

TSSF Study and Prayer

Alnmouth study week: 3rd-7th October 2011

Those who read the “Little Flowers” nowadays may well be perplexed, partly by the miraculous stories but also that Francis’ followers apparently found joy in extremes of adversity. In “The Little Flowers in historical context 1226-1325”, Hugh Beach opened this year’s Franciscan study week with helpful elucidation. Within a short time of Francis’ death the order experienced an acrimonious schism. Original friars, such as the Ancona group who produced “The Three Companions”, held to his austere view of the mendicant life of poverty. Others, more pragmatic, believed they should accommodate the cultural life of the time, entering the universities and building basilica. The new power structure of more sophisticated men marginalised the first friars.

Their split was crystallised in the dispute over Christ’s poverty in which the pure views of Francis about the order’s own poverty threatened the worldly papal authorities so severely they were condemned as heresy! This led to the Order being instructed by the Pope to own possessions and property, the most rigorous who refused being punished and even burned. It was this group of ostracised friars who produced a collection of stories, preserving the early tradition but also preparing their brothers to endure hard treatment or even martyrdom - and inviting them to rejoice in it. With Hugh’s help, some of us began to understand better the strange Franciscan notion of “perfect joy” which is first found in the “Little Flowers”.

One way to make sense of miraculous accounts is to distinguish the contemporary, rational idea of truth from the intuitive kind conveyed through the story genre. In “Francis and stories”, Caroline Ugbo reflected not just on the power of stories and rituals to capture experience and shared traditions, but also their near universal acceptance until recent times. Stories are communal and depend as much on their audience as their teller, and the Gospels are a good example. Constructed to convey what the writers thought most important about Jesus’ collective impact, the surprise may not be that some historical details are inaccurate but that so many prove reliable. It’s the New Testament’s vivid portrayal of “essential truth” that has led it to be described as “true fiction”, and in that sense a template for many subsequent folk traditions including of course those concerning Francis and other saints. We were reminded that the stories about Francis, read daily in the friary refectory, can still inform our personal Franciscan journeys.

With “Dehumanising Poverty” we jumped far forward to the August riots as Vic Vivien reflected on the destructive effects of both poverty and wealth. He started with the recognition that while poverty freely chosen can be spiritually valuable, involuntary poverty is demeaning. It can reduce the poorest to abject humiliation: unchosen poverty should never be idealised. However if this was familiar, Vic moved on to an ironic reflection on what he called “*DuW*” (dehumanising undeserved wealth). We heard about “*DuW-bank*” (rich bankers apparently unaware of their effect on others lives); “*DuW-parl*” (the

behaviour of MPs similarly estranged from the expectations of their constituents). Vic was now observing new versions such as “*DuW-olymp*” (the inflationary effect on house and ticket prices of the 2012 Olympics). The concept of (un)deservingness predictably provoked mixed reactions, but we gradually realised that Vic was teasing us. His conclusion though was wholly serious. In a society increasingly dehumanised by its addiction to materialism and widening inequality, some of us choose a different lifestyle and can act as “antibodies” of humility, love and joy.

On Tuesday morning we were pleased to be joined by Br Desmond Alban and four SSF postulants for Helen Hood’s investigation of “Franciscan approaches to Islam”. If as Franciscans we have a primary vocation in the C21st it may well be to engage in respectful dialogue with Muslim communities, taking Francis’ encounter with the Sultan as our ethical template. Helen had read widely among accounts of just these efforts today, greatly needed in the light of the Islamophobia that followed 9/11. Helen suggested that an understanding of Francis’ motives for meeting the Sultan could help us in such ventures, and considered various views: that he wished to convert the Sultan, or die a martyr, or that he simply wanted to show the true and peaceful nature of Christianity. Concluding that although Francis made his approach in a spirit of mutual respect, that the Sultan graciously reciprocated, he nevertheless hoped to convert the Sultan to the ‘true faith’, Helen admitted to her own ambivalence between honouring the beliefs of Muslims and bringing them the Good News of Christ. She invited us, in small groups, to share our personal experience of relating to Muslims, and what “to make our Lord known and loved everywhere” means to each of us in this context.

