking further (Delio, 2001 and 2007). Over his lifetime he came back to reflect on the nature of the Trinity at regular points. He was drawn to God as goodness, highlighting the significance of such texts as, '*No one is good but God alone*' (Luke 18.19). Understanding God to be revealed as 'good' in the New Testament, Bonaventure saw the Trinity as being grounded in goodness. This echoes Francis' nine references in his known writings to God as good.

Bonaventure illuminated two things of great importance about the Trinity. First, that it is a source of internal communication. This means that the persons of the Trinity communicate with each other. Secondly, that the love that holds it together arises from the innate goodness of God. This love of one person of the Trinity for another is therefore a

personal love, not some altruistic phenomenon. Such love, which might also be called charity, is what binds the Trinity together. This Trinity is therefore loving and communicating, but also through incarnation binding us into the Trinity. It is the model that reveals why community is at the very centre of our life as Christians and our life as tertiaries. It also provides the criteria for discernment in our listening and obedience. It is the call to be good like God, to be loving like God, and to be bound into this community that is both Trinitarian and Franciscan.

### **Items for reflection and discussion:**

#### **As an individual:**

- **What do you understand by discernment? How do you engage in it?**
- **Is your rule a joy, bringing lightness, or a burden and a struggle?**
- **How often do you speak or think of your way of life as 'my' Franciscanism?**

#### **As a Group:**

- **What does obedience in community mean to the group?**
- **How does the group ensure a sharing of the ways of life of its members?**
- **Does the Trinity play an active role in the life of the group? How is it manifested?**

### 3. Minorness, or what it means to be 'lesser'

The previous section considered how obedience can be enacted in community. This necessitated the surrender of the 'my' in the individual's Franciscan journey, and the need to model behaviour on the internal life of the Trinity, of which tertiaries become part by entering into the work of God on earth: the mission. This relates to one of the less often considered elements of Franciscanism, namely Francis' regular reminders to the Brothers that they were to be minor, or lesser. This was as controversial an idea in the time of Francis as it is in our age of individualism and celebrity. Francis had engaged in many acts of individual bravado as a youth, and even led the young people of Assisi in their revels. His position as the son of a cloth seller meant that he could dress in the most dazzling manner. It was an age when appearance was of immense importance. The celebrities of today behave in similar ways to Francis' time. Francis' teaching was deeply controversial. In attempting to live a new way of life, Francis was deliberately removing the 'my' from the community that was gathering around him. His own example of being 'lesser' was to move him, as an act of obedience, to give up the leadership of the Order that he had founded. How is this reflected in the life tertiaries choose to lead today?

Days 22 to 24 of the Principles address this.

The First Note: *Humility*

*We always keep before us the example of Christ, who emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, and who, on the last night of His life, humbly washed His disciples' feet. We likewise seek to serve one another with humility. (Day 22)*

*Humility confesses that we have nothing that we have not received and admits the fact of our insufficiency and our dependence upon God. It is the basis of all Christian virtues. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux said, 'No spiritual house can stand for a moment except on the foundation of humility'. It is the*

*first condition of a joyful life within any community. (Day 23)*

*The faults that we see in others are the subject of prayer rather than of criticism. We take care to cast out the beam from our own eye before offering to remove the speck from another's. We are ready to accept the lowest place when asked and to volunteer to take it. Nevertheless, when asked to undertake work of which we feel unworthy or incapable we do not shrink from it on the grounds of humility, but confidently attempt it through the power that is made perfect in weakness. (Day 24)*

Such humility is deeply counter-cultural in an age when assertiveness training is often a requirement if one is to progress through the 'system', where glass ceilings are to be 'shattered', and where individual rights (with no mention of the concomitant duties) are reshaping the society in which we live. In *Following Francis* (2006) Susan Pitchford reminds her readers of the Bible context for the humility espoused by tertiaries. Psalm 51, the Bible reveals, was written after David was confronted by Nathan about his adultery with Bathsheba:

*Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion  
blot out my transgressions. (v.1)*

The only conceivable response to wickedness is to ask God not only to forgive, but to reverse the evil done. Disobedience in the context of a freely chosen life in the Order is a type of evil. David's failure to discern the evil in his actions is a mirror for anyone who feels called to ignore the rules of a community which they freely chose to belong to. David's response is to listen to the voice of the community, in this instance the prophet Nathan, and discern the wrong he had done. This is an ancient example of how even a king can chose to be 'lesser' in the face of the need to be obedient.

