

## **Pilgrimage for Peace: The Pilgrims of St Francis**

Seventy years ago, outside the walls of Assisi, Fr Algy SSF met a group of Roman Catholic pilgrims. Called 'Les Compagnons de S. François', they had been founded 10 years before by young French and German Catholics to foster reconciliation between their countries. Since then the movement has spread to the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Sweden, Portugal - and Britain. The British branch was founded in 1969 and called the 'Pilgrims of St Francis'; from the start First and Third Order brothers and sisters have been involved. Kathleen Holford of the Third Order SSF has played a leading role in the movement and was both the first woman and the first non-Roman Catholic to be the International Guardian of the whole organisation.

### **Kathleen writes:**

The Pilgrims of St Francis is an international, ecumenical movement, whose aims are peace, social justice and Christian unity. Its members strive to answer the call of God to work with God's plan to bring about the harmony of all creation by following Jesus Christ after the style of Saint Francis of Assisi.

We see pilgrimage as an outward journey with an inner meaning. It is a microcosm of our whole life's pilgrimage with its joys and sorrows and opportunities for service. It is an enjoyable holiday, but it is more than that, an act of worship and witness and an exercise in community living. We do not necessarily have a geographical goal, as do many other pilgrimages, which go to famous shrines. The route itself becomes the centre of our way of life, of life's journey to God. The spirit of pilgrimage is life always on the move, going out from the known into the unknown; not being afraid to move on in ideas and thoughts.

Each year an international pilgrimage is organised by the participating countries in turn. It is an opportunity to live in Franciscan simplicity without the trappings of our everyday life, carrying everything in a rucksack which we see as a symbol of our walking through life. During the pilgrimage we are divided into groups of twenty to twenty-five people, trying to give a mixture of ages and nationalities, making sure that there are enough people with language skills to interpret for people in their group. People of all ages are welcome; for example last year the youngest was seven weeks old and the oldest, eighty five years. Those who, because of age or infirmity cannot walk the route, are accommodated in a Centre group, where they follow the same programme as the walking groups, without the physical exercise. The walking groups move each day, sleeping on the floors of parish or village halls or in barns.

Every ten years since 1927, the pilgrimage goes to Assisi, all countries helping in the preparation. National Pilgrimages are also held in each country every year, mostly in the summer, and several national movements have weekend pilgrimages and reunions of local groups. A typical day on pilgrimage begins with a meditation before breakfast. Several times during the week, a Eucharist is celebrated in an informal way, often out of doors in a field with an altar constructed of piled up rucksacks. After breakfast we clean up our accommodation, boasting that we leave it cleaner than when we arrived. Then comes the call to 'sac a dos' and we set off towards our next

destination, often singing as we go. The housekeeper and the day's volunteer cooks sometimes have to stop for shopping and sometime during the day we pause for the discussion time.

One feature of the yearly calendar is the International Chapter at Pentecost, following the example of St Francis who called his brothers together for a chapter at that time. Each country also has a National Chapter. These Chapters are times of discussion, following a theme decided internationally and followed during the year in every country and at every meeting, starting on St Francis day. One recent theme was 'violence', and another, 'choice'. The International Chapter leader gathers suggestions from every country to develop the theme and notes are translated and distributed to each country.

Each country has a committee of people, known as the Guardiannat. This committee sends the National Guardian and one other representative to the International Guardiannat which meets twice a year in different locations in Europe. Each country publishes a regular magazine, whose articles are often shared between countries.

Once you have been part of a group on pilgrimage, sharing its life, walking together, praying, singing, cooking and sleeping together, you find you have friends for life. Every pilgrim's home is open to you and many visit each other between pilgrimages in different countries.

The International Pilgrimage for 2007 will take place in Italy around Assisi, 24 July -1 August; the U.K. National Pilgrimage will be from Sherborne to Glastonbury, on 18-25 August. Further details available from Mr S. Isitt, National publicity Officer PSF, 25 Renfrew Court, Allfrey Road, Eastbourne, East Sussex BN22 7SZ, or from the National Guardian, Gill Myall, email: [gillmyall@hotmail.com](mailto:gillmyall@hotmail.com) *f*



*En Route: A stop for Eucharist*