

## **Roots and Shoots**

### **Hilfield Friary, 8-12 January 2009**

'Would you like to go to a conference on Formation at Hilfield?' the Provincial Formation Guardian asked. 'Yes,' I said, without pausing to think. So, on some very frosty days in January, I found myself at the First Order's Formation Conference. I had not been to Hilfield for years and found it changed: I noticed fewer Brothers, no Wayfarers, the presence and activities of the Hilfield Project workers, and warmer and more comfortable accommodation! On the other hand, the life of prayer and aims for a simple lifestyle were reassuringly familiar. And I was made welcome – Sr Helen Julian gave me a very helpful guided tour!

The Formation Conference itself looked at the Roots of Franciscan Orders, in Francis' time and in the 20<sup>th</sup> - 21<sup>st</sup> Century, through looking at the development of Rules of the Order. To ease us in, Br Colin Wilfred reminded us that the Latin word for Rule can also mean railing (to enable travel in the right direction) and signpost (to show where to go and how to get there). In contrast to the common assumption that Rule means limits or boundaries, we need to understand that vast farms in Australia do not have fences, they have wells. The Rule of an Order, then, can be like a well, drawing people together because of the life it gives. Colin Wilfred illustrated this by looking at the psalms, especially Psalm 119. Almost every verse relates to the law, statute, word, and commandments of the Lord and could be read as being about regulations and boundaries. But the psalm also reflects a relationship: after the first three verses, every verse has you/your and, often, I/me/my. In fact, although the law gives the shape, this psalm is really an expression of a long-lasting and profound relationship with the Lord. In the light of this, if a Rule does not help in the process of developing such a deep and enduring relationship with God, there is a problem with the Rule. Also, Walter Brueggemann has pointed out that the Psalms express orientation, disorientation and new orientation. The Rule of an Order and of an individual needs to provide similar encouragement and challenge.

Paula Pearce SFO, from the Franciscan International Study Centre in Canterbury, then spoke informatively and with enthusiasm about Francis' Earlier Rule and its development. Scholars have sought to identify which bits were original – John Moorman's version is in 'Walking in the Footsteps of Christ' in our Manual. Many of us were struck by the time and life-experience that went in to developing that Earlier Rule. This was underlined later as Helen Julian and Colin Wilfred described the experiences of developing Rules for the Anglican First Order Sisters and Brothers. They now use the Principles (in Daily Office SSF) as central to their Rules.

In other sessions we explored images of Franciscan crosses with Canon Christopher Irvine of Canterbury Cathedral (illustrating many aspects of the gospel, not simply a painful crucifixion); the Rule for Hermitages with Br Samuel (causing us to think about the Franciscan approach to solitariness as part of community), and Paula Pearce also gave an introduction to the (Roman Catholic) Third Order Regular (TOR) Rule and to the Secular Franciscan Order (SFO) life.

With so much brain-food, it was a joy to walk with Sr Maureen, to chat with First Order novices and postulants, to get to know some of the First Order Brothers and

Sisters I pray for, and to tap their expertise on particular issues. I also welcomed the opportunity to talk to our new Minister Provincial, Joanna Coney, who joined me as the other tertiary at the Conference.

From this listening and talking, we came to reflect on where we might go from here. In particular, what shoots can we see and how should we encourage them? One shoot I thought we could develop in the Third Order is our relationship to the Rule of our Order, especially our interaction with the Principles.

The First Order are clear that their Principles, adopted by both Brothers and Sisters, are out-of-date. They have already decided that re-writing the Principles would take disproportionate time and energy, so they have decided to write a commentary on their Principles. This commentary is planned to bridge the gap between the writing of the Principles and current experience and understanding. As such, the commentary will probably need re-writing in years ahead. I wondered, could the Third Order, or perhaps our Third Order Area/Local Group, benefit from writing a commentary on our Principles?

From the Conference, I learned that there is lots of material to inform a commentary. The letters and writings of Francis and Clare, as a start, can be thought-provoking, especially if read with a particular theme in mind, such as humility or poverty. Also, the Third Order Regular have done extensive thinking about their Rule which The First Order think will benefit them. It may benefit us too.

My one reservation about the conference was that I began to feel engulfed in words. Do not mistake me, I like words. But Franciscan life, as I understand it, is a whole life, not solely word-based. So what I would like to see is some Third Order groups explore what a non-prose-based commentary on our Principles might be like ... music, action, poetry, drawings and paintings ... What would you do?

Both Joanna Coney ([ministertssf@franciscans.org.uk](mailto:ministertssf@franciscans.org.uk)) and I ([anne28@cnet.org](mailto:anne28@cnet.org)) would love to know how you get on.

Anne Spalding  
Area Formation Guardian  
East Anglia Area