

Study and Prayer (Third Order Studies)

Report on Alnmouth 2008 study week

The ten study papers are available at http://orders.anglican.org/tssf/Members/TSSF_Studies.html

This year's study week was both familiar and new. The peace and spirituality of Alnmouth Friary, the mix of discussion, rest and worship and the cold beauty of the Northumberland coast in autumn - these were familiar, and welcome for it. However it was also our first taste of hospitality from the new First Order community led by Br Alan Michael. We thank them for supporting us, and for the small number of well-judged changes they have introduced such as the reconfigured chapel. As always we benefited from our five days of living in Franciscan Christian community.

In the encouraging ambience of the friary library Peter Dunbar began our studies with a paper, "The spirituality of St Cuthbert", about his favourite saint and the towering figure of Northern Christianity. Peter soon dispelled the haze of romanticism that sometimes surrounds the Celtic tradition. Cuthbert lived robustly and austerely in a hard landscape. He was repeatedly the focus of remarkable miracles. His heroic prayer life, fasting and solitude were hard to emulate, yet he was loved by ordinary people because he was straightforward and warm. He plainly radiated God's love. Even if we set aside the cosier Celtic bird and beast themes there were compelling pre-echoes of Franciscan spirituality in what Peter taught us. That surely suggests scope for a future study week paper.

Hilary Pearson drew on her doctoral research on the life of a C15th Spanish nun to ask "Is there tension between the First and Second Aims?" When evangelism becomes imposition by the powerful, making our Lord known and loved everywhere can work precisely against the aim of breaking down barriers and seeking equality for all. Hilary described the efforts of Franciscans (and Dominicans) to convert the large Jewish community in Spain that had previously been broadly tolerated and well-integrated under the Moors. The Spanish Franciscans' purpose was ostensibly theological and evangelical. However the resulting programme of compulsory sermons and disputations, and the alleged discovery of heresy in rabbinical writings that led to more forced baptisms and expulsions, added up to a regrettable episode in Franciscan history. The lessons for contemporary inter-faith encounters were clear. We will not be thanked by others for giving the First Aim too much priority over the Second.

John Whitwell rescued us from these salutary reflections through the comic dimension of "Francis the Holy Fool". He began by recalling the comedians who had been important to him: the Crazy Gang; ITMA; later, Morecambe and Wise. This was a dose of nostalgia for those of a certain age, but John's topic was intriguing as well as enjoyable. He was aligning the linked but separate

Franciscan ideas of joy and foolishness while exploring the comic side of each. The Holy Fool has no false dignity: God is more important to him than his ego. The strange Franciscan notion of joy shares the same character. It transcends the ego and the conventionally gratifying. Similarly we found that our own favourite comedians typically make fun of themselves, not of others, suggesting a kind of selflessness. Consistent with his theme John prompted a good deal of laughter, that essential ingredient of the abundant life God wills.

Discerning that will was then the subject of Beryl Warren's reflections on prayer. Her title, "God Calling (Is He?)", was teasing. How do we spot in ourselves a god-led vocation, distinguishing it successfully from a cleverly disguised but merely human want? Or is that too polarised a distinction since God works mysteriously, not only via the Holy Spirit but also through our experience of other people? Certainly others can assist our discernment. Beryl knew the life of intense prayer better than most. Here she called us to recognise the constancy of God's call, but also to acknowledge the discerning role of others. The Church should be where we discover ourselves. This was a message about the need for balance in the face of mystery. Beryl concluded: "*We are significant in our uniqueness, yet at the same time insignificant because we are a miniscule part of the ongoing mystery.*"

A TSSF working group commissioned by Provincial Chapter to review obedience within the order had already made good use of David Swain's Alnmouth 2007 paper on the subject. This year John Wiltshire made another contribution via Study and Prayer, "Obedience - is TSSF a place for growth". He distinguished "obedience" from individual conformity to rules and questioned how helpful the word is in the 21st. Surely we should emphasise our collective responsibility to sustain the order, through mutual care and courtesy, more than a judgemental attitude to other tertiaries? Drawing on Richard Rohr's distinction between the first and second halves of life, John asked whether TSSF is becoming a mature, discerning community. Should we, as Paul Bodenham has suggested, create an official space for discernment that may sometimes assist those who appear on the surface to be "disobedient"? For the first time, we benefited from a SSF brother joining a study session. Encouragingly, Br. Martin told us that First Order thinking on obedience ran on some similar tracks.

