

Study and Prayer (Third Order Studies)

Report on Alnmouth 2009 study week

Not least because they take place in our Franciscan houses and absorb their atmosphere of hospitality and prayer, these study weeks always stimulate reflection on the Franciscan dimension of our lives. This year Peter Dunbar struck this note immediately in his opening meditation on “The Three Notes of the Order: Humility, Love and Joy”. Peter supplied us each with a beautifully produced copy of his material, including three glowing art reproductions. Two of these were luminous Giotto's. If these were relatively familiar the third, on joy, a brown monochrome image by an unknown artist of Francis closely embracing the leper, was startling as well as new. In stark chiaroscuro the leper's mouth is open in a silent, Munchian howl, his fingerless hand bears the unmistakable mark of a nail and in case we remain in any doubt three crosses surmount the hill in the background. We ended our first day firmly reminded of the challenge of our Franciscan vocations.

Anne Campling had been confirmed in childhood by “Bp George Bell: a voice in the wilderness”. Bell was bishop of Chichester, known to most of us for his friendship in the 1930s with Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his lonely opposition to the intensive bombing of German cities at the end of WW2. Anne shared her admiration for the man she remembered as *“the Bish-Chich”*, and for the prophetic public stance that won him few friends at the time but now resonates strongly in our own world of collateral damage and massive force. Bell could be fierce. He kept young clergy firmly in line, while “speaking truth to power” at the highest levels of British society. Thanks to Anne we met the private man as well. In the wood-panelled friary library it was easy to imagine an elderly bishop presiding over his annual Christmas party, leaning against the big palace fireplace with a slight smile on his face as the local children dance by.

Pursuing themes she had introduced at Study and Prayer's weekend event in May on the work of Fr Richard Rohr OFM, Nell Slocock presented Rohr's ideas about “Mutual Indwelling and the Eucharist”. Indwelling (the constant presence of the Holy Spirit within us, something already given so not needing to be won by effort or merit) is a key theme for Rohr. Nell emphasised references in the Gospel accounts of the Last Supper to *“giving thanks”*, and Rohr's preference for a translation of Matthew 5:48 proposing not that we *“must therefore be perfect, as your heavenly Father is”*, but rather: *“Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God has lived toward you.”*

Rohr would have us view the eucharist as an opportunity to do the same as Christ: to live generously, graciously and sacrificially, not just to thank God for doing so on our behalf. He reminds us that this daily *“eucharistic living”* is just as important as the ceremony at the heart of Christian life. Rohr's ideas weren't easy to unpack, but it was moving to go directly from discussing the eucharist to

its daily celebration in the friary chapel. Indeed, we call our activities “Study and Prayer” for precisely this reason.

This year several presentations addressed the character of TSSF as a community, the place for shared activity within the Order and the vital need to introduce young people to the Franciscan way. First Avril Landay in a paper on “Making Community” challenged us to display more vigorous self-confidence as a religious community, by wearing our profession crosses openly for example but also by making ourselves more prominent both as Franciscans and as members of parish churches. Avril questioned the validity today of the original tertiary tradition of “*hiddenness*”. Teasingly, she asked us whether we use the familiar encouragement by Francis to preach the gospel “*if necessary, using words*” as an excuse for bashfulness about our Christian commitment! Lastly Avril urged us to draw people, including those from other traditions, more actively into the worship and fellowship of our families and church and TSSF communities.

In asking “Can Third Order community life be expressed by living together?” John Wiltshire wondered whether tertiaries typically do enough together to amount to a “community” in a developed sense. Although the characteristic mode of TSSF life is of course dispersal, unlike the communal life of friaries, convents and monasteries, it’s interesting that the Christe Seva Sangha ashram on which SSF was modelled was so mixed in gender and marital status. It looked as much like a Third Order experiment as a prototype friary. Either way, shared living can deepen fraternity and create a sense of collective identity. Our group was keen on the proposal that TSSF could establish an annual presence at the Greenbelt Festival, addressing both Avril’s plea for greater visibility and also, if those representing us should camp together, trying out some communal living.

Denise Mumford was able to put these ideas into a wider perspective, recently having conducted systematic research into TSSF for her MA dissertation. She emphasised the order’s penitent roots in order to stress the wider meaning of *penance* as a continuous process of conversion within a community. This opened up important formation issues, as did the use of a sociological approach. The Third Order seems to fall between two types: the “intentional community” (in which people invest very heavily in the values and requirements of their group, and have strong ties to it) and the “association” (constructed on weaker ties and with correspondingly greater involvement in the surrounding society).

It’s not remarkable that an order very much “*in the world*” should find itself with a foot in each camp, nor that tertiaries should have different preferences and indeed needs along with their differing levels of involvement. Perhaps it’s also unsurprising that Denise’s questionnaires unearthed not only much commitment to TSSF, but also an element of dissatisfaction needing to be addressed thoughtfully. This she suggested should involve further work on *lifelong formation*, with particular support for the Order’s leaders, and could be helped by a *re-founding project* to review our Rule in the context of C21st living.

