

CHASING THE WILD GOOSE
or
A WILD GOOSE CHASE



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Is spirituality for daily living a wild goose chase or is it a question of chasing the wild goose? What do I mean by this?

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines a 'wild goose chase' as 'a foolish and hopeless search for or pursuit of something unattainable'.

The feeling of being involved in a wild goose chase is not an uncommon experience for those who consciously attempt to practise spirituality in their daily lives. But a wild goose chase is not the same thing as chasing the wild goose.

In the Celtic tradition 'the wild goose' is the symbol for the Holy Spirit. The wild goose is an enigmatic creature; once seen, never forgotten; once heard, always remembered; here one moment, gone the next; fond of desolate places and freedom; a romantic figure living a wild life; almost impossible to follow, but once pursued, almost impossible to give up.

Are we on a wild goose chase that will lead us on a journey to nowhere or are we chasing 'the wild goose' that will lead us home? For anyone who has begun the search for spirituality in their daily lives there can be no real doubt that they are searching for their true home; the kingdom of heaven; the pearl of great price; the treasure hid in the field; the mustard seed of life. But it is hard to pursue the kingdom of heaven without sometimes getting lost and bogged down by the weight of worldly affairs.

How can we hold firm to spirituality in our daily lives?

I am a member of the Third Order of the Society of St Francis in the Anglican Communion and I am delighted to write about how Tertiary Franciscans try and maintain a spiritual vocation in their daily lives.

Tertiaries

To begin with I'm sure it will be helpful to explain what being a Tertiary of the Third Order of the Society of St Francis means.

There are within the Society of St Francis three orders: The Brothers and Sisters of the **First Order** live a community life under vows and express their dedication to Christ by outward service to others.

The Sisters of the **Second Order** live under vows and maintain a life of prayer within the enclosure of their community.

The Brothers and Sisters of the **Third Order** are vowed to lifelong commitment to Christ and bear witness to the Gospel life in their homes and in the occupations to which they believe God has called them. The members of the Three Orders are bound together in the one Society by their prayer and the contemplation of Him who is the source of their strength and of their common life.

This is the heart of Franciscan spirituality, expressed through the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in the First and Second Orders and through a threefold vow to live daily in the spirit of these counsels in the Third Order.

It's as though the family of the Society of St Francis had three children. The eldest has given up all worldly goods including power, prestige and position to become an itinerant herald of the Kingdom of God, just like St Francis. The second child has followed the same path of worldly poverty but has decided to remain in one place devoted to a life of prayer for the world, just like St Clare. The youngest child, finding itself inextricably caught up in the world's affairs, has decided to live in the continual spirit of poverty and prayer, using its outward service for the good of the world, just like the Lord Orlando, Sir Thomas More and countless others.

But before I embark on how we attempt to make spirituality real within our daily lives I think it will help if I define the overall aim of our Society and what it means to us to follow the example of St Francis within the Church and the World.

Aims

The aims of Tertiary Franciscans are to make our Lord known and loved everywhere as Brother Francis did; to spread the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood with all creation; and to live simply and joyfully. This is the particular obedience which we find this vocation has laid upon us, and which helps shape our lives and attitudes. It means that we are called, like

Francis, to take this vocation to heart and to express it in the life of the Church and the World. We experience it as the Word of God unceasingly inviting us to allow His Spirit to work in us, so that His Kingdom may become a reality for those among whom we live. This is the heart of Franciscanism.

Openness

Tertiaries renew the pledge of their vow each year, and one question they are asked is, 'Will you be open to the Holy Spirit?' Being open, allowing the Holy Spirit to work in us, involves us in a mighty revolution. It involves turning the spirituality of our daily lives into a reality.

What do I mean by this?

We can spend time every day reading the Bible; we can spend time in prayer; we can spend time going to confession; we can spend time going to church, but until we allow the Holy Spirit to take over and act through us, we are, in fact, preventing the spirituality of our daily lives from becoming an active reality.

This means a radical transformation of our being, which can be very costly and painful in spiritual terms, but it gives the Holy Spirit of God the opportunity to flow through us, filling us with the grace to act in His Name. Then in the different situations in which we find ourselves in life and in the daily choices which we have to make we begin to find a permanent transformation taking place. For Francis this new life of the Gospel showed as an active reality when he made the decision to embrace a leper. In a similar way all followers of Francis are called by the Spirit of God to give themselves in love to the needy, the unloved and the unattractive. This is a concrete calling and it can come in many ways and in many guises. It always seems to be a difficult call that asks us to die to ourselves so that we might live for others. And it isn't a once only call—would that it were. It is a call which seems to keep on being repeated in different ways and at different times and it is always challenging. It comes silently; it is unmistakable, and it is easy to avoid if we are set on ourselves. In fact I dare say that it is impossible to face up to this call unless we continually pray for the grace of God that we might do His Will and not our own. I think it is akin to Jesus saying, 'Lord let this cup pass from me, but not my will but thine be done'.