In the Gospels there is the story Jesus tells about the tax collector praying in the temple:  
*'But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner'.'* (Luke 18.13)

In this instance, the sinner seeks reconciliation of God, identifying his powerlessness in the face of evil. This is recognition that disobedience results in weakness and excludes an individual from a community.

Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, devoted his life to the Good News of Jesus. He recognised his dependence on God with the words: *'For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.'* (Romans 7.19)

Paul's words demonstrate the inherent tendency to pursue self-will and not the will of God, even when the individual knows this to be the case. Nathan's, the tax collector's and Paul's stories act to legitimate life in community in that it is by shared living that obedience becomes possible.

All three quotations are from people who were seen in their societies as powerful, independent and influential individuals, but who in their hearts came to realise their utter dependence on God. It was this dependence on God that Francis tried to convey to his followers when he spoke about being minor, being lesser. It is a profound challenge to our own age where low self-esteem is seen to be a sort of illness. Central to an understanding of Franciscan obedience therefore is the need to be lesser and therefore to be running against the public culture of the day.

There is a struggle to find the most apt language to address this. Words like 'brokenness', 'self-emptying' and 'poverty' are important in this context. Working at becoming minor or lesser means allowing the work of God to be done through the individual rather than egotistically pursuing one's own

agenda. It is important to recognise the significance of bearing the divine image in which we were all made: the gift not completely lost by the disobedience of Adam. The term 'image' is today one of the key phrases associated with 'self-actualisation', 'profile', 'appearance'. To Francis it was the gift of incarnation and the opportunity to develop in oneself through the life of the community a more perfect image of God in this human life. For Francis it explained the place to be taken, that is, nailed with Christ to the cross, because this was the road to perfect freedom.

Some have argued that Clare sees being lesser as the very centre of the Franciscan calling (Hammond 2004). Clare, writing for the first time to Agnes of Prague in 1234 states: *'I rejoice because you, more than others, could have enjoyed public ostentation, honours, and worldly status, having had the opportunity to become, with eminent glory, legitimately married to the illustrious emperor, as would befit your and his pre-eminence. Spurning all these things with your whole heart and mind, you have chosen instead holiest poverty and physical want ...'*

Agnes was a princess in a royal family and passed all of that up to establish a community similar to the sisters of San Damiano. Clare praises her for taking this step of lesserness and focuses her teaching on the logical consequences of that step. She sees it as being the way in which Agnes can achieve the ultimate closeness to God. It centres on poverty, not of destitution, but a poverty characterised by Paul's first letter to Timothy: *'For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that'*. (1 Timothy 6.7-8)

Obedience to this calling is central to what it means to be Franciscan. For tertiaries in SSF it goes beyond the minimal requirements of the statutes of the Order and into the questions of life style, possessions, patterns of spending, and the complete engagement of individuals in the commercial

and economic life individuals are called to lead. It raises fundamental questions about how to relate to the environment, political assumptions of the age, and the supposed requirements of daily living. It takes tertiaries into an intimate engagement with the world around them and is not a retreat from the messiness of daily life. As Francis discovered when he asked Clare about whether he should be a hermit or an apostle, she was clear that his calling was to be an apostle. The Franciscan way is an apostolic way, a travelling on the way, dependent on the Lord: 'travelling light' to use a contemporary phrase.

Obedience in this context becomes something that strikes at the very centre of the tertiary's being. Not only does it determine individual life style, but also the nature of the relationships that can be engaged in. The Third Order was established by Francis to offer people not living in houses of a religious order a way of life to support them in the world. Until the time of Francis, there had been a belief that only those removed from the world could achieve holiness. Francis contradicted this and established the Third Order to facilitate the spiritual growth of the laity (correctly defined as people not in a religious order). Today the term laity is contrasted with clerical; however, technically all those living outside of a religious order are laity. The obedience of minorhood or lesserhood presents fundamental challenges. It is not a calling to slip into the world unseen, but to bring others to Christ through the life style adopted. Obedience to the calling of minorhood or lesserhood is radically different to the expectations of our age. It is itself a prophecy for all to see. Obedience for those prepared to be minor or lesser is enough to call others from their way of life to a closer following of Christ. Through the grace of God, tertiaries can be obedient to the calling to minorhood. Through the grace of God, others will see the obedience and respond positively. Francis was rewarded with the gift of brothers; the growth in numbers in TSSF suggests that such an example still has the



power to bring others to the obedient following of the master and his disciple Francis.