The C21st often perplexes those of a certain age. If Hugh Beach's exploration of "Generation X, St Francis and the Third Order" underlined Francis' continuing relevance, the psychological distance it indicated between most of us and many now aged between 25-50 seemed daunting. Since that is the cadre from which religious orders hope to recruit, the pragmatic and apparently even amoral attitudes of the "X-ers" towards honesty, integrity, education and sexual morality can only be seen as problematic. Their typical distaste for authority figures and for joining organisations hardly suggests a tendency to obedience! Despite this Hugh found X-ers to be impressed by authenticity both in individual experience and in relationships, much less than worldly and indeed "*born mystics*" even though not conventionally religious. The parallels here with the young Francis were tantalising, but Hugh's paper also suggested the need for some sustained reflection in TSSF about the longer-term future of our order.

Julie Kimber was experienced in working with young people, and in the process of establishing a specifically Franciscan youth group. Her paper introduced us to the principles and models of community and youth work, leading to "A Franciscan model aimed at young people". Although their lives today seem a constant clamour of information and cultural noise, Julie found a slow barge trip through the countryside with a group of young ones, although initiated with some apprehension, to be a revelation. They spoke of their wonder at creation in tones similar to the great Canticle, experiencing a kind of "*holy leisure*" and recognising their need of it. Julie offered a valuable checklist of practical ideas for Franciscan youth work, emphasising the importance of communicating relevantly but also the core Franciscan values of worship, love of the poor and green concerns. Her enthusiasm enthused the rest of us, eliciting offers of support for future TSSF ventures with young people and much interest in an imminent example - the Franciscan taster weekend shortly to follow at Alnmouth Friary.

Michael Campling gave us both welcome leisure and a reminder of our own younger days via "A debt to C.S Lewis". This was a late night reading from his favourite novels, Lewis's theological science fiction trilogy. While Michael read from "Out of the Silent Planet" we sat absorbed as the significantly-named hero, Ransom, struggles to grasp where he is being held prisoner, finally realising he is aboard a space ship. Written in the 1930s, before the emergence of modern science fiction in the shadow of the H-bomb, Lewis's style was reminiscent of the originators of that genre, H G Wells and Jules Verne. It also recalled the irreplaceable pleasure of being read to by a grown-up before bedtime!

On Thursday morning our theme changed to the current economic crisis. Margaret Field took us back to scriptural roots with "1 Timothy 5: a pattern for mission in a time of economic crisis". This reading speaks in homely terms of the importance of appreciation, fairness, impartiality, caution and discernment. All are salutary within a society that naively saw debt as a benign engine of economic growth, not requiring reasonable precautions even for the financially

fortunate let alone to safeguard the disadvantaged. Other key themes within a short scripture include accepting menial, unglamorous tasks as part of communal service and the special importance of discernment in economically difficult times. Margaret showed how *“extravagant and reckless actions by some have wreaked havoc on many.”* We all need to hear this ancient Christian call to personal integrity as a building block for collective health.

The Timothy text started from the local and domestic. Vic Vivian drew on biblical sources too, but also on his international perspective as a marine chaplain in “A Franciscan response to the economic crisis”. Vic noted how the indigenous people of the earth lived nomadic lives in harmony with their surroundings, *“God’s boundaries”*, whereas each advance in modes of travel eroded natural limits and expanded the scope for stronger groups to colonise and exploit others. *“The earth was no longer the Lord’s, but a commodity that could be lost at cards, traded for a wife..or used as a bartering tool in some alliance.”* Now the power of PCs surpasses all this, and *“a humble computer technician could wreak havoc on the world and bring nations to their knees without leaving his bedroom”*. Yet almost all of us largely buy into the dominant culture that generates these extremes.

The scope here is global and the scale such that many people respond as in Kubler-Ross’s psychological model of stages of denial, as if bereaved of earlier certainties. However the same biblical precepts that Margaret had underlined should structure our response: fundamentally, that recognition of the poor and vulnerable that Vic had seen the Taize community, SSF and others show in Africa. Unless we return to these moral roots, we merely continue to *“trail our sins behind us”*. All agreed this topic could hardly be more appropriate for Franciscan reflection. We looked forward next to a related Study and Prayer-supported initiative, John Fox’s forthcoming paper on “Franciscans and Money” based on a study day in September.

Our final paper, “Br Ramon SSF and Franciscan spirituality”, was delivered by David Swain. David had established “Study and Prayer” within TSSF and was now to retire from its steering group after many years of commitment. He stressed that Franciscan spirituality is not systematic - to some tertiaries, confusingly. Despite that he identified five “marks” of our spirituality: penitence; practising the presence of God in prayer and action; celebrating his real presence in eucharist and in the world; working for justice and peace; openness to personal development. David wanted these to be treated flexibly and with discernment: not laid down as dogma, but meriting discussion. We expressed our thanks to him for his inspiration in making this and other study weeks possible.

We also owe appreciation to the friary community, led by Br Alan Michael, who once again worked hard to provide us with Franciscan hospitality, including Br Peter who contributed to two of our sessions. We are very grateful to them.

Participants at the 2009 Alnmouth study week

(* first time attenders)

Hugh Beach		West London
Nina Brown		East Anglia
Anne Campling	*	Oxford
Michael Campling	*	Oxford
Peter Dunbar		West Yorkshire
Margaret Field		Newcastle
Julie Kimber	*	Somerset
Avril Landay	*	Scotland
Denise Mumford	*	South London
Nell Slocock		Oxford
David Swain		Oxford
Vic Vivian		Nottingham
John Wiltshire	:	East London

*Do contact our coordinator, John Wiltshire, with any queries, suggestions or offers of help with "Study and Prayer" (Third Order Studies). John is available at:
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"All study is the study of God"