But ultimately it's impossible to follow the dictates of the Spirit unless we are disciplined. For Franciscans this means accepting as a gift from God and learning to practise three particular virtues, the virtue of humility, the virtue of love and the virtue of joy. These are virtues that flowered so fully in St

Francis and which should be the hallmark of all his followers in the Church. These three virtues are Christian characteristics which as Franciscans we particularly seek. They mark a death to self and a new life guided by the Holy Spirit.

I want to take a careful look at each of these virtues.

Humility

In St Matthew 11:29 Jesus says, 'Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest'.

Humility comes from the word 'humus' meaning the ground, the soil. In St John 12:24 Jesus says, 'Unless a grain of wheat falls in the ground and dies, it abides alone, but if it dies it brings forth much fruit'. Why? Because it allows the soil, in spiritual terms the humility and gentleness of Christ, to surround it, nurture it, and give it greater life than it ever had before. In Francis's life we see the struggle to follow these Christian virtues of gentleness and humility. For Francis it was the growing awareness that God is everything and that we are nothing and have nothing of ourselves. This helps us to put God first in our lives so that we can concentrate on, and listen to God above all. We need to experience his presence and hear what he is saying to us. This attentive listening enables us to participate in the building of His Kingdom which we begin to see is infinitely more beautiful than our own lives without Him.

So humility is the apparent weakness of putting ourselves last and God first, which allows God to manifest his power. Francis discovered this for himself and it became the inspiration and the source of his love.

Love

Love flows out of this humble forgetfulness of self and concentrated focusing on God. Love is the essence of the Christian message but love is a many splendoured thing and we need to focus our attention on certain aspects of it and put these into practice if we are to progress in spirituality for our daily life. I John 4:19 says, 'We love because God first loved us. If someone says, I love God, yet hates his brother, he is a liar'. So one very particular way of practising Christian love is to see every human being as one's brother or sister. In fact Francis went much further than this in seeing all living creatures in these terms. In his great 'Cantic of the Creatures' he even goes so far as to include the elements: Death, too, is to be recognised as our sister, part of God's creation.

Most high, most powerful, good Lord
Praise, glory and honour, and all blessing are yours.
To you alone, most high, do they belong,
And no one is worthy to speak your name

Praise to you, my Lord, and to all your creation,
Especially Sir Brother Sun, who is our day, and you give us light through
him.
And he is beautiful, and shines with great splendour.
From you, most high, he takes his meaning.

Praise be to you, my Lord, from Sister Moon and the stars:
In the heavens you have formed them, shining and precious and
beautiful.

Praise be to you, my Lord, from Brother Wind,
And from air and cloud and calm and all weathers,
Through which you give your creatures nourishment.

Praise be to you, my Lord, from Sister Water,
Who is so useful and humble and precious and chaste.
Praise be to you, my Lord, from Brother Fire,
Through whom you lighten our night:
And he is handsome and merry and vigorous and strong.

Praise be to you, my Lord, from our sister
Mother Earth, who nourishes and sustains us,
And brings forth her various fruits, with many-coloured flowers and
grasses.

Praise be to you, my Lord, from those who forgive for love of you,
Bearing weakness and tribulation.
Blessed are those who bear them in peace,
For by you, Most High, will they be crowned.

Praise be to you, my Lord, from our Sister Bodily Death,
From which no one living can escape:
Woe to those who die in mortal sin:
Blessed are those whom she shall find doing your most holy will,
For the second death shall not harm them.

Praise and bless and give thanks to my Lord,
And serve him with great humility.

Another special aspect of love lies in the mystery of the Cross. Francis understood, just as we do, that Christ is the perfect pattern of authentic love, for in his life and death we see a self-giving which is complete and utterly free because it was deliberately chosen. This love is not a matter of emotion or of feeling. It is a gift of oneself to others. And so our love involves us in taking risks. It demands renunciation of ourselves and it leads towards a continual death of self for the purpose of newer and greater life. All true love sooner or later leads us to the cross. It is therefore costly because we can be frightened of receiving no return for our gift. So our love is not only for the brothers and sisters of our community, though that indeed is where it all has to start. Our love has to flow out to everyone, of whatever race, class, colour, creed or sexual orientation and after the example of St Francis it embraces the natural world as well.

