Many Franciscans have become drawn to the work of Fr Richard Rohr OFM and his Centre for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico. His message often seems fresh and new, although established Franciscan Christian ideas are always at its root and Rohr himself claims only to be "articulating to our minds what we already know in our hearts". His greater emphasis on experience, rather than ideas and the intellect, is characteristically Franciscan and captured in the increasingly familiar phrase "Action and Contemplation". These correspond to two of TSSF's ways of service, work and prayer (the other is study), but Rohr challenges us yet further - to an expanded commitment to social action fuelled by a more profound prayer life and in particular the contemplative work of silence.

Rohr's thought is wide-ranging. It encompasses proclamation of the gospel, scriptural commentary, contemplative prayer and non-dual thinking, trenchant social and cultural criticism, the enneagram, male and adult spirituality and in his current book Breathing Under Water, the "spirituality of imperfection" of Alcoholics Anonymous and their 12 Steps. Although his work is complex Rohr thinks purely intellectual ideas and study, however essential, are simply not enough for holistic God-and-other-centred living. The importance of finding the right balance between ideas and experience led TSSF Study and Prayer to organise a two-day Richard Rohr speaking event for a predominantly Franciscan audience last September at St James, Piccadilly in London. Revisiting some of the themes at that event may begin to convey the variety and depth of Rohr's ideas, and the way in which "action and contemplation" continually informs them.

Rohr began with "non-dual thinking", another way of describing "the contemplative mind" and a foundational concept. In the modern Western tradition most of our thinking is functional and works in polarised categories: true/false; either/or; but, no and not. In contrast, we occasionally manage to grasp the totality or inter-relatedness of things in a more spacious way analogous to some Eastern mind-states ("Yes"!). Rohr describes this as "seeing through the veil" of our day-to-day perceptions. Associated with the mystics, and the fruit of non-verbal contemplation, this non-dual consciousness can offer the momentary recognition that Everything Belongs (the title of Rohr's most popular book) and that beneath the dilemmas and contradictions of normal but dualistic thinking all is fundamentally a harmonious whole. In practice our words and categories typically get in the way: "the Word became flesh and we made it back into words". In contrast "experience is always non-dual" - at least, until we start to verbalise it. The more educated we are, the harder it is to achieve contemplative or non-dual conscious-ness, so it is profound experiences such as great love or great suffering that most effectively cut through our normal dualism. Indeed Rohr often quotes Paula D'Arcy's remark: "God comes to you disguised as your life!"
This "whole seeing" has many consequences. Rohr's attitude to nature, unlike the caricature he calls "birdbath Franciscanism", is theologically radical but distinctively Franciscan. Many of us were struck at St James's by the concept of "the Cosmic Christ". Just as Aquinas said that creation is the primary and perfect revelation of the divine, Rohr insists the original incarnation took place 14.5 billion years ago. What happened 2,000 years ago was the human incarnation in Jesus. This insight demands that every aspect of the world must be fundamentally sacred. In repackaging the theology of Bonaventure, Rohr gives the Franciscan imperative of stewardship of the environment the profoundest of groundings. Commitment to social action on behalf of disadvantaged people is an organic part of that stewardship, but it leans on our taking the widest perspective on the world. Put differently, Contemplation must lead to Action.

Having established the importance of a different way of seeing, Rohr moved on to the theme that may be most relevant to TSSF today, and perhaps to the other orders as well. Just as contemplation is re-emerging in the church after 500 years of neglect, a number of new, optimistic impulses within religious communities are now coming together in a way that seems to bypass many of the old boundaries and obstacles. This "Emerging Christianity" takes many forms but is characteristically ecumenical, inclusive and contemplative. It doesn't look for a single institutional expression and is more reformist in nature - though this time with the hope that the reformers will sit lightly enough to traditional religious institutions to avoid making familiar mistakes such as exclusiveness and over-emphasis on introverted piety.

In Rohr's analysis of reformations, new approaches that merely replace one dualistic mindset with another (such as Protestant succeeding Catholic ideas of right and wrong) are less promising than those that transcend the either/or distinctions and move to different, more spacious ground. Rohr identifies several current signs of this evolving spirituality. Nonetheless new-style communities committed to social action on peace and justice issues, an inclusive outlook, a simple rule of life and also committed to contemplation are still in Rohr's view "the least developed pillar" of Emerging Christianity.

How interesting then that at this year's Greenbelt Festival, where some of us first encountered Richard Rohr, ideas about "new monasticism" (a communal expression of Emerging Christianity) were highly visible. At a panel discussion leaders of several new communities, such as the Moot community in central London, discussed their commitments and vision. If those sounded remarkably like "action and contemplation" they were also more than reminiscent of the Franciscan charism, including the particular innovation of a dispersed order living in the world. Our own Bishop Protector, Michael Perham, emphasised as Rohr does that Emerging Christianity has a very long history, Francis himself being one of its earliest exponents after the Desert Fathers. Friars were the "new monks"! He also suggested that the Third Order, if only at its best, looks like a "new monastic" emerging Christian community. The current Hilfield Friary community comes even more quickly to mind. It seems no accident that Richard Rohr's view of the world, summed up in the phrase "Action and Contemplation", attracts many of us so strongly.
To explore some of Richard Rohr’s work further, see the Winter 2009 edition of the *TSSF Chronicle* at:

The fullest resource though is his Centre for Action and Contemplation website at: http://www.cacradicalgrace.org/