

## FRANCIS THE INSPIRATION

**SAINT, TROUBADOUR, revolutionary, fanatic, clown – whatever impression we may have of Francis of Assisi, no one can deny the inspiration he has been to many people down the centuries. Whether he is inviting us to be with the poor, or beckoning us to discover God in our Muslim neighbour, Francis challenges us to look again at the gospel of Jesus and believe.**

Europe in the time of Francis (1182-1224) was a place of deep divisions. Towns and kingdoms nourished ancient feuds with their rivals, while the established princes struggled against the growing power of the merchants. Many people lived in poverty, while those at the top fared sumptuously. But even the ordinary poor were not so wretched as the lepers, the ultimate outcasts of those days. Meanwhile the witness of the Church was weak, and Francis responded to the call from God to 'rebuild my church', with Clare, by founding a religious Order at that time.

Francis and Clare, with their brothers and sisters, met the evident needs of the people by sharing food and shelter, and through preaching and living reconciliation, based on prayer and an active love for Christ. They answered the pain of the outcasts by making them their friends, such as the lepers, and shared the reproaches hurled at them. Their witness incorporated a spirit of conversion and penitence, fortified by times of quiet and withdrawal.

Today within the Anglican Church there are three related Franciscan Orders which all started in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century:

- The **First Order**, consisting of men and women who live in community under a rule based on the traditional vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience. They give expression to their mission by a variety of activities, seeking to maintain a balance, corporately and individually, between prayer, study and active work. There are some 15 Franciscan houses in Europe and a similar number in America, Australia/New Zealand and the Pacific Islands.
- The **Second Order**, the Community of Saint Clare, which is composed of women who feel called by God to an enclosed life of contemplative prayer, coupled with work to be self-supporting.
- The **Third Order**, which is open to men and women, ordained or lay, married or single, over the age of 18, who feel that God is calling them to live out their Franciscan vocation in the world. While committed to family responsibilities and engaged in the ordinary tasks of life, the Third Order offers a life of challenge and support for those who are called to a deeper commitment to Christ, their Lord and Master, to a life under vow.

There are currently over 2,000 members of the Third Order (called tertiaries) in the European Province, based mainly in Local Groups throughout England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Sweden. There are tertiaries also in other Provinces across the world.

The Mission Statement of the Third Order is as follows:

***'The Third Order of the Society of Saint Francis is building a Community of those who accept Christ as their Lord and Master, are dedicated to him in body and spirit, with a desire to fulfill the three aims of the Order: to make our Lord known and loved everywhere, to spread a spirit of love and harmony, and to live simply. The Third Order aims to attract, nurture and empower Christian men and women, loyal members of their own Churches, who wish to follow Christ in the distinctive way of Francis and Clare.'***

This brochure provides illustrative stories from a variety of tertiaries in different walks of life. The stories aim to indicate what membership of the Third Order means to them personally. They may say how or why they joined, and highlight the perceived benefits of membership to them as individuals or couples. We hope that these cameos will stimulate further interest in the Third Order on the part of those who may be seeking an additional resource for their own spiritual nurture and development.

## **Life in TSSF in Papua New Guinea**

Professed as a tertiary in 1974, I became a science teacher in a Government High School in Madang a year later. The only Franciscan there was Bishop Bevan Meredith, who became my Spiritual Director; most Christians were either RC or Lutheran. I was perforce an isolated tertiary as the Bishop was continually on his Diocesan travels. I was more fortunate when I moved to Dogura as Headmistress of the Anglican Girls' High School as my Deputy, Elizabeth Graham, was also a tertiary. I got to know the Friars of the First Order, based in Haruro and Port Moresby, who were held in high regard in PNG. In particular, Brother Alfred visited our School and his ebullience endeared him to the girls; he was truly Franciscan in spirit and sadly died early as a result of his zeal. In my life as a tertiary I have found that Franciscan friendship knows no bounds; this was very evident on a visit to Sydney whilst in PNG. Now I am back in the UK it is a shock to the system! What I treasure so much is the spontaneity of spirit that is truly Franciscan, and Clare's vision that comes only through prayer.

**Pamela Banks**

## **Living in Mongolia**

We first came to Mongolia in 1991 for two years, and then returned in 1998, shortly after our profession as tertiaries in the UK. Ulaan Baatar, where we now live in our own house, has a reputation as being the world's coldest capital city that is richly deserved; -35 C at night, rising to -22 C during the day!! After completing a year of language study we began to work with the Catholic Mission on an unpaid basis, mainly with poor children; this is one of the valued ecumenical links of the Mission. We help with a variety of initiatives - two classes in our local village school in Yarmag, a mini-school with three classes for children aged 6-15 in the city, also a Children's Centre that provides a home for street children, orphans and children of homeless families aged 2-18. We assist as well with the children's service at church, to which 30 and 50 children come on a Sunday morning. We very much appreciate the prayerful support and fellowship of our brothers and sisters in the Third Order in connection with our life and work here in Mongolia.

