

The Hilfield Friary Community

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Over the past year the community of Franciscan brothers at Hilfield has been supplemented by the arrival of others who have come to share in the life and work of the Friary. As well as young volunteers who are with us for up to a year we now have three couples (plus one small baby) and three individuals committed to being with us for a longer period, who are sharing in developing a new pattern of community living.

In one sense this development is a matter of expedience. With seven houses, several outbuildings and nineteen acres of land, the Friary is a large place to manage and care for and for some years it has been difficult to find younger brothers able to undertake this as well as providing hospitality for guests. Work for wayfarers was abandoned a few years ago, the Guest House reduced in size, ministry outside the Friary cut back, and the Hilfield Project established to undertake something creative with the land, but it was still too much for those who remained. We rejected the idea of closing other friaries in order to bring brothers 'back to base', and for a time we even considered the possibility of leaving Hilfield.

In another sense, however, this development is the expression of a new vision of Franciscan community which has been coming into focus over a number of years, and which is mirroring what is happening elsewhere in the Church. People are feeling called to share in a life of prayer and worship, of radical hospitality, of care for creation, and to live this in community - but to do so without the institutional structures that have come to be a part of traditional religious life. This might seem to be a sign of the lack of commitment characteristic of contemporary society or a way of 'having one's cake and eating it', but it could equally well be the work of the Spirit bringing fresh life to a flagging, or even dying, movement.

The development or re-foundation of the community is not without growing pains or risks. The five of us SSF brothers who are now living at Hilfield could feel a bit swamped by the influx of others 'taking over'; the direction of the place could be hijacked by those who haven't experienced the formation of a Franciscan novitiate and it could lose its particular Franciscan identity. People without a life-long intention or commitment can go as well as come and we could be left suddenly in the lurch. Those living with us for a limited time, especially couples with children, are going to have different needs to brothers who are vowed to celibacy and poverty, so there are financial and other implications too. Yet here we are, trusting that this is the way forward under God.

It seems to me that there are three essentials in response to such risks, the first of which is that a life of prayer and worship is maintained as central to the community. We continue with the rhythm of prayer time, daily office and Eucharist which is part of the SSF First Order rule; others join the brothers for more or less of the liturgy and share in officiating, reading, interceding, preaching and preparing worship - indeed we often need to rely on them to

keep the pattern going. We make room, too, for other less formal kinds of prayer and bible study. Without this centrality of prayer the community would be in danger of losing its Christ-centredness - the very thing which attracts people to Hilfield in the first place.

The second essential is some clarity in understanding what we are about, for life in community can never be an end in itself. Hilfield, from the beginning of Franciscan life here, has always been a place of care for people and of radical hospitality, especially for those on the margins of society. The guest ministry for both individuals and groups continues, and we are beginning to welcome again people who come with particular needs of sanctuary, rehabilitation, or renewal. The focus on paying attention to the land and on its 'kindly use' for producing food is, we believe, a true expression of our Franciscan view of creation as a blessing and as a family of which we are a part, rather than just as a location where we happen incidentally to live, a place simply for our own convenience. The title of the Peace and Environment Project, set up in 2006 to put this into practice, has been adjusted slightly to that of The Hilfield 'Programme', in order to emphasise that this is now an expression of the whole Hilfield Friary Community - its mission - rather than something separate and running in parallel to it. Having various types of accommodation available to visitors, self-catering as well as the Guest House and rooms for day groups, means that we can offer a programme of study and reflection which shares with others something of our Franciscan ecology or 'household wisdom'.

Lastly, for this new type of community to succeed, those who come to join us must be invited to play a full part in carrying responsibility for the life, rather than being seen just as 'brothers' helpers'. While ultimate responsibility for Hilfield remains for the foreseeable future with the First Order SSF Provincial Chapter and the Minister, the Hilfield Local Chapter consists of both brothers and longer-term community members and takes decisions about all essential day-to-day matters. The whole community, including those who live locally and come in to help us in any way, also meets together regularly to share concerns and ideas, a kind of formation programme which shapes the vision of who we are and what we are about.

It could be said that the wheel at Hilfield has come full circle, since in the 1920's under Br Douglas' leadership the early community at Flowers Farm consisted both of those committed to a form of traditional religious life and also of others, including couples, who shared in the work of the market garden and of rehabilitation of men on the road. Out of that initiative (not without its critics who claimed that it wasn't 'proper' religious life) there issued a flowering of which today's Society of St Francis in its three orders is the fruit. Who knows where this present development will lead us? *f*