

St. Mary at the Cross - Glasshampton Monastery

On the top of a hill in Worcestershire, a mile up a pot-holed farm track, the intrepid pilgrim can turn to survey a view that sweeps across the Severn valley. Here at the monastery of St. Mary at the Cross the SSF finds its place as a community in the tradition of Franciscan contemplative prayer. It is a tradition that goes right back to the early hermitages beloved of St. Francis in the mountains of Umbria and beyond.

The house itself was originally a stable-block, built for a large mansion now ploughed under the neighbouring field. The stables were built around 1810, but the main house burned down soon afterwards and was never rebuilt. After this, one corner of the stables was used as a gamekeeper's cottage. In the early years of the twentieth century, Fr. William Sirr of the Society of the Divine Compassion (SDC) felt called by God to leave his work in the East End of London to lead a life of prayer in a more secluded setting. In the winter of 1918 he moved to Glasshampton and established the religious life in this place.



Fr. William lived here for nearly 20 years, leading a life of silence, contemplation, intercessory prayer and manual labour. He renovated the building to make it habitable again. People came to stay for shorter or longer periods of time, finding in him a spiritual director of great holiness. Fr. William had always hoped to found a Cistercian style

community at Glasshampton, but as the years went by it became clear that no community was going to form around him. He died in 1937, and his grave can be found in the monastery garth.

In 1947 the brothers of the Society of St. Francis were invited to come to live at Glasshampton. From that time the monastery has acted as a place where a group of professed brothers seek to live out the contemplative side of the Franciscan charism, novice brothers receive part of their training, and guests come for a time of retreat. Our day is structured around the Daily Office, and other times of communal prayer in the chapel, much of which we sing to Gregorian chant. The daily Eucharist, and the times of silent prayer morning and evening, also help us in our aim to maintain a sense of stillness and waiting on God, even amidst all the business of cooking, cleaning and tending the garden. This includes keeping the central cloister quiet and having silent meals. We do this in order to nurture an awareness of the presence of God who throughout the day, meets us when our hearts are open to the silent wonder of God's love.

Many brothers have lived here over the years. Local people still talk with great affection of brothers such as Alban, Ramon and others who have lived here in the past. At present we are four resident brothers: Benedict, the Guardian of the House and Novice Guardian; Jason Robert, who is with us from the Province of the Americas for two years; Roger Alexander, who joined

us in the autumn of 2005, having moved from the SSF house in Cambridge; and Nicholas Alan, who until May 2006 has been attending an ordination course at Queen's College in Birmingham two days a week. Many others have stayed here in recent years, but have now flown further afield, such as Thomas Anthony in Assisi, James Anthony in Tanzania, and Andrew now back in Papua New Guinea. Hosting brothers from other provinces is also a great joy for us, and our lives have been enriched by Athanasius from PNG, Stephen from Korea and others from the Melanesian Brotherhood.

The main ministry of the house is to the people who come to stay with us. The guest-wing of the monastery has five rooms for men or women staying on retreat. Guests usually stay for up to six days, between Tuesday afternoon and Monday morning. Working guests stay for up to two weeks and help us greatly, from cooking pies to pruning roses. Individuals, and small groups from parishes, have Quiet Days here; and friends from the local farms and villages join us from time to time for services during the week. People staying with us enjoy walking in the gardens and beyond the monastery, following one of the many footpaths in the area. We are privileged to live in an area of great natural beauty, surrounded by woods and fields. People sometimes ask to see one of the brothers for spiritual direction or confession, or use the time to study, or simply take the opportunity to relax and come closer to God away from the pressures of life at home or at work. Many return year after year for an annual retreat, finding in Glasshampton a spiritual home that helps to keep their lives centred in God. [f](#)