**Roger and Hillary Parritt**

## **A Franciscan Journey**

I read Elizabeth Goudge's 'St Francis of Assisi' many years ago and thought 'I wish there were a Third Order today' little realising that there was! I was led to join a local Julian Group, and soon I realised that our hostess had a strong link with Franciscans. In June '84 my enquiry to TSSF received a warm, positive response. In collaboration with my Novice Guardian and Spiritual Director I made my first rule. I was accepted as a postulant on the day, sadly, that my husband Syd died, but the Order opened up a whole new world to me, both people-wise and spiritually. Being a botanist and lover of creation I fitted into this rich, warm environment so easily, and have now been a tertiary for 15 years. Being in the Third Order has stabilised and enriched my life, giving me great joy and a new, exciting spiritual knowledge through meeting other tertiaries, spiritual direction (how did I manage without it?), and retreats. I fail so often, but am very grateful for the fellowship and help of others in keeping me going; I thank God for calling me to join TSSF.

**Madeline Davies**

## **A Franciscan Angel**

I came to know about the Third Order over 20 years ago, at a time of significant change in my life. God sent an angel in the form of Peggie Downie who gave me a lift in her car and started telling me about TSSF. I had been a full-time mother for 11 years. Our lives had come to the point when my husband needed my support in paying the mortgage and school fees, so I was having to give up my voluntary work and go into a full-time job. I felt as if I was going into the wilderness, and wondered how I could hold on to the sense that I was doing God's work. When I heard that one element of a tertiary's personal rule was a statement about her daily work, and that this was placed annually on the altar in dedication, I felt that this was what I was looking for. It has affirmed my mission in the world, but my husband has found it hard to understand my calling to the Franciscan life. The simplicity and poverty side does not chime with his joyful, extravagant generosity. I have learned to be attentive to what Christ is saying to me through the life of Francis, and value and love the support of my TSSF brothers and sisters.

**Liza Coates**

## **Not just a Franciscan Fan Club**

When I first heard about the Third Order, I was interested mainly because of two things I knew about Francis – that he was concerned for the poor and for the created world. That interest has been developed and increased through the Order – but it was only a start. I found that the Order was much more than a fan club! Membership demands a real commitment – particularly to devise and keep a personal rule of life; its structure I have found to be beneficial spiritually. Most tertiaries take their Christian faith seriously, and are prepared to give time and attention to studying, praying, thinking and acting; above all we are a community of people who aim to support and love one another. At first I recognised that community in my local area, gradually I have seen it binding together people throughout the UK, and indeed the world. Being a tertiary doesn't prove you are a good Christian, but it might help you to be a better one than you would otherwise be. The Franciscan way doesn't suit everyone, and there are plenty of other ways you can deepen your faith. But I think it has suited me.

**Robert Dimmick**

## **A Wider Vision**

Some First Order Brothers had led a number of Parish Weekends for our church, and they made a deep impression on us. We are both busy people, one working as a management consultant and the other as a counsellor and psychotherapist, and at that time we were fully engaged in bringing up three children. It was only some years later that we built on this initial attraction, and eventually joined the Third Order. We felt that we needed more spiritual nourishment than our local church was able to provide, and a wider vision of the potential fulfilment of life as Christians in the world. We have received just that, together; we wanted to be involved in an initiative that we could share as we normally had to spend so much of our time apart. Though there will always be a tension between worldly pleasures and the focus of Francis on a life of poverty, we find the simplicity of the Franciscan lifestyle a wonderful ideal to aim for. With annual retreats, spiritual direction and a loving Local Group we are indeed nurtured spiritually, well beyond our expectations.

**John and Maria Fox**

## **Being a Tertiary**

I became a tertiary after a visit and introduction to the First Order Sisters at Compton Durville in Somerset. What attracted me most to the Franciscan way was the insistence on working with the marginalised; something I have never found easy, but an imperative nevertheless. In many ways, joining the Franciscans has been in a sense 'a coming home' because of the nature of my work; for many years prior to my joining Oxfam as a member of staff I have been preoccupied with issues of justice and the environment. Fellow Franciscans remind me that such preoccupations can be a vital part of our witness for God. I don't find Francis an easy model; in real life I would have found him very daunting, but I do identify with his desire to stand alongside those in real need. Some sentimentalise his rejoicing in the natural world, but I find his attitude both robust and refreshing. It is both a comfort and a challenge to live by a daily rule, and our Principles constantly remind me that the Franciscan way is no easy option! The annual renewal of commitment 'in the company of our brothers and sisters' encourages me; without that visible support I would find the Franciscan path very hard indeed.