In “Franciscan service to a damaged world”, Margaret Field explored what it would be like to respond to the chaos and unfairness of the world around us in an authentically Franciscan and so Christ-following way. Margaret pointed us to two remarkable texts that portray Jesus as a good shepherd and as washing the feet of his disciples (John 10 vv 11-18, and 13 vv 2-17). She invited us to discuss the sense of shock and disbelief these should still evoke. Certainly in the C1st a master taking the role of servant would have been a scandal. In small groups we noticed how significant it is that Christ discarded his earthly status of rabbi as he approached his death, and that he extended his profound gesture of hospitality as much to Judas, his nemesis, as to the others he loved. We identified the counter-cultural nature of “servanthood leadership” and thought how much all of us can learn from meditation on these two gospel stories. Might TSSF, and individual tertiaries, dare to act as Jesus did in “*laying aside and taking up*” within the deep love of God? This requires us to recognize the hold on us of all things which separate individuals from each other, and to have the courage to replace this with Christ’s sacrificial love and service to all.

To vary the mix, Lesley Anne di Marco introduced a creative exercise producing “The Mandala”. This ancient design, usually based on concentric circles around a central symbol, is found in many cultural traditions and is often thought to represent the “circle of life”. We find it clearly in Hindu and Christian formulations but also, among others, in Navaho and Buddhist sand

paintings and the child's kaleidoscope. The psychoanalyst Carl Jung saw the mandalas drawn by himself and his patients as a potent route to self and soul. Our own efforts are shown below, but they didn't come easily into being. Lesley Anne commented that, like stories that don't belong to any one individual, these separate images were the result of a group working and learning together, encouraging and affirming each other as the mandalas emerged.



Most of our study events have benefited from a non-TSSF guest and this year we were grateful to Gavin Wakefield for giving us a trenchant, well illustrated account of the real nature of 6th-7th Irish / Northumbrian Christianity. His presentation was complemented by Fran Wakefield TSSF who identified the parallels with our own heritage in "Creation, Cross and Peregrination: shared themes in the Irish and Franciscan Traditions". Gavin questioned the comforting modern myth of a warm, ecologically sound so-called "Celtic Christianity", and also the assumption that it had any identifiable direct effect on Francis himself. Instead he offered us three key themes which, for all that, have intriguing later echoes in our own tradition.

With "Creation and Cross", Gavin stressed that while Irish spirituality of the time was certainly intimate with nature its meaning was discerned through scripture, and particularly Christ's sacrifice (so in the phrase "Celtic cross", both words matter!). "Community and Solitude" picked up a need for balance

that's shown in both the traditions, and which now finds contemporary expression in the phrase "action and contemplation". "Wandering (*peregrinatio* / *pilgrimage*) and Stability" suggested a similar important tension. We thought about the SSF postulants we had met, moving from one temporary stability to another between the First Order's houses.

The last theme recurred when Nina Brown gave up-to-date advice on making a "Pilgrimage to Assisi on a budget" (she spoke with authority, having only returned a week previously). Whereas some organised tours are expensive, Nina outlined a three-day visit that could cost under £300 and be both enjoyable and spiritually sustaining. As well as advice on flights, monastery websites, places to stay and how to eat economically in Assisi, she also suggested an itinerary that would take in the main Franciscan sites in the city and included suggestions about spiritual reflection at each place. When Nina's notes are ready we hope to turn them into a printable leaflet that will fit easily into a budget-conscious pilgrim's rucksack.

Invoking a broader sense of pilgrimage, John Wiltshire introduced "Stages of life; stages of faith: models of the faith journey". Although such models are at first glance not well-known, we found ourselves aware for example that Carl Jung's two life stages (first doing, then being) stand behind Richard Rohr's "two stages of life", which are well-known to some of us. John introduced a representative six-stage model, Hagberg and Guelich's "The Critical Journey". The first stages typically draw on external factors from a chosen tradition (a person; a book; church customs) and lead through a period of "learning and belonging" to long-term commitment within a faith community.

