Community Routes

Solitude, Silence, Stability

Gwenfryd Mary is one of three CSF sisters who is a hermit. Here she writes about this life, which despite the Benedictine sound to the heading, has been part of the Franciscan tradition since the time of Francis.

Silence, solitude, stability - these are the three things which the hermit has to offer to the world and to his or her religious community of Sisters and Brothers, and also to the wider body of the Church.

These days there are very many variations on the theme of the eremitical life. In no way is it to be seen as narrow, rigid and stereotyped. There is no rigid pattern of living which is followed by each hermit. Each person called to this way of life is very different, each one's rule varies from the next person's rule. With each one we hopefully find silence, solitude and stability, and a searching after God and the things pertaining to God. Obviously, I can only speak of my own first hand experience of living this type of life - I can only guess at how others work it out, and occasionally share ideas with them.

Hermits and solitaries are found living out their lives both inside and outside of religious orders. The variety of experience and expression is tremendous, as various as the individuals living in this way, each one concentrating on living out his or her life of prayer, devotion, contemplation, good and bad times, high and low times, times of depression, loneliness, bleakness and frustration, emptiness and fullness: times of joy and depths of happiness in a surrounding of cultivated silence, solitude and stability. This, then, is how we live - some of us supported and enabled by our communities and others 'going it alone'.

I attempt to live it out with simplicity and faithfulness. I always try to remember the three aforementioned 'S words'- I feel very strongly about their importance in my everyday life. Indeed, without them there would be no hermit life, no dedication to prayer and contemplation. There is something very drastic about this call, this compulsion to go it alone, and to find in it peace and fulfilment; to find in it a forward movement and also a stillness - a keeping still. To onlookers it will seem a waste of life, a crazy thing to do, an obsession, a piece of fantasy. To hermits it is the only way - the way which means everything and all things.

It is like a ploughman who focuses his gaze on 'the mark' set at the furthest end of his field as he ploughs the furrow, so hermits have to walk a straight line to their 'mark' which is Christ crucified, risen and glorified.

Henri Nouwen, in his book Clowning in Rome, puts it like this: Solitude, celibacy, prayer and contemplation are values for all people, but some men and women have the unique vocation to give special visibility to these values and to guard them with special care. Whenever these values are lived out authentically and generously, what becomes visible is not a spiritual virtuosity, good for a select few, but a way of life which speaks to many.

St Thomas's Chapel

Gwenfryd Mary continues:

It is my very good fortune to reside where I do as the property here belongs to the Church in Wales and one of the two buildings on the site is a Norman 'Beacon Chapel' dating from 1180. It is a Grade II listed building; the other building is the bungalow in which I live.

This little Beacon Chapel has a very interesting and varied history. It is dedicated to St Thomas à Becket and at its foundation it served as a form of lighthouse. It was maintained and serviced by the Benedictine monks from the priory which was situated about two miles inland from here at what is now one of the outer edges of the town.
When the priory was built the town of Milford Haven did not exist, except perhaps for a few fishermen's abodes and the only building visible from the waters of the estuary and the sea would have been St Thomas's perched high up on its rocky foundations. The monks would have cared for the lighting of the cresset up on the roof. It was one of three of its kind along the sides of the waterway. The other two were down at its furthest end - one at each side, the Angle Bay Chapel on the south side and the St Anne's Head Chapel on the north side. There is a modern lighthouse at St Anne's Head now.

The chapels fell into disuse and disrepair at the Reformation and the only one still extant is St Thomas's. Its shell was extensively renovated in the early 1930s by the then vicar of St Katherine's and St Peter's Parish (the Milford Haven parish), an enterprising man who got the complete work done for £900. The result is a very attractive, simple little chapel which still draws visitors and pilgrims, in a steady, quiet way. During the warmer times of the year a weekly Eucharist is held there, with the vicar presiding and a nucleus of regular worshippers.

At the time of the renovation of the chapel, stones from each of the cathedrals in England and Wales were brought here to be used in the construction of the altar, the centre one being from Canterbury Cathedral. There are also two floor tiles set in the front of the altar, remnants from the pre-Reformation floor covering. During the Civil War the chapel was used as an ammunition dump and in later times it housed animals and farm equipment.