**Averil Swanton**

## **From Free Church to TSSF**

My life was based in the Free Church, firstly the Congregational Church when cared for by an Aunt as a baby, followed by the Methodist Church when I married, and then the Baptist Church - to accommodate our 2 year old Chinese foster son with learning difficulties. 7 years ago I felt drawn to the C of E and heard of the Third Order; I tried to ignore the calling to TSSF, but God would not put me down! It is quite a surprise that I am now a tertiary, but God works in a mysterious way. I am a full time foster carer, as our foster son still lives with us and is 22 years old. What does the Third Order mean to me? Discipline, Acceptance and Freedom are words that spring to mind. It helps to centre my life on God. Having a rule to follow helps me enormously, and feeling part of this worldwide community brings great joy. Having come from a dysfunctional background the acceptance I found from my brothers and sisters, my 'Family', has meant so much to me. Being a Franciscan has freed me to be myself, to offer God the service I can give; it has taught me so much about God's love. Our cross breaks barriers, and no matter what walk of life we come from we are one in his love.

**Elizabeth Nickless**

## **Following the Way of Francis**

Francis saw all creation as brother and sister but he also needed a human family, the Order he founded. I value family; my TO Local Group is the family where I love and am loved, give and receive support, bear with others as they with me, as together we continue growing in the Christian life. This family group is the background from which I can venture out to others. For many years I belonged to another branch of the Franciscan family, the enclosed Second Order sisters. In the 1990s I came on leave to care for my elderly father, and the local TO helped me to adjust to the new way of life by welcoming me into its midst, keeping alive in me the Franciscan spirit. I left the Second Order eventually (my father lived to 94!) and am pursuing my Franciscan vocation with TSSF – I am discovering that a contemplative life can have a fruitful active dimension in this new setting. Being poor as regards income helps me to live simply, grateful for God's bounty shown to me and ever more aware of how rich I am in other ways. The rule and our stimulating Group discussions give me new ideas about how best to use my gifts. I wouldn't be without my TO family.

**Brenda Stephenson**

## **Becoming a Tertiary**

I grew up in all kinds of Christian traditions and none. My parents were agnostic, and I had myself baptised at the age of 10, my Godmother giving me a copy of 'The Little Flowers of St Francis'. This I read when I was 18, at about the same time as I heard a talk by Fr Peter, SSF, who was inspiring. From school I experienced worship in Westminster Abbey, from home the local RC church, and at Cambridge, briefly, the Christian Union. I met the Franciscan Brothers there and soon found a niche in their church, St Bene't's. Then followed a time abroad, with Lutheran, French Reformed and RC worship. We moved to Derbyshire and went to our Evangelical Charismatic village church, another steep learning curve, but I needed more. I had already become a Companion, but the Third Order drew me and eventually I became a novice and was professed. So what does TSSF mean to me? Good friends, certainly; people I can talk to with frankness, people who may be very different and from other backgrounds, but who are on the same wavelength. It means discipline in prayer and study, and being part of a community of people inspired by the lives of Francis and Clare.

**Adrian Noble**

## **A Day in Tertiary Life**

Prayer time starts the morning, then teenage grunts at breakfast.

*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy*

Small group teaching with 8 student doctors and a simulated patient. We've been practising giving bad news about cancer and other illnesses to patients and their relatives. 'James, you seem quiet today.' 'I just need to watch this morning – my mum died last summer.' The group falls quiet, his eyes moisten. We spend 20 minutes reflecting on James' bereavement and how to cope when our work and our personal lives overlap so closely.

*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy*

She strides into evening surgery, as ever the smart branch manager. 'I'm no better today. I'm not coping. Normally I can do at least three things at once, now I'm having trouble with one thing at a time. Don't be sympathetic. I've got to stay in control.' We talk. Suddenly she buries her head in her hands and sobs, her body heaving.

*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy*

The Third Order has rooted me, since my teens, in Francis and Christ. The rule, daily prayer, quiet days, people, annual retreat, spiritual direction and so much more. All shape my life and touch the lives of those I meet daily.

## **A Vintage Life**

My story is more notable for length rather than excitement. I spent some agnostic years as a teenager then, as an undergraduate at Cambridge, I came upon the First Order and the living Gospel brought me to my knees. Eventually I discovered the Third Order (very secret then) and was professed in 1947. I spent 3 years in Greece working for Inter Church Aid. Back in England I married Michael, another tertiary, and brought up 3 sons. The Third Order in those days seemed to put much emphasis on personal poverty. I wrestled with that in terms of family life and keeping my rule amidst all the distractions and demands of a home. I'm thankful that I persevered. I've been a widow for the last 17 years. With the help of my director I have found a way of keeping my rule, which is now as dear to me as an old coat; in spite of age I do my best to live in a Franciscan, open and hospitable way. Nowadays I make my contribution to the life of my parish (Romsey Abbey) by the use of my pen and a few small jobs. In my 80<sup>th</sup> year, after over 50 years as a tertiary, I would say to enquirers 'Join us and know the joy and fellowship of serving our Lord in the way of St Francis.'

**Judy Walker**