

Alnmouth Study Week 2009

Can Third Order community life be expressed by living together?

It is commonplace for us to speak of TSSF as a community. On Tuesday evening this week Avril Landay will help us reflect on some of the issues facing us as a dispersed religious community, a definition which it will be interesting to explore and perhaps qualify but which is surely basically right. After all, Francis established the Third Order at Cannara in 1221 precisely because he saw that if its men and women simply abandoned family and civic responsibilities and decamped to follow his Rule, their zealotry was bound to disrupt and could even destroy that local community. It was a revolutionary move, but also a thoroughly sensible and pragmatic one, to establish a dispersed penitential community instead, under vows but fully "in the world".

This has continued to be the basic model for Franciscan orders such as our own and the RC Secular Franciscan Order. Indeed it is sometimes suggested that tertiaries should never consider establishing any closer form of community, such as experiments in shared life together in a single location, because that is foreign to the nature of TSSF. However, to the extent that we endorse that nature (i.e. *dispersal*, rather than physically *living together*) as the fundamental mode of TSSF association, we will also want to interrogate closely the distinctive nature of our community life as an order. Avril has done us a service in raising those questions in principle, while it will be interesting to see what Denise Mumford's MA research tells us about the actual practice of community life in TSSF. This coda to those presentations simply asks two questions:

- (a) how unproblematic is our normal concept of TSSF community?
- (b) should we encourage some, probably small-scale and firmly finite, initiatives in living together within TSSF?

Interestingly and perhaps teasingly, our TSSF Rule originated in a physically proximate community of shared life (the Christe Seva Sangha ashram), but one that nonetheless had as many third order characteristics as first order or broadly monastic ones. In her study of SSF (1), Peta Dunstan writes:

"The crucial impetus....was provided by a *first order community* but not in Britain. It was to come from India and the Christa Seva Sangha, a community which eventually settled at Poona (now Pune) and which contained both Indian and English members. From its inception, it had envisaged linking different cultural and racial groups, but it also mixed the characteristics of the religious life (eastern and western) with the values of a Christian lay life, whether single or married. Its founder was Jack Copley Winslow. Educated at Balliol College Oxford he was ordained in 1907 In India, he began to gather around him others who shared his vision of a

community living in a Christian Ashram, *men and women, married and unmarried* sharing all their material possessions. After nine months the group was given episcopal sanction on 11 June 1922 on the feast of Saint Barnabas, under the title of Christa Seva Sangha (society of the servants of Christ). There was *no intention to create a Western style monastic life. Rather it was an attempt to explore Christian communal life* in an Indian context."

The *italicised* sections matter: although Dunstan calls this a "first order community", and it was enormously influential on Fr Algy Robertson in his founding of SSF, the ashram was more mixed in gender and marital status than almost all mainstream monastic or friary communities since the Celtic Christian "conhospitae" of the Irish 6th century. Interestingly, it looks as much like a third order experiment in communal living as it does a prototype for a first order friary.

While we are noticing paradoxes, we should also remind ourselves that the first order friary form (as opposed to the monastic, e.g. Benedictine, model), although conventionally contrasted to third order dispersal is itself subject to regular qualification. We know that Francis did not want the early brothers to share houses at all, while the longer history of the friars has always been one of mobility and shallow roots compared to the stability and continuity of the monastery. That is what it has always meant to live as a Franciscan (or a Dominican) friar.

In other words, though, that means in turn that we should be careful about contrasting SSF too starkly with TSSF dispersal, if only because the physical aspect of living together in SSF is provisional and changeable. Indeed, the liberation theologian Leonardo Boff has argued that Francis did not advocate *community* at all, but *fraternity*, which is why his mendicant life made such a radical break from the monastic inheritance. To Boff, Francis's gift was to reveal that we are all brothers and sisters to each other, and not only to humans but to all creatures (note the Canticle). He preached a radical levelling of status in one family under God. Boff sees fraternity as drawing attention to that common dependency on God and revealing our kinship both with human and non-human creation. Community life by contrast is a primarily human innovation. If this is right, then not only TSSF but SSF too should be emphasising association and fraternity rather than fixed physical communities. The flipside, though, is that just as physically proximate residential communities have in practice been fruitful as well as necessary for SSF, it might at least be interesting to wonder whether some additional expressions of TSSF's sense of community could enhance our fraternal life as a dispersed order.

Expressions of TSSF community

Enough theorising. What might all this mean in practice for the Third Order? It would not mean that out of up to 2,000 tertiaries many would start to live in a

wholly different way. It could mean, though, that we notice some small innovations and opportunities more clearly. We could notice:

- that the resident tertiary initiative at Alnmouth has for many been satisfying as an experience of community living, not just as a chance to support SSF;
- that weekend and week-long residential occasions including this study week have a dimension of temporary communal living and are often perceived by participants as deepening engagement in the order through a greater sense of being in community with other tertiaries;
- that TSSF retreats can have a similar character (for example, a London local group uses the large house of one of its members to contain its own annual shared retreat);
- that the current weekly presence at Hilfield Friary in Dorset of a tertiary couple could, in principle, be the seed of a small tertiary community there.

This discussion really only matters if we do something practical about it. So in order to encourage further ideas through communal discussion during this study week, as well as to promote a particular possibility, here is a definite proposal.

Proposal: establish a TSSF presence at the annual Greenbelt Festival, and give it a communal expression

The compatibility of vision of TSSF and of this liberal Christian festival (in its 37th year next August Bank Holiday 2010) is indicated by the fact that SSF has an established encampment there every year. Reflecting SSF's methods, it is the only religious contribution located outside the main festival area and instead within the dense tented community on Cheltenham Racecourse. It offers quiet respite, eucharist and daily offices but also from our point of view a Franciscan focal point within a busy, temporary Christian community. This year we distributed with SSF help flyers for our forthcoming young people's taster weekend at Alnmouth (successfully, too, enabling that venture now to be fully booked).

There is already some discussion about establishing a visible, annual TSSF presence at Greenbelt, almost certainly in some sort of partnership with SSF but displaying our own distinctiveness too. It is a short step to wondering whether tertiaries who provide such a presence could pitch camp in one place, as many parish and other church communities do already. Camping together would be simple, requiring little organisation when time and energy for that would in any case be better allocated to the more visible presence.

In its small way this could give TSSF a significant experience of living more fully together, as well as a shared relevant endeavour to promote our Franciscan

commitment. Its very temporariness too would be consistent with the wider Franciscan tradition, and no threat to the concept of third order dispersal.

References

- 1 "This poor sort: history of the European province of the Society of St Francis" Peta Dunstan DLT 1997
- 2 "Francis of Assisi: a model for human liberation" Leonardo Boff
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