### **Items for reflection and discussion:**

#### **As an individual:**

- **How do you seek to be minor or lesser?**
- **How do you identify evil in your life and seek God's forgiveness?**
- **How aware are you of living a life that runs counter to the culture of the age?**

#### **As a Group:**

- **What do you do to help members to identify the challenges of being minor or lesser?**
- **How aware are you of being part of a religious order? How does it influence your activities?**
- **When bringing novices to profession, how does the group enable them to become minor or lesser?**

#### **4. Pride as the core of disobedience**

The Bible opens with two stories, told twice. The first is the story of creation, the great outpouring of God's love, to be matched by God's outpouring of love in the death of Jesus on the cross. The second story is about the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. The first is a story about God being obedient to the call of outgoing love; the second is about what happens when individuals obey a call of inward love. The Bible therefore starts with the key text for all Franciscans: the stories that show the difference between listening to God's call and listening to the call of self. Listening to God is known as obedience, listening to the call of self is known as pride. The story of creation is the first great incarnation and as such underpins much of Francis' thinking. If God has stooped to create this world, it meant for Francis that all of it was precious, and even more importantly, it was holy. The rejection by Adam and Eve of the world that God had created was not simply an act of self-will, but a disruption of the integration of God's love and the creation it generates. Pride therefore is the placing of the 'my' before the 'our'. It is a decision to undertake personal discernment only and not to engage in the process of community.

When a tertiary decides not to comply with the requirements of the Order, the pastoral care and support that fellow tertiaries would offer to him or her are ignored. Having entered TSSF freely and in so doing having surrendered the self to the life of the community, failure to engage in the process of obedience (listening) is a manifestation of pride, and as a consequence, is an act of disruption as it shatters the building of integrated living. Reflection on this has led some members to point out an anomaly in the life of the Order that comes to light when a member asks for a period of leave from the Order to reflect on her or his calling. During that time, there is no structured process for helping the individual in the listening process. It is clear that more is needed by way of support. The opportunity to seek once

more the word of God as revealed in the shared and integrated discernment of the Order is a positive way of examining whether an individual is being tempted by pride or is genuinely being called elsewhere. It highlights the fact that each member is asked to reflect on her or his rule and pray about it in advance of Francistide. Such an active and shared process of discernment would therefore be a challenge for tertiaries who are 'lukewarm' about their calling. The yearly reflection demands of all tertiaries an active and continuous reflection of what it is they are called to and to what they are attempting to be obedient. Failure to do such a Francistide review is a type of pride and therefore disobedience, as it suggests that in some way the individual is excused from such work and discernment.

This illuminates another important facet of the issue of obedience: there needs to be on-going discernment of vocation. One of the concerns here is the nature of power in the organisation. Power in the church was touched on earlier from a cultural perspective. It is when uncertainty enters the soul and discernment becomes complex that the influence of corporate power can be felt most sensitively. The drag and drift towards conformity can be very marked. *'Power itself is morally neutral ... but how power is used is of moral significance'*. (Liaschenko 2006, p. 183) All of us have power, even when we think we do not. We keep power, think we have more than we have, give it away, crave it, share it, abuse it, wear it lightly, and are frightened by our own power. We can choose to use power in ways that promote human flourishing, or use it to oppress others. This choice needs to be guided by active discernment in company with others. The belief that such decisions can be made alone is a reflection of the impact of pride, leading individuals to be prepared to ignore the voice of the community and to break the cohesion of a group in order to pursue personal goals.

Much of the understanding of power rests on the interpretation of what a 'person' is and what 'personhood'

means. In western society a person is often understood to be *'equal, rational, autonomous, independent, self-realizing, self-interested, or at least mutually disinterested'*. (Liaschenko 2006, p.184) Feminists have argued that *'persons are not primarily autonomous because their lives are filled with many largely unchosen relationships, such as children, family, fellow workers, superiors, etc. These are often relationships of dependency, resulting in restriction of personal goals and activities'*.

