

## Report to Provincial Chapter

### Study and Prayer event on the work of Richard Rohr OFM

Freeland Convent  
29<sup>th</sup> - 31<sup>st</sup> May 2009

#### Summary

We met to explore the growing interest within TSSF in a body of work that seems increasingly important within contemporary Franciscanism, but which also has a much wider following. Blessed by perfect summer weather we concluded our weekend under the great tulip tree in Freeland's garden, sure that Richard Rohr's vision has much to offer the order at our current stage. Chapter is invited to note this consensus. Some ideas for further development follow in an appendix.

Familiar as any of us with Rohr's work, having heard him speak on several occasions in the UK, Nell Slocock was well qualified to provide us with a preliminary introduction. Nell emphasised the importance not only of the books and CDs available, but also the existence and work of Rohr's community, the Centre for Action and Contemplation (CAC) in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The phrase "Action and Contemplation" resonated throughout the weekend, deftly summarising the distinctiveness of Rohr's work in three words and providing useful dry ground should its scope and richness find any of us briefly at sea.

Rohr is a trenchant social and cultural critic. He firmly includes the church in his analysis of a post-modern society that has lost the ability to distinguish the truly valuable from what merely gratifies us superficially, and the presence of God from the routine habits and preferences of faith communities. He continually stresses the need for a "radical contemplative stance" if we are to transcend the demands of our ego (this is a key word), see the world with clarity and depth and sustain the inner resources to act constructively to improve it in response to God's call. As the weekend progressed we started to unpack Rohr's view of contemplation, and its importance as a prelude to action for social justice.

Our early discussions thus focussed on contemplation. David Norwood began by presenting one of Rohr's best-known books, "Everything Belongs". Having long been drawn to silence, David had been excited on discovering Richard Rohr to find contemplation presented as so valuable - an antidote to shallowness and misplaced priorities: *"The gift that true contemplatives offer to themselves and society is that they know themselves as part of a much larger story... Their security and identity are founded in God, not in being right, being paid by a church or looking for promotion in people's eyes... God is always bigger than the*

*boxes we build for him, so we should not waste too much time protecting the boxes.”*

David also introduced us to another key Rohr theme - the importance of suffering in dethroning the ego and opening us up to a mature relationship with God and greater availability to others. Echoing the mystics like John of the Cross he says that mature Christianity is a “path of descent” rather than a quick route to happiness, but that it can open us more fully to authentic experience by pushing us beyond our entrenched individual concerns and passions. *“You do not resolve the God question in your head...it is resolved when you agree to bear the mystery of God: God’s suffering for the world and God’s ecstasy in the world”*. A further theme now became apparent. The Western rational mind for all its strengths is generally an obstruction to this deeper kind of knowing, which is better understood in many Eastern traditions and can lead to the inner transformation that Rohr promotes.

Clearly we needed to understand how contemplation might help us along this path. David Swain presented ideas from three related CDs: “Beginners Mind”, “Living the Eternal Now” and “Contemplative Prayer”. Unlike the zealous who think they know it all, we need the openness of returning continually to a “beginners mind” that is always receptive to new apprehensions of God. Jesus’ religious contemporaries were scandalised by this - they thought they knew it all already - but Rohr suggests that *“Ignorance does not result from what we don’t know, but from what we think we know”*, spiritual clutter we are better off without than being pleased with. The “eternal now” reminded us of the sacrament of the present moment, and also the pared down spirituality of the Zen monastic tradition, but this was also a good point at which to notice that it reflects Rohr’s Franciscan commitment too and that Francis himself is always present behind his ideas.

For Richard Rohr contemplation allows us to move beyond the concerns of our ego (our implacable self-absorption) and its excessive preoccupation with past and future. In doing so it helps us distinguish between our false and true selves. This distinction (“true self / false self”) seemed uncomfortable to David, not least because it suggested what Rohr himself calls “dualistic thinking” (that’s another key word: right/wrong; me/others; yes/no). Rohr sees dualistic thinking as normal but problematic because it closes down possibilities to limited “either/or” choices, so that most of the time *“nothing new happens”* and unsuccessful patterns such as violence and revenge are endlessly repeated. Contemplation is clearly at the heart of transformation, then. In fact Rohr does not talk much about its technique, though we did learn that at the CAC everyone sits in silence together for half an hour early each day. Inevitably there was more here for us to understand, so it’s apt that we are planning a future Study and Prayer event on contemplation.

