

Franciscans in Dialogue *Colin Wilfred SSF*

Some years ago a friend brought back from holiday a picture of a fresco of St. Francis in a church. Nothing unusual about that, you might think, but it was a Greek Orthodox fresco in a church in Crete and normally Eastern Orthodox do not give honour to Western saints post the 1054 schism. Once again, as the old Heineken advert had it Francis is able 'to reach parts that others can't'!

In December 2002 a group of Franciscan friars and sisters, members of Anglican, Lutheran and Roman Catholic communities from 7 different countries, gathered in Italy for the first official 'Inter-Franciscan Dialogue'. In September 2006 the second such meeting took place for five days in Canterbury at the Franciscan International Study Centre. This time there were 23 participants from ten different Orders/Congregations/Communities from Italy, the United Kingdom, Turkey, the United States, Australia and Canada. Each person had been officially appointed for this ecumenical experience and task.



The theme this time was 'From Rule to Life' exploring the different Rules under which Franciscan brothers and sisters live and how these impact on our daily life both together and in mission. However, this was not meant to be a study seminar with learned papers by academics but living together as a Franciscan community sharing an 'ecumenism or dialogue of life', sharing experiences of prayer, of memories, of hope and of projects.

We met in prayer three times a day, including in the morning for lectio divina with prayerful reflection on the gospel of the day in small groups, and for a corporate evening prayer. On such ecumenical occasions, the celebration of the Eucharist can often be the source of painful conflict and so the community decided to have a 'Eucharistic fast' at midday with silent prayer in the presence of the blessed sacrament in the chapel or in one's room - a costly experience but peaceful.

Each day, a different group would make a presentation of the Rule under which they were living. Some live under Rules coming from Francis and Clare in the thirteenth century. The Roman Catholic Third Order Regular (the majority of Catholic Franciscans) live under a Rule last revised in 1982. We Anglicans live under a Rule which includes the Principles of the Society of Saint Francis, first compiled in the 1920s and 30s for a Christian ashram in India and then brought to England and gradually adopted by other Anglican Franciscan groups. Not very surprisingly, there were constant 'cries of recognition' as different sisters and brothers discovered the common notes of the different movements which make up the Franciscan symphony. As always much of this process of sharing and discussion goes on informally at

the meal table, in the corridors and common rooms; links and friendships are made, plans for future mutual visits and activities.

We tried to begin to respond to the challenges which the planning group had given us:

'What is franciscan ecumenism?

What unites us even in our division?

What is our role in the relations between churches and within our own churches?

What is taught in our faculties and to our friars and sisters about Franciscan ecumenism?

How are we to understand a Franciscanism rooted in the essentials of the Gospels, not touched by divisions? Could this be a way to unity?

The group committed itself to continue to meet every two years in an international gathering, the next being in Washington DC 2008, and in the intervening year to meet nationally or regionally. In this country it is planned that a group will meet in Easter week 2007. Hopefully, if we can establish such a regular rhythm of breathing in and out of the Spirit of unity, we can make an ecumenical contribution of Franciscan warmth in a time when official church dialogues and cooperation seem to be entering an 'ice-age'.

Meeting in the context of Canterbury with a christian history back to the third century of our era; renewed by the coming of Augustine in 597 at the instigation of Pope Gregory; the place where the first Franciscans settled led by Agnellus of Pisa sent by St. Francis; the see whose Archbishops in the sixteenth century and beyond embraced the Reformation and the Mother church of the Anglican Communion, it was an obvious place for us Franciscans to go on pilgrimage together. We prayed at Greyfriars, where SSF has a house, ate our sandwiches with the Bishop of Dover in Canterbury (representing the Archbishop), made a pilgrimage around Canterbury Cathedral, explored S. Augustine's Abbey and S. Martins (the church with the longest tradition of Christian worship in the British Isles) and finally gathered for Choral Evensong in the Quire of the Cathedral. Hopefully, Francis and Clare were urging us to move forward with faith, hope and love to deepen our baptismal unity in Christ. *f*