In this context it is important to understand what, for tertiaries, issues of 'autonomy', the 'renunciation' of the self, the relationship between pursuit (or grasp) of things and gift, and the nature of the 'power' of one person over others means in terms of Christian living, and of a secular religious calling in particular. Addressing these issues is in reality an examination of the awareness of personal pride. The question presenting itself is if the 'my' is being put before the 'our' and if the individual is aware of the strength of the hidden pull that Paul alluded to in saying that even when one thinks that one is acting for the best, the presence of pride can subvert that effort.

In the process of the formation of the calling to be a Franciscan tertiary, emphasis is disproportionately placed on the spiritual. Formation is generally perceived to have four components: spiritual, intellectual, pastoral and human. Through spiritual directors, prayer and shared worship and local group activities, the spiritual element is catered for reasonably well. The intellectual component probably varies from person to person depending on personality and proclivity, and there is an increasing amount of material to meet the study needs. In pastoral terms, the embedding of the local group structure has the capacity to make this a rich experience as individuals learn to care for each other. An imbalance across the four elements can turn spirituality into saccharine and self-centredness. An undue focus on the intellectual element can disconnect the head from the heart.

A focus on active service for others has the capacity to hide individuals from themselves. It is only when due emphasis is given to all that is human that we can go in building stronger community in the Order. The human part of formation is to do with self-awareness, how honest we are with ourselves and our power, and how we engage in our relationships.

Herein lies a special challenge; being Franciscan calls for an honouring of all that is human because it was created by God and is therefore holy. Achieving a balance across all aspects of formation, especially the human, is a manifestation of what it means to be Franciscan. The wound of sin means that this work is a struggle. In Day One of the Principles it is noted that:

*Jesus said, 'Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.'* (John 12.24)

Human formation is an on-going experience, based in dying in order to generate new life. The mixture of vocations tertiaries carry within themselves means that individuals find themselves in many different communities. As members of the Order, and by proper engagement in all aspects of formation, it is possible to reflect the God-given individuality that can become part of the community of the Third Order. The process of integration both into the Order and of the Franciscan way of life into all the other aspects of the individual's life ensures that the pride of individual achievement is transformed into new possibilities of servanthood.

For some people, the writings of Richard Rohr (2002 and 2006) have thrown particular light on this. Rohr's analysis of 'adult spirituality' is highly relevant to TSSF in its current, arguably transitional, stage. He views the first half of life as a time when identity, including religious identity, is being explored, shaped and consolidated. Rules, conventions and authority are important. They are typically embraced positively, and often

adopted for very long periods. Good examples are that rules establish in people's minds who they see themselves to be, their place in the world and in the life of the church. This worked well until recent generations, but today people increasingly reach adulthood without any fixed sense of values and identity. Yet, alternative life-styles can offer similar and relatively fixed and unquestioned identities and ways of living.

For Rohr, the second half of life is typically signalled by a period of personal doubt and flux, sometimes called a 'liminal [threshold, boundary] space', in which old customs, loyalties and assumptions no longer satisfy, leading to a mid-life crisis that can happen at many points. Sometimes people need to move beyond a previous spiritual position, even leaving behind whole faith communities that no longer seem right. This is not always welcomed, especially by church friends who would prefer their surroundings not to change. Eventually a second stage of life may exhibit less preoccupation with convention and more with meaning, less emphasis on the cultivation of personal piety and more on other-centredness. Justice and peace issues or wordless contemplation may come to seem more pressing than recitation of the office, for example. The nuances are endless, and the key point here is that later-life spirituality is more varied and hence less susceptible to fixed assumptions and customs. Perception becomes more relevant than repetition of the familiar and the need more acute to challenge assumptions that may be based on personal pride.

If a troubled or simply uncertain period in liminal space is like a 'dry spell' in the spiritual life, it is one that often ends with the traveller moving permanently to new territory. Going back to an earlier stage of life is not particularly healthy in these terms, even though it may well be gratifying to others, such as an earlier church community. If change is to be taken seriously, the approach to obedience and new insights needs to avoid being locked into what Rohr calls 'first stage

of life assumptions'. A greater recognition of spiritual movement and flux, especially in maturity, will be more relevant in attracting people to the Franciscan way and in making Christ's purposes more widely known.