With some of the major themes opened up, Beryl Warren presented an issue that has led the CAC to considerable action for fundamental change. Rohr’s book,

“From Wild Man to Wise Man” explores the neglected area of male spirituality. Noting the absence in modern societies of the initiation rites that all traditional cultures thought young men needed, he argues that most men nowadays are psychically wounded yet receive little or no help with healing. They are not taught the importance of pain and loss or how to cry, like boys in allegedly “primitive” cultures, while our own society teaches subliminally the importance only of pleasure and strength. We were being reminded of the importance of suffering to a whole sense of ourselves. Rohr believes the value of the male role itself is being lost, and thinks there is a widespread “Father Wound” and “Father Hunger”. Boys look for approval from an older man (just as many adults look for approval from a Father God). If they cannot find it nearby they can migrate to the world of gangs, which do provide rites of initiation but usually destructive and negative ones. A prison chaplain in Lima observed that on Mother’s Day she was inundated with requests from young male prisoners for cards. She received no requests at all for Father’s Day.

Steven and Mary Ashton, very welcome guests and our link with Rohr’s UK network, told us of the action-oriented work done by CAC and in the UK through the M.A.L.E. programme (“Men as Learners and Elders”). On these intensive courses, men who participate are asked to give up some defences (watches and mobiles, as well as intangibles!) and to explore their spiritual needs more fully than is usually possible. We found it hard to spot anyone else working seriously and practically today on male spirituality, apart from Rohr and the CAC.

Another practical application was presented by Brenda Stephenson. Rohr has worked extensively on the enneagram, an ancient personality-type indicator more suited to addressing the spiritual dimension of our nature than management-oriented models such as Myers-Briggs. There are nine basic types (such as Perfectionist; Carer; Boss; Artist etc) arranged around a circle. Associated types are systematically linked and each is grouped around three even more basic impulses (Heart; Head; Gut). Rohr and others view the enneagram as an aid to self-knowledge, not to be seen as using rigid categories since with insight and help we can evolve within our own personality type even though the fundamentals do not change. Too complex to convey here in any detail, this system did not immediately convince all of us (nor was that Brenda’s expectation), but it was noticeable that those who had previous experience were all satisfied about the enneagram’s value, including for formation and spiritual direction. Perhaps Study and Prayer should offer a full study event using this model.

To end Saturday’s discussions Hugh Beach returned us to a chapter from “Everything Belongs” called “Don’t push the river”. This was a good example of the density of some of Rohr’s writing. A single chapter addresses the limitations of the Western kind of “knowing”; the possibility of universal restoration (redemption); a proposal that two thirds of Jesus’ teaching was about forgiveness; the closeness of sexual desire to desire for God, and yet our

tragically sin-obsessed view of sex; the idea that healing includes weeping, which is the opposite of blaming (including self-blame) and denying - and lastly the need to trust God more, not to “push the river” but to “go with the flow”. That’s quite a chapter, confirming that “Everything Belongs” is a good place to start.

Although often packed with ideas most of Rohr’s writing is very readable, but it does derive from his public speaking and is best read with that both in mind and inner ear. To make his voice present at Freeland John Wiltshire played short sections from a CD set in which Rohr speaks on “Adult spirituality and the two stages of life”. Foundational ideas that often recur in his work (for example, in relation to male spirituality), the two stages analysis helps explain why church life sometimes becomes as constraining to those committed to it for decades as to those who reject it much earlier on. Rohr thinks the essential work of the first stage is to create a firm sense of identity by establishing our enthusiasms, achieving status and possessions and often committing ourselves in detail to a movement or cause, including throwing ourselves into the routines and requirements of church lifestyles. We have to have a healthy, strong identity before we can move beyond it (“*You have to have an ego to lose an ego*”). That movement beyond often begins with an uncertain period in “liminal space”, and is typically driven forward by the experience of suffering (the path of descent, which has to follow the ascent of the good first stage if we’re to achieve full maturity).

If and as we move to the second stage we may become much more creative, importantly more other-centred, frequently more interested in peace and justice issues and overall more contemplative. Conversely, old loyalties and customs including the repetitions of conventional religious life can come to seem less important. If this is like the familiar mid-life crisis, it’s also less predictable. Rohr has said, “*I’ve seen children of ten in the cancer ward who’ve reached the second half of life, and grumpy octogenarians still stuck firmly in the first*”. In TSSF we’ve already invoked Rohr’s model of adult spirituality when looking at obedience issues at Chapter’s request.