Outside in the yard there is a grave marked with a simple cross, reputed to be the last resting place of a Norman soldier. On the east wall there is an incised cross, much worn by time, and probably the original consecration cross. The chapel has five windows, three of which have coloured and leaded glass. These depict the Annunciation, St Hugh of Lincoln and St Thomas à Becket. Above the altar is a modern triptych which tells the story of the setting. The centrepiece shows the martyrdom of St Thomas. This is flanked on one side by a picture illustrating the scene during the Civil War, whilst the other side depicts the Quaker Fathers arriving at Milford. There still remains a strong connection with the Quakers in the area.

Recently it was the tenth anniversary of the tragic accident to the oil tanker, the 'Sea Empress' on the rocks at the mouth of the Haven. It is easy to imagine how dangerous it would have been there in the Middle Ages and how useful the Beacon Chapels were for those sailing in the area.

**A New Venture in Assisi**

We Anglican Franciscans are a small, recently formed branch of the Franciscan movement, but as such we too are delighted to have been able to find a home among the spiritual sons and daughters of Francis and Clare in Assisi.

That home has found its concrete reality in a small rented apartment in the old city, not far from the Basilica of St. Francis, where Brother Thomas Anthony is establishing an Anglican Chaplaincy in the city on behalf of the Diocese in Europe. We have the use of a little church with a service every Sunday morning, and we are also involved with the Centro Internazionale per il Dialogo (CEFID), run by the Conventual Friars (OFM Conv), in its work of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue. They also have self-catering accommodation for ecumenical groups.

The task is first of all to represent Anglican Franciscans among the many other Franciscan groups present, but also to be a resource for the thousands of people who come to Assisi every year. They come for all sorts of reasons but all are pilgrims one way or another and the hope is to be available whether by providing some background, directing people to the places of interest, by giving informal walking tours, or by helping to find accommodation.

It is intended that other brothers and sisters from the First and Third orders will work with Thomas Anthony and he will always be happy to have company, whether people come for visits, to assist in the work of the chaplaincy, or to relieve him when he has
to be away. A donation will be asked from visitors who come to stay. Because of local sensibilities sisters and other female guests will stay at CEFID, just a three minutes walk away.

To find out more, contact Thomas Anthony in Assisi (see address page 13) or follow the link from www.franciscans.org.uk

Algy SSF
23 November 2005 was the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Father Algy, a co-founder with Brother Douglas of SSF. Brother Anselm wrote the following remembrance of him:

About ten brothers in this Province remember Algy, all with different memories - he was very much 'all things to all men' which makes defining him so difficult. Anything remembered can be countered with a 'but'. An iron fist in a velvet glove? Just as often, the other way round.

I remember two constants.

First, the sense of direction, of purpose. Everything was for Jesus, for his kingdom, for the achievement of what he believed to be his life's work - the way he hastened from being late from one appointment to being late for the next. My last memory is of him walking up the path from Clare House (then 'The Friars' House') towards the garage where the van waited(!) to carry him from the priests' retreat. He was leaving for the final appointment, as it turned out.

Second, never far away was the sense of humour - not that he went in for wisecracks, but that there was always a gentle irony which went with his ability to get to the bottom of things with people. There were those among the senior brothers on whom all that was lost, who couldn't see beyond the inconsistencies and the unpunctuality. That was a dominant factor in friary politics, and I think gave rise to such mixed messages about him. As ever in Religious Life, we're so wonderful with other people, and hopeless with each other.

Whatever the memories, the exaggerations, we can be sure of this. Anyone who has experienced the love of God through the medium of SSF is indebted to Algy whose painful life's work was its creation. And is - he's still around. It's just that he's a little late - 50 years, to be exact.

College of Evangelists
Desmond Alban was commissioned as a member of the National College of Evangelists, by the Bishop of Lichfield on behalf of the two Archbishops, at Lichfield Cathedral on Thursday 23 March 2006. The College was inaugurated in 1999 and exists to provide recognition from the wider Church and mutual support and fellowship for those called to a ministry of evangelism beyond the local parish and diocese. Founder members include a number of well-known and lesser-known evangelists across the various traditions of the Church of England, amongst them Brothers Bernard and Martin. Phyllis was admitted in 2001.

Round up
Amos has moved to Hilfield and Mark Edmund to Saint Martin's Vicarage, Plaistow. Jenny Tee has moved to Birmingham and Hilary will move to Compton Durville in June (please note the change of address when sending in subscription renewals). Andrew, whilst remaining a member of this province, has returned to Goroka in Papua New Guinea.