However the later journey often begins with an interior trauma and a resulting disruption of conventional religiosity that can nonetheless lead the individual to a more mature faith. Drawing on more confident personal meanings, the later stages can involve greater self-acceptance and acceptance of others, less need for religious customs but also tolerance of those who give them priority. Commitment to the essence of the tradition may actually become deeper, but it may be exhibited less conventionally. Later life spirituality that takes this path is not predictable or tidily organised, hence the metaphor of "peregrinatio" for what we could more simply title "personal journeys". In a few cases, like Francis, they can end in what we call sainthood.

From looking at personal journeys in general terms we moved to specifics as Maria Fox shared her own experiences in "The challenges of being an Area Novice Guardian". Despite many years as a psychotherapist, and latterly a novice guardian, Maria approached the ANG role with some apprehension. Exercising a ministry to enquirers, postulants, novices and also to their novice guardians, she had found the work demanding. Despite that, engaging with newcomers to discuss their private journeys in confidence had proved to be a great privilege.

As well as listener, advisor and encourager the ANG acts as a gatekeeper to TSSF, trying to discern whether a progress to profession would be right both for a novice and for the order. Maria also has to support novice guardians

while recognising that not all tertiaries, nor indeed some active NGs, are able to do the job well. Inevitably the theme of unique journeys was again relevant. As well as many satisfactions Maria had found the order on certain occasions to be too rule-bound, such as when a dying tertiary was denied the fast-tracked profession she longed for or in the refusal of novicings or professions at Francistide. Maria's ministry was clearly vital. We were left with the image of her "meeting and eating" with the strangers she encounters on the spiritual road.

We began our week addressing two competing early visions of Franciscanism. John Fox concluded it by revisiting the most significant and most consultative re-appraisal and change of direction in TSSF's history in "Reflections on the TSSF Provincial Review 1998/99". The Review inaugurated our current local group / area / Chapter arrangements, but also clarified the vision, encompassed in the Principles, of nurturing the soul of the order. It committed us to: nurturing tertiaries (now "lifelong formation"); building a TSSF community; self-confident local leadership; attracting new, younger, members; ecumenism; encouraging new initiatives; continuous review. The study group recognised some of the difficulties that still need to be managed within the structure, for instance an uncertainty between the various structures about the expectations of each. The group also acknowledged the real desire by all office holders to offer servanthood leadership following Francis' example.

All of the review recommendations were fully agreed, so they still apply, but it seems that only some parts of the Review have been implemented. Perhaps most importantly the order was to change from a "pyramid" form (a conventional organisational hierarchy, with Chapter handing down instructions), to a "wheel". In the wheel approach communication and ideas should flow in both directions between partly autonomous areas on the rim and a light-touch Chapter in the centre, encouraging a variety of initiatives such as JPIC, Study and Prayer and more besides within a framework of interdependency.

Several observations were made regarding the outcome of the review and the continuing interest by tertiaries in an open and consultative TSSF that would further encourage nurture and innovation. It was also recognised that those entering the Order since the review would not be aware of its intention and that it would be beneficial to re-visit it, as originally intended, to encourage continued growth and development.

We ended our study week on this note. Once again the daily friary liturgy enabled us to pray as well as to study. It was a delight for us to be at Alnmouth for Francistide, especially for the festal mass, and to share it with the friary community. We owe them many thanks, and wish the four postulants well. As always we made many connections within our discussions, some of them unexpected. There were so many, in fact, that a post-Compline trip to the "Hope and Anchor" was required so that we could continue digesting them.

Participants at the 2011 Alnmouth study week

(* first time attenders)

Hugh Beach		West London
Nina Brown		East Anglia
Lesley Anne Di Marco		Sussex
Margaret Field		Newcastle
John Fox		Southend
Maria Fox		Southend
Graham Gee	*	Wessex
Helen Hood		Edinburgh
Caroline Ugbo	*	Leeds
Vic Vivian		Nottingham
Fran Wakefield	*	Yorkshire
Gavin Wakefield (guest)	*	Yorkshire
John Wiltshire		East London
Denise Yeldham	*	West London

Do contact our coordinator, Lesley Anne Di Marco, with any queries, suggestions or offers of help with TSSF Study and Prayer.

Lesley Anne is available at:

mizlesley@hotmail.com

To book a place on the 2012 study week (1st - 5th October) please contact Lesley Anne as above. NB: initially we reserve half the places on the annual study week for newcomers and first time returners.

“All study is the study of God”