

Minister's Letter

Brother Daniel SSF, Minister General of the First Order Brothers, writes:

Dear Friends,

I am writing this letter just after the completion of our First Order Chapter and Inter Provincial Third Order Chapter, which met at the Franciscan Study Centre in Canterbury in September 2005. The First Order Chapters meet every 3 years. Every six years Chapter meets with the Inter Provincial Third Order Chapter. We met for about two weeks and there were about 50 of us, so it was quite a good sized meeting. I have always found it difficult to convey the atmosphere of such a gathering to those who have not attended. It can be a list of facts covering the business that was conducted, and I am sure that that information will be communicated elsewhere. What I want to try and do is to tell you about the background in which we met.

The representatives came from all of our Provinces, that is, of the Third Order and First Order Sisters and Brothers, as well as a Tertiary representative from Brazil, a First Order brother from Korea, and the Abbess of the Second Order. We also had Bishop George Connor our Bishop Protector General and Fr. James Puglisi Minister General of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement with us for the meetings. This was obviously a very international meeting, as one looked around the gathering and saw that only half of the faces were from an Anglo-Saxon background. I found that this mix of cultures increased the ease of dialogue for often we of the western world jump in to have our say at the first chance. Although, to be honest, something else of even more significance took place.

We gathered, some of us never having met before, others not having seen each other for some time, so we needed to build community. This was done with some ease due to the well thought out programme which had been arranged. For we prayed together, we studied together, we had fun together and talked in informal gatherings.

The study took the form of three wonderful presentations given by three Catholic Franciscan religious. Sister Frances Teresa OSC presented two papers on 'Holistic living in the style of Francis and Clare' using some of the teaching of Bonaventure. A most thought provoking presentation. We then had input from Fr. John Quigley OFM on the work of Franciscans International of which he is the Director. It was good to hear about this work on the international scene being carried out ecumenically by the whole Franciscan family in the area of justice and peace. The third presentation was given by Fr. Adam Bunnell OFM Conv. who has replaced Fr. Max Mizzi as the General Delegate for Ecumenism and Inter-religious Dialogue. He brought us up to date with the work of the Conventuals' centre in Assisi.

Each day started with Morning Prayer in small groups, including a Bible study which led into a time of sharing and prayer. Each day seemed to build upon

the previous time of prayer and study. We celebrated Eucharist, using hymns and liturgies from the many different countries from which we came, often with much more movement than some of us were accustomed to. We made Pilgrimage - I will never forget the atmosphere and prayerful time we spent one Thursday evening making a candle-lit pilgrimage around Canterbury Cathedral. It was a procession of life in Christ around the Mother Church of the Anglican Communion, ending with the singing of Night Prayer as we sat around the site of the Shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket. The sound of the plain chant floated around that wonderful space filled with Christian memories, both past and to come.

We spent time together walking into Canterbury, having a picnic lunch at Greyfriars and ready use of the Friary in town. We even spent time watching the Cricket Test Match on the TV. All of this led to building up community: we very soon realised that even though we came from many different countries and cultures we had that underlying unity in following in the footsteps of Christ after the manner of Saint Francis.

Therefore when the reports were presented and concerns shared, this was done with a sense of unity in Christ. As we thought about the problems of our divided world, to say nothing of the divisions which face the Anglican Communion, we knew that dialogue and sharing those things we have in common was the only way.

I came away from the Chapters with an even greater sense than ever that dialogue and community based on equality and justice under-girded with love and humility was the only hope for our world.

Pax et bonum
Brother Daniel SSF