Joy

This love which springs out of, and is richly nurtured by humility, does tend to produce a certain sense of joy, especially when we remember the word of Jesus in St John 15:11 'These things have I told you that my joy might be in you and that your joy might be full'. Joy is not necessarily an exciting emotion which leaves us exhausted but it is a form of happiness that springs out of an inherent faith in the goodness of all things and of our maker, God. This joy can be present in the midst of anxiety, suffering, and even agony, because it resides with love and humility in the depth of the soul. It is allied to our growing awareness of being in the presence of God at all times and of the knowledge that God is good. It tells us of eternity. It springs out of a state of giving which comes from the renunciation of the self.

It is the immanence of the Holy Spirit breaking forth into new life, telling us that in the presence of God is unutterable joy. Francis, after his terrible suffering on Mount La Verna, when he received the stigmata just two years before his death, radiated this indescribable joy to all his followers.(The 'stigmata' being those inexplicable but reliably attested marks of the wounds of Christ on hands, feet and side, which a very small number of saints have experienced)

I have spent some considerable time describing for you the three particular Christian virtues that Franciscans try to practise above all others in their attempt to live out the spirituality of their daily lives. But so far I have only described a few ways in which we try to make these virtues into a living reality. If we are not to get caught in the trap of creating high sounding ideals that are never put into practice we need to give them a practical framework. This is why Tertiaries make a threefold vow.

Putting the Virtues into Practice

Francis said: 'The Rule and life of the Friars Minor (that is, members of the First Order) is this, namely to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by living in obedience, without property and in chastity'.

In the Third Order our threefold vow undertakes the spirit of these vows of Simplicity, Chastity and Obedience in its wording :-

'seeking to spread the knowledge and love of Christ, to promote the spirit of love and harmony as the family of God and to live joyfully a life of simplicity and humble service'

The Threefold Vow

1. To live simply.
2. To live in the spirit of brotherhood/sisterhood.
3. To make our Lord known and loved everywhere.

This is a serious commitment, renewed every year before other brothers and sisters of the Order, and is made with life intention.

To live simply

This is allied to the characteristic of humility and aims to give us a freedom from ourselves. This is not absolute poverty but life lived in its spirit. 'Happy are those who know they are poor in spirit. The kingdom of heaven belongs to them', says Jesus (St Matthew. 5:3.) Francis's practice of poverty and simplicity was based on his awareness that he and we are nothing of ourselves, that God is all, and that in love God gives us everything that we need.

Here are some Franciscan pointers on simplicity and poverty;

1. Poverty may be seen as reverence for the integrity of creation.
2. Poverty is the refusal to exploit or manage the natural world without reference to the needs of other people and to our responsibility as stewards of God
3. Poverty recognises the beauty, the sanctity and the goodness of things, as all are creatures of God.

4. Poverty seeks not to be excessively attached to our possessions, but to use them for God's glory, for the welfare of people and the universe itself.
5. Poverty in clothing, transport, holidays, relationships and houses, needs to be characterised by simplicity.
6. Poverty avoids dominating or exercising undue power over people's lives, remembering the words of Jesus: 'He that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger'. St Luke 22:26.
7. Poverty strives for that simplicity which is the fruit of humility.
8. Poverty seeks to be free from all attachment to wealth and material gain by being aware of the poverty of the world and its claim on our stewardship.

To live in the spirit of brotherhood/sisterhood

This is allied to the characteristic of love and encourages us to make a total gift of ourselves to others in chastity. In St Matthew 23:37, Jesus said 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind'.

1. Chastity is the dedication of our whole being to God.
2. It means a commitment of love for other people that involves the risk and openness of Christ's love, without either demands or expectation of return.
3. It means to love and not to possess.
4. It means to give but not to count the cost.
5. It means to be affectionate and outgoing.
6. It means to behave as a member of a loving and caring family (whether one's own relatives, the Franciscan community, the whole Church, or all humanity)
7. It means fighting against any ignorance or prejudice that breeds injustice or partiality on account of distinctions of race, class, creed, sexual orientation or status.
8. It means being open to all, which was a characteristic of Jesus.
9. It means moving self from the centre of attention and striving to see all people as equal children of God.

To make Our Lord known and loved everywhere.

This is allied to the characteristic of joy and aims to encourage us to be joyfully abandoned to God in total obedience. In St John 5;15 Jesus says 'If you love me, you will obey my commandments'.