Nell Slocock not only introduced our weekend but began to draw it together through the powerful book, “Hope against Darkness: the transforming vision of St Francis in an age of anxiety”, whose sub-title again reminded us of the Franciscan roots of Rohr the OFM priest. This dense book almost defies summary, but repays slow and thoughtful reading. Nell wisely gave Rohr’s own words much space. His critique of contemporary culture, and the transforming possibility of the gospel, is especially striking here: “*The cross is how to work for the answer without becoming part of the problem itself. Look to any number of wars to see why this is right. People seek reform by way of fighting and the use of power. Most revolutions begin on the left of the political spectrum and end on the right. This movement is inevitable if the self is not transformed. Jesus is, in some way, the only true revolutionary. Most revolutions merely rearrange the furniture on the deck of the Titanic. Jesus built a new boat.*”

Perhaps a good choice to read after “Everything Belongs”, the explicit Franciscanism of “Hope against Darkness” will be welcome to many tertiaries: *“When he (Francis) read the inaugural discourse of Jesus, he saw that the call to be poor stood right at the beginning: “How blessed are the poor in spirit!” As a result Franciscan spirituality has never been an abstraction. It is grounded in Jesus’ specific instructions to his disciples and not in theology. Francis’ living of the gospel was lifestyle pure and simple. It was the Incarnation continuing in space and time. It was the presence of the Spirit taken absolutely seriously. It was being Jesus more than simply worshipping him.”*

In presenting some of Rohr’s most recent work on “The emerging church”, Nancy Adams alerted us to some additional key themes. While like Francis a loyal member of the RC church, Rohr also (again, like Francis) conveys a robust critique of its all too frequent failure to follow gospel teaching. In “Everything Belongs” he writes that religion in its institutionalised form, *“is often the least mature manifestation of the living presence of Christ. Suffering and risen people everywhere tend to show forth God’s Glory more than managed religion”*. When we first heard this quote we thought it over-stated. By the end of the weekend we could see the point more clearly, so Nancy’s related theme was illuminating.

Nancy summarised Rohr’s tentative identification of emerging religious trends that bypass many of the old obstacles. The “emerging church” is almost by definition inclusive, ecumenical and contemplative. It reflects a growing consensus among scholars about what Jesus was really saying, and challenges the “non-negotiables” of church (often, ways of excluding) that are at variance with his teaching. It recognises that new forms of community are needed, but resolutely does not propose new institutional structures (such as an “Emerging Church Denomination”, which might simply repeat old mistakes). Instead of barriers to the eucharist, for example, Nancy identified within Rohr’s ideas a kind of “eucharistic living” - a daily pattern of receiving, thanking and sharing that does not exclude, does not judge, is primarily about being in relationship and is a sort of living sacrament of healing and forgiveness. How suitable a way to finish our event.

### Conclusion

This Study and Prayer weekend on Richard Rohr was stimulating and enjoyable, leaving most of us ready for further reflection and reading but also confident that many of the ideas and themes within Rohr’s work can be of benefit to TSSF. We also felt we had laid some useful ground in advance of his TSSF speaking engagement in September 2010. In an appendix, we offer Chapter some ideas about future possibilities.

***When asked which is the most important word in the key phrase “Action and Contemplation”, Richard Rohr says it is the “and”.***

## Richard Rohr study weekend 29-31<sup>st</sup> June 2009

### *Appendix 1*

#### **Participants**

Nancy Adams	Scotland
Hugh Beach	West London
John Dennis	Winchester
David and Rosemary Norwood	South Wales
Nell Slocock	Oxford
Brenda Stephenson	Nottingham
David Swain	Oxford
Beryl Warren	East London
John Wiltshire	S.E. Essex

#### Day guests of Study and Prayer and TSSF

Louie Allen	Oxford
Stephen and Mary Ashton	Oxford

### *Appendix 2*

#### **Next steps in using the work of Richard Rohr within TSSF**

- 1 Respond to any suggestions or decisions from Chapter.
- 2 Put papers and report on the Study and Prayer page of the TSSF website.
- 3 Subject to Chapter decision, Winter 2009 Chronicle to profile RR.
- 4 Future Study and Prayer study event e.g. on the enneagram?
- 5 Consider a wider contribution to TSSF formation.
- 6 RR-led TSSF event; St James, Piccadilly; 3<sup>rd</sup>- 4<sup>th</sup> September 2010.