More precedents: Margaret Field also joined us for Wednesday morning's session (our first day visitor) while Ann Leigh's thoughts on "Francis's Rule for Hermitages" commenced a run of midweek contributions from some of us not only new to a study week (that also included John and Ann Whitwell, and Hilary Pearson), but also coming from different Christian traditions. Ann's attitude to silent retreats was challenging. Living alone she has much access to silence and so on retreat needs a different spirituality that balances solitude with community (just as Francis's companions - the "mothers and sons" - would alternate the roles of contemplative and supporter). Ann saw a link with the foregoing obedience discussion: a "one size fits all" order will not maximise growth in the

second half of life. So a quiet hermitage is not for everyone while TSSF can, and does, cater for solitaries. Again, balance and discernment were our themes - community and solitude; action and contemplation; interaction and silence; justice and peace, and personal devotion.

Of those dualities, Nell Slocock explored "Action and Contemplation: from St Francis to Richard Rohr". Just as Francis once asked Clare which of these two paths he should follow, and then proceeded to encompass both, many spiritual teachers have explored the interdependence of doing and being. Nell quoted St Theresa of Avila, the Benedictine John Main, TS Eliot, and the Jesuit William Johnstone. If those quotations mostly explored the contemplative angle and the submergence of the self that it facilitates, this echoed the work of the contemporary Franciscan Richard Rohr and his "Centre for Action and Contemplation" in New Mexico. Rohr found that much time was needed to teach contemplation at the CAC if it was to release energy for social and political action on behalf of the dispossessed. There was far more to be said here than Nell could easily have covered, which is why we have organised a Study and Prayer weekend on the writings of Richard Rohr at Freeland Convent in May 2009.

In an ecumenical development, we were joined for the week by Ursula Mott SFO. That alone linked us to the much larger international RC Franciscan family but Ursula's paper, "From Order of Penance to Secular Franciscan Order", further explained how SFO is currently evolving and indeed susceptible to closer links with TSSF. Although a Third Order existed from the end of the C13th, it was never a popular name. In 1883 Leo XIII introduced a new Rule designed to attract as many people as possible, thinking this would once again help to reform the church. However the longer view now is that this Rule not only diluted the Franciscan character of the order, but also any real sense that it was a separate order at all. It became a broad and diffuse, prayerful association within the church. Following Vatican 2, only since 1978 has SFO been an autonomous, and distinctively Franciscan, order. Ursula told us that this is still falling into place - hence in one sense the timeliness of her visit to Alnmouth, and the current scope for mutual support and encouragement between our two orders.

We had opened up a Roman Catholic connection. Sandy White then balanced it with a Protestant evangelical take on Francis's universal appeal, "Francis - a Saint for all People". Do most of us notice, in our roughly Anglo-Catholic way, that Francis fits so comfortably into the expectations of another tradition? Sandy reminded us that he would have been at home with the evangelical emphasis on conversion. His own was a classic of its sort - think of the old chorus: "*I've decided to follow Jesus – no turning back, no turning back!*". Similarly Francis would have had no trouble with a literalist evangelical approach to scripture, while some of today's so-called "*happy-clappy*" ones might understand our own notion of Franciscan "joy" better than we do ourselves. Lastly Francis could have identified closely with a concentration on the cross although many evangelicals would shrink from his extreme attachment, and from the ensuing stigmata. Sandy

hinted gently that we could have broader Franciscan horizons than we sometimes do.

This year's keynote address, "St Francis and the Popes", was delivered on our last evening. A veteran TSSF author, Hugh Beach judiciously ignored the suggested page limit and treated us to a magisterial survey of Francis's relationships with the popes of his time. Hugh noted how severely in need C12th clergy were of improvement (drunkenness; gluttony; impiety) and did justice to reforming movements such as the Poor Men of Lyons, the Humiliati of Verona and especially Joachim of Fiore. Many of their aspirations were similar, but it was Francis whose influence lasted. Hugh's thesis was that this reflected not only his extraordinary personal qualities but also, more strategically, that Francis achieved a papal accommodation. It benefited the church and mandated the Franciscans, but did not - at first - privilege them. Hugh also thought this alliance was as much attributable to the wisdom of Innocent III ("*the most powerful man in the world*") as to Francis, but that successive Franciscan leaders and popes including Br Elias and Cardinal Ugolino (later Gregory IXth) betrayed its possibilities. We ended our week wondering with Hugh, after the theologian Hans Kung, how the church and world might be now if Innocent with Francis's aid had radically reformed the church along true gospel lines.

So, that was our Alnmouth 2008 study week. It was a varied mix, but as always the unplanned connections between our discussions ("God-incidences", as they've become known) persisted. We were sorry that both Avril Landay and David Swain had had to withdraw at a late stage through serious illness, but delighted that Ann Leigh and Ursula Mott could join us instead and at even shorter notice. In 2008 more than half were "freshers" at the annual TSSF study week. "Study and Prayer" is clearly becoming well known.

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:
020 8527 5148 katherine.wiltshire1@ntlworld.com

To book a place on the 2009 study week please contact Nell Slocock, who is at:
01865 762291 nell.slocock@gpmd.net

"All study is the study of God"