1. Obedience is the acceptance of our vocation as lovers of God and of our fellow human beings.
2. It is co-operating with God in bringing about a society of love.
3. It involves taking our full part in the common life.
4. It involves spreading ideas of social justice and international peace by word of mouth and by personal example.
5. It involves taking on the responsibility of leadership when called upon to do so.
- 6 It involves being at the service of all.
7. It involves being gentle, peaceable and a source of light to all the world.

Making our Lord known and loved everywhere is an obedience which the Gospel asks of us and which should shape our lives and attitudes. It reflects the obedience of the first disciples whom our Lord sent forth as his witnesses. Like them we are called to 'make disciples of all nations' (St Matthew 28:19) because we have come to understand that in Christ the perfect revelation of God has been given. We know, through his incarnation, his ministry, his passion, his death, through his resurrection, ascension and the sending of his life-giving Spirit, that the true life of God has been made available to everyone. This Gospel of salvation has been committed to his Church, so we naturally and joyfully accept the duty of bringing men and women to this redeeming knowledge of Christ. This duty and service starts to become real when we make a practical commitment to pray and work for Christ's kingdom by living it out where we are day by day.

So far we have chosen a particular Christian path to follow in the footsteps of St Francis and we have encased that in a three-fold vow; but we still haven't said how we are going to exercise this vow in our everyday lives.

How do we go about being servants of God?

The Three Ways of Service

The ways in which we serve are through:

1. Prayer
2. Study
3. Active Work

It is important that we find a balanced expression of these three ways of service if we are to be able to fulfil our function of being lovers of God and humanity.

Prayer

Christ said in St Matthew 18: 20 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name there I am with them'. So at the heart of our life is prayer. At the heart of that prayer for us is the Holy Eucharist. Also in reflecting on our lives, we recognise our shortcomings and sinfulness and recognise the necessity for constant conversion and renewal. Therefore repentance has to form a regular part of our spiritual life. Repentance comes from our contemplation of God, which shows us something of God's beauty and of how far we fall short of that beauty.

Contemplation of God is of the essence of our Franciscan calling. This involves us in daily prayer and reflection, and our praying together as a community when we have the opportunity to do so. For this we set aside days of peace and quiet for mutual reflection and weekend retreats together, where we can withdraw into the fastness of God in contemplation..

Study

Like all Christians we are concerned with constantly listening to the Word of God, and we need not only to hear it, but also to understand it. As Jesus says in the parable of the sower, St Matthew 13:19 'Those who hear the message about the kingdom but do not understand it, are like the seed that fell along the path. The evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in them'. God's Word comes through Scripture, the Life and Liturgy of the Church, the events of the world in which we live, our relationships with other people and our own inner relationship with Him. All these require thinking about and studying as far as we are able. Not all are called to academic study.

We seek to widen our knowledge and understanding of the Church's mission, of our Christian calling, and of God's world. We believe too that all things of this world may be examined and studied with reverence. In this way we feel that we can become the people of God, sensitive to his presence and to the inspirations of his will, diligent in his praise and able to serve him in every situation, making his presence evident by the witness of our lives. This witness is in part made evident through the active work we undertake in His Name.

Active Work

We seek to promote human dignity, development and liberation. We express this mainly in our care for the sick, the underprivileged and the oppressed, remembering especially those who long for a new meaning to their lives and who thirst for fullness of truth. Our primary concern is for individual people in their needs and particularly for those who are neglected or rejected. This can mean condemning systems and laws which are wrong and contrary to Christian principles. We hold before us the continual need to work for the reform of conditions that cause poverty, injustice and miseries of every kind, remembering that Jesus said 'The poor you have with you always'.(St John 12:8).

Our work is expressed through brotherly and sisterly love and the simplicity which expresses the dignity of all human endeavour, remembering that Christ came among us as a servant of all. We are called to be lights that shine out in the world, and salt that gives savour to people's lives. We are called to be involved in the life of the world; not to be conformed to it but in order to transform it.

But without a **Rule of Life**, which anchors all this down onto the personal level we would still be sounding fine words without any real action ,and so our threefold vow lays upon us the necessity to make out a Rule of Life that commits each one of us to specific objectives within the guidelines of all that has been said. Initially, Novices are asked to undertake a Basic Rule of Life, which during their time as a Novice they will be able to develop into a Rule particular to themselves.

The Rule falls under nine headings. The details of each tertiary's individual Rule will differ in detail as it develops in order to accommodate their own individual gifts and circumstances In drawing it up, we have help from our Novice Guardian, or our Spiritual Director. The nine headings give tertiaries a thoroughly practical framework upon which to base our calling, our vision and our vows.