*This leads back to the Franciscan response to pride, rejection of the Word, and the call of God. The Third Order is an order of penitents, devoted to penitence. This is not to suggest that sackcloth and ashes the everyday norm. Rather, Franciscans live in the knowledge that metanoia, or the need to change, is a constant part of the life of tertiaries. Metanoia and repentance are often used interchangeably. The Greek word is complex and in theological terms holds many meanings that are important for Franciscans. Not only does it mean change, but it suggests going beyond mere change, to achieve something lasting. It is a call for a reorientation, a complete re-focusing of purpose and approach. It is not simply making reparation, important as that is, but it is a change of life.*

To support this change of heart and of behaviour, Jesus left the sacraments, and for Franciscans the Eucharist and sacramental confession are of particular significance. Both give the grace to change where necessary and to persist where appropriate. They draw the individual into the Trinity of love and re-incarnate the individual in God's image. Pride can only be overcome by the regular reception of these graces. God knows that it is not something to be tackled alone, which is why the church, the body of Christ on earth, is there to hold, and the Third Order is there to sustain. The living out of the call to obedience and the rejection of pride is only possible where God's grace enables God's servants to live in community that is 'in union with'. TSSF is one of the ways to be in community.

## **Items for reflection and discussion:**

### **As an individual:**

- **How do you make yourself aware of the role of pride in your decision-making?**
- **Do you perceive the whole of creation as holy and how does that lead you to behave?**
- **What power do you perceive yourself to have and how does it influence your behaviour?**

### **As a Group:**

- **Where does power rest in the group and how is it used?**
- **How does the group find a proper balance in its programme of formation for its members?**
- **How does the group help its members to achieve a proper balance in the vocations they carry and the servanthood they exercise?**



## Conclusion

These reflections on obedience are intended to facilitate reflection, discernment, prayer and growth together in the vocations that tertiaries are called to follow. Over time, the understanding of obedience changes. Following the Second World War and the horrors of the Holocaust, people wondered what obedience meant. The American psychologist Stanley Milgram's (1974) experiments, the first of which was carried out in 1961, were the earliest investigations of the power of authority figures, as well as the lengths to which participants would go as a result of their influence. Milgram's results showed that, contrary to expectations, a majority of civilian volunteers would obey orders to apply electric shocks to other persons until they were unconscious or dead. Prior to these experiments, most of Milgram's colleagues had predicted that only sadists would be willing to follow the experiments to their conclusion.

Learning to obey adult rules is a major part of the socialisation process in childhood, and many techniques are used by adults to modify the behaviour of children. Obeying rules and following instructions does not necessarily come naturally, but successful parenting is often judged by whether individuals have been fully socialised, i.e. have been taught how to behave in most of the circumstances they find themselves. For many people this provides an acceptable level of certainty in their lives. However, the call of God often induces uncertainty and the need to review past beliefs and behaviours. It is recognised that most people will struggle with this and Milgram and his successors have demonstrated that rule following is very easy, catastrophically so on occasions. We live in a post-modern world where rules have apparently less significance, but still the evidence of irrational conformity accumulates, as the slaughter of any number of defenceless and innocent people testified. It is hoped that this document will provide a stimulus for tertiaries in the Third Order of the

Society of St Francis to address these issues both individually and in community.

To enable this, obedience has been addressed under the heading of listening, and in part as Trinity, minoriness, and pride. These reflections have had as their common theme the importance of community, and the importance of life together if obedience to God's call and Word is to be discerned. The supposition throughout has been that individual discernment tends towards disobedience, and community discernment towards obedience. That is why it is important that TSSF focuses on its main purposes and ensures that novices are aware of what they are undertaking when they seek to join the Third Order. Equally, there is a need for on-going common discernment and formation among all tertiaries that can only be properly undertaken in community. The 'my' in Franciscanism has to be replaced by the 'our'. Being elected to profession is a statement of communal obedience, both on the part of the Society and of the individual. It is only by constantly engaging in the life of the community that the vocation can be lived out in the Christ-like way as Franciscans would wish in obedience.

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