

THE AMERICAN CENTENNIAL CONVOCATION

held at

St. Anne's Retreat House, Melbourne, Kentucky, USA

Great fire work displays seem to go on forever, full of colour, noise, and surprises punctuated with periods of silent expectation. They have to be planned carefully, take an eternity to organise and are over almost before they have begun but they are never forgotten.

This was my experience of the American Province's Centennial Celebrations, a gathering together of tertiaries from the United States, Canada, Brazil, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Guyana, Trinidad and Nevis. (Those from Cuba were unable to attend because they were refused USA visas but more on that later.)

Many dialects, accents and languages, coming together in laughter and song, music and dance, sermons, films, books, workshops, crossword puzzles, shared meals, stories and small groups meeting to look into the future, all bound together with prayer and the centrality of the Eucharist each day.



It was an extraordinary week allowing Franciscan principles to flower so joyously amongst people from different backgrounds and cultures, making friendships that will last a lifetime and made possible with the meticulous organisation of a dedicated group of Tertiaries led by Beverly Hosea.

Our days started with Morning Prayer at 7 am, followed by breakfast in the refectory, a Eucharist in the afternoon, In the chapel, ending with Compline at 8.45 pm and followed by a time of fellowship for those who had the stamina to see the day out with jokes, stories, general chat and a drink or two or three in the aptly named Galilee Room.



The first day, Tuesday, started with registration in the afternoon and then after dinner there were introductions, orientation and a getting acquainted fellowship hour that went on into the night!

Each country, including the European Province, were invited to introduce themselves

On behalf of Jamie Hacker Hughes, our newly appointed Provincial Minister, who would very much liked to have been present but felt that his place, the week after his commissioning, had to be in Europe, asked me to deliver his missive from the European Province.



The following morning, Wednesday, started with a keynote address from Father Murray Bodo of the Order of the Friars Minor, Cincinnati.

We had been asked to read his latest book 'Francis and Christ' to help us focus on the purpose of the Convocation.

It was a brilliant talk full of wit and deep insights which set the tone for the rest of the week.



The central focus of the convocation (the absolute heart of both the European and American Convocations)

Preparation for discussion groups followed each day when we separated into fourteen small groups to discuss:

1. 'The call for transformation in the church and TSSF'
2. 'Birth pangs of personally experiencing God's liberating call to the Church and the World'
3. 'How we can work together to create God's new kingdom of grace, compassion and justice'.

What was fascinating was how the distillation of these sessions seemed to mirror our own process of discernment at our recent European Convocation where we agreed to pursue the themes to:

Enhance the energy that arose across the Province through the Convocation process which needs to be captured and taken forward so that we recover our distinctiveness and **prophetic edge**.

1. **Impact:** To make an impact on the church and the world through our **distinctiveness**.
2. **Depth:** To attend in depth to **ongoing formation**, our distinctive Franciscan spirituality and discipleship, from profession onwards.
3. **JPIC:** To ensure that JPIC plays a **key** role, individually and sometimes collectively working in the ecumenical and interfaith arenas.
4. **Growth:** To encourage growth in numbers, depth and engagement, retaining established members and attracting **young members**.
5. **Structure:** to ensure that structure must be in the service of mission and that we **continually strive for simplicity** in every area of the Order's life.

Below I have listed a condensed version of the deliberations that came out of the Convocation of the Province of the Americas and put in bold brackets where our Convocations almost exactly mirrored each other in their thoughts.

The Province of the Americas distilled their discussions down to:

Pray and Show Up: prophetic action (prophetic edge) comes out of 'Prayer and Contemplation' which is a neat way of saying '(**Enhance the Energy**)'.

1. **Impact:** The church is for others. We need to remember how the gospel makes us **different (distinctive)** from society. The church has become too comfortable with being a part of society. Its task is to be different. The Earth is our cloister. We have to get better at using technology for fellowship, mission and formation and to ensure our internet presence is alive. (Suggestion that people use TSSF as a signature on emails and hyperlink it to the website; use visibility in terms of t-shirts, wearing Franciscan symbols etc. so people might ask us who we are.)
2. **Depth:** We must **continue formation (ongoing formation)**. Nourishment is the key. We have to "Dance with what we've got". We have to be willing to put ourselves out there and let the Holy Spirit take care of the rest, moving beyond what is comfortable. We must make time for prayer. We must be intentional about our connections to each other and our "Senior Saints" who are a constant source of encouragement and knowledge.
3. **JPIC:** Our relationship to creation is **key (key role)**, not relationship as in caretakers, but our relationship as kin to creation.
4. **Growth: Young adults (young members)** today use technology. Young people sometimes feel like strangers in their churches. They are looking for traditions, but they need us to be genuine about who we are... they want to be involved with communities that are working for the poor and disenfranchised. They don't want us to be 'cool'. They want us to be

honest. We need to allow them to work alongside us whether they want to enter formation or not. We need to provide engaging work for young people.