THE RULE OF LIFE

1. The Eucharist

The first rule of our life calls us to commit ourselves to regular participation in the Holy Eucharist and asks us to continually consider the importance we place in the Sacrament.

2. Penitence

The second calls us to commit ourselves to regularly examine our life and conduct in the light of the Gospel and to seek God's forgiveness through confession. For Professed Tertiaries this examination is made with the counsel and advice of our spiritual director, who acts as our spiritual guide.

3. Prayer

The third calls Tertiaries to a regular pattern of daily prayer with an emphasis on the contemplation of God and silence. For the Order there is also what we call 'Community Obedience', which consists of the daily reading of a passage from our Principles, and the recitation of the prayer

'We adore you most holy Lord, Jesus Christ, here and in all your churches throughout all the world, and we bless you because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.'

4. Denial

The fourth calls us to fulfil our vocation to self-denial. This involves voluntarily denying ourselves those things that keep on separating us from God. I should add here that this is a question which it is essential we address with the help and guidance of our spiritual director, as it is very easy to get it out of balance if we try and answer it on our own.

5. Retreats

The fifth calls us to commit ourselves to going away on retreat on a regular basis, which needs to be at least once a year.

6. Study

The sixth calls us to set aside time for study of the Bible and other books and materials that help to increase our understanding of the Church's life and mission.

It calls us to keep the Franciscan Manual fresh in our minds. It also calls us to know and abide by the 'Rule of the Order', (which is distinct from our own individual Rule of Life and consists of Tertiaries' Order for Profession and Renewal, the Principles, and the Constitution—in effect the

housekeeping rules of the Tertiary family.) Neither must we forget such things as novels and poetry, films, television and video in order to help enlarge our understanding of our fellow human beings and of life.

7. Simplicity

The seventh calls us to express our Franciscan principles of simplicity in specific ways, which include the expenditure of money that is under our control. This is another question that has to be carefully sorted out with our spiritual director in order that we maintain a sensible balance.

8. Work

The eighth calls us to be practical in how we make our Lord known and loved in our daily work and service, and here again we need to be helped with the advice of a good spiritual director.

9. Direction

The ninth calls us to make sure that we meet with our director on a regular basis, which should be at least twice a year. It calls us to make sure that we renew our pledge, on a yearly basis, to the vow we took at our life profession. It also calls us to do all in our power to get to Third Order meetings that are arranged on a regular basis in the locality in which we live.

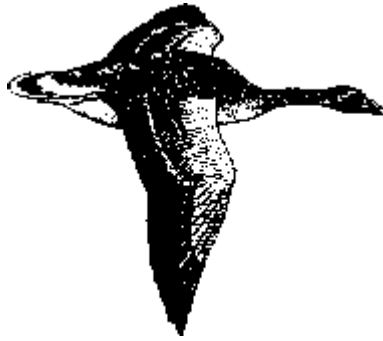
None of us can live the Franciscan life on our own. St Francis himself founded a community which met round him. We Franciscan tertiaries recognise that we belong to an Order, a Family, and that one of our greatest responsibilities is to love, pray for, and support each other. It is for this reason that all Tertiaries are members of Local Groups. These groups meet several times a year and even those who for various reasons are unable to attend are nonetheless still members of their Group.

Conclusion

This last part of our rule of life hopefully seals the gap on our initial heady desires to be spiritual people of God, members of His Church in our own locality following in the footsteps of Christ, after the example of St Francis. We commit ourselves to a definite and a very real practice of spirituality in our daily lives. Without this sort of definition and commitment we would find it very easy to slip into half-hearted and sloppy forms of spiritual practice. In fact even with these inbuilt safeguards it is difficult enough to remain even a hundredth part faithful.

Chasing the Wild Goose

Having now been a member of the Third Order of the Society of St Francis for many years I can see that people, like myself, who embark on this way of life, need to safeguard their ideal of practising spirituality in their daily lives with a rule of life, a spiritual director and a community to keep them going on the chosen path. I don't find it an easy vocation, nothing worth while having is ever easy to pursue, but I am happy to be a Franciscan because the call of 'the wild goose' is ever in my ears, and, having glimpsed that goose once or twice in flight, I know that anyone who pursues spirituality on a daily basis is never on a wild goose chase that is going nowhere. The practice of daily spirituality undoubtedly gives one the knowledge and experience of eternal life in God, through Jesus Christ who is our Lord.



Copies of this booklet are obtainable from:
Third Order Distribution,
The Old Parsonage, Freeland, Witney, Oxon. OX29 8AQ