5. **Structure:** The Aims and Notes of the order are our identity, our Principles unite us. Our order/structure will come out of the chaos of new beginnings. We talked in chapter about throwing open fellowship meetings to anyone who wanted to work with us. We need structure (formation, fellowship, etc.), but we don't want the structure to impede the Spirit's work. **Our processes shouldn't be overwhelming (continually strive for simplicity)**, but should help guide and encourage us to find balance. Back to basics: service/prayer/love.

These compared decisions clearly indicate that we are all moving in the same direction and the excitement this **prophetic edge** gives us needs to be enhanced in the **energy to 'pray and show up'**.

In the afternoons and evenings we were invited to attend a number of workshops on themes as diverse as 'Greening', 'Solitude', 'Twelve Step Transformation', 'The film: Finding St Francis', 'Fundraising', 'The Cosmic Web', 'The On-line Lending Library', 'City of Immigrants', 'Heroes of the Third Order', 'Forward Publications', 'The film: The Sultan and the Saint', 'The Role of Animals', 'Transfiguration', 'JPIC', 'Franciscan Music Writing', 'Rumi the Poet', 'Sanctuary', and 'Franciscan Beekeeping'.

Needless to say it was only possible to attend at most six workshops alongside both films. The ones I managed to attend were all excellent providing a wealth of new knowledge and ideas to take into the future.



The poet 'Rumi' workshop

We did have free time which for some was taken up by meetings and for others provided a welcome chance to put our heads down to rest for an hour or so.

The one day that was distinctly different was Friday when a bus tour had been arranged to take us to Cincinnati to visit the Freedom Center and Underground Railroad Museum, Christ Church Cathedral and the site where the Third Order in America started.

The Underground Railroad Museum was a revelation. We were appointed guides who took us round explaining how slaves were transported over the Ohio River across the Mason Dixon line that divided the slave-owning state of Kentucky from the slave-free state of Ohio via freedom trails that led to Canada, Mexico and Florida. This was a dismal period of American history but Britain and other countries were also complicit in the slave trade. The museum reminded us that slavery is still with us today in the form of sex trafficking which is a major problem still to be resolved.



The glass beads represent the number of people who died en route to being sold as slaves

Quilts used for signaling safety

Needing time to process the impact of the museum we went to the Cathedral for a mid-day Eucharist. What immediately struck one on entering this beautiful modern building were the myriad flocks of russet coloured paper birds suspended from the ceiling on invisible wires swirling in patterns down the central nave of the cathedral towards the alter. The next visual treat in this light-bright building were the stained glass windows and then the vast organ set high above the choir stalls started playing. I'm not an enormous fan of organs but the sound emanating from this vast beast was so pure and perfect that it dispelled all my reservations as to the organ's ability to sway the senses. It was magnificent. This was followed by the generous hospitality of the cathedral inviting us to lunch in their crypt.



Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati

This rich tour concluded with our visiting, and paying homage to, the birthplace of the Province of the Americas. Fittingly, for Franciscans, it was in one of the poorest parts of the city with run down tenements and no sign of the church that had once acted as the spur to the American Franciscan Third Order movement.



Laying wreaths where TSSF began in America

Saturday was a gathering together day with plenary sessions, the Centennial Eucharist, celebrations, thanksgivings and special presentations ending in entertainment, compline and then a Galilean party that went on late into the night.



Saturday night presentations

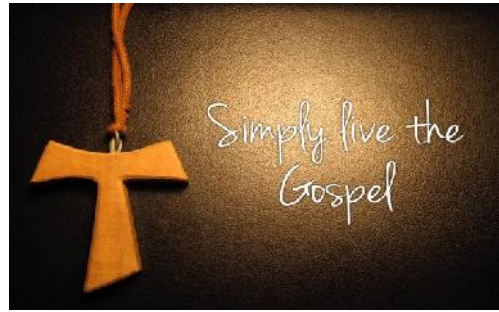


Bishop Rice's sermon

And so to Sunday with the wrap, the final Eucharist and the heart felt goodbyes.

This was indeed a convocation of immeasurable worth where the kingdom of heaven was definitely brought closer to earth.

The only sad note that needs recording is that the two Cuban Tertiaries who wanted to attend the Convocation were prevented from doing so by having their USA Visa applications turned down. Appropriate missives are being sent to the US State Department and various legislators responsible and condolences sent to our Cuban brothers and sisters. We all need to do what we can to reverse this unfortunate and unhappy trend in events.



Finally, on behalf our brothers and sisters in the European Province a huge thank you to everyone in the Americas for including us in your celebrations and the knowledge that we are truly one family committed to making our Lord known and loved everywhere; of treating all creation as our brothers and sisters; and of living simply.

May God richly bless each and every one of you.