If your memory is long enough to encompass life in the 50’s, you'll recall that ‘first’ and ‘third’ class described railway seats - ‘second’ had mysteriously disappeared. Not so with the Society of Saint Francis, for that comprised First, Second and Third Orders and if there was a mystery it was that which veiled the Third Order from the view of any but the chosen few. It was the creation of Father Algy and the legendary Dorothy Swayne, and there was no talk of Areas or Regions or statistics or names even - in fact, among the rank and file there was no talk at all, which opened the door to all kinds of speculation.

This issue of *franciscan* explores the subsequent development and expansion (in all directions) of the Third Order from various viewpoints. My task is to give an impression of how the First and Third Orders interrelated over the period, decade by decade, in an unashamedly personal and anecdotal manner. I shall not hesitate to drop names (you will have already noticed two), so here is evidence from one who was successively a Hooke brother, a roaming brother, a Scunthorpe brother, a Cambridge brother, a Birmingham brother and a Glasshampton brother. Let me say at the outset that I simply offer these memories as impressions, with no attempt at any kind of analysis - if the reader can spot any developing trends in the way First and Third Orders connect over this period, let her or him do so - never forgetting the role of the Second Order, our sisters at Freeland, whose prayers from 1950 onwards have been crucial to the life of the Society of Saint Francis.

In the 60’s and 70’s I was a Dorset brother, mostly as the ‘headmaster’ at St Francis’ School, Hooke, near Beaminster and have one memory during those eventful years of a Third Order contact. There was to be a gathering in Exeter, and I was invited to speak to the group - inevitably, about the life and work of brothers at the school. I drove down to Devon; there was the eucharist in a lovely little church in the cathedral close, and I suppose sandwiches and talk, organised by Joan Levett. Before dropping that name, I looked it up and found that she now lives in Axminster. I wonder whether she can remember that day?
The 70's (long hair, and growing disillusionment) gave way to the 80's (Thatcher, the Falklands, yuppies) - and I spread wheels and wings as the First Order brothers' European Minister Provincial. Ex officio, I attended Third Order chapters usually held at St Columba's in Woking, in order to acquaint those tertiaries with the doings of our brothers in the province which then included houses in England (from Cornwall to Northumberland), Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Tanzania with a population of about 100 friars. With my recent experience as a teacher of science I was an enemy of waffle and a firm believer in visual presentation, so there accompanied me on my travels a camera, and a slide projector. My slot at the TO chapters always included the latest transparencies from the First Order houses and left me with memories chiefly of Mary Johnson, then Guardian of the TO European Province and firmly in the chair at chapter, and many others - for me Mary was my top tertiary and I miss her very much.

From time to time Provincial Chapter (FO) has become concerned about leadership in the First Order, and to help with the brain-racking process it was decided to assemble a think tank at St Edward's House in Westminster. We discovered that in the ranks of the Third Order there was a General, no less, and Hugh Beach generously gave of his time and wisdom to come and help us to grapple with this perennial problem.

As well as being a roving minister, I was from 1984 a Scunthorpe brother (half time) - and this brought lots of contacts with Lincolnshire tertiaries. Foremost among them has to be Rachel Ollard whose conviction it was that First Order brothers were in dire need of lavish hospitality. Twice a year, on Boxing Day and Easter Monday, we all went in the car over to Scallowes Hall for a splendid lunch straight from the Aga, and on one such occasion we were able to express our gratitude by giving her a hare which had come into fatal contact with our radiator twenty minutes earlier.

When the house was opened by the Bishop of Grimsby (David Tustin, a Companion of SSF) the Third Order was there in force. Later I became a regular visitor to St James', Louth to hear confessions at the invitation of David Owen, team rector, and yes (later), a tertiary. The late Madeline Ruddock was another of that valiant band who visited the Scunthorpe house regularly.

Also while in Scunthorpe we had links with the RC Secular Franciscan Order at St Bernadette's. And, an invitation came from the Midlands TO to help with a regional event to be held at St Paul's, Balsall Heath in Birmingham - and this included a planning day with Elisabeth Stirling, Daphne Cook and Doreen Lambert. Subsequently, over the years, Elisabeth shared her generous hospitality in Ketton, conveniently situated between Cambridge and Birmingham on the railway.

However, it is in the nature of Franciscans to come and go, and after thirteen years the Scunthorpe house closed. Five years earlier, I had become a Cambridge brother, and parish priest at St Bene't's. Waiting for me in the congregation and in leading positions were Pamela Hill - soon to become
churchwarden, Pamela Middleton (PCC Treasurer), Elizabeth Walser, Alice Knewstubb, Pam Yates and the late Thelma Frost. It was a very real bonus to have a Franciscan presence in the congregation - many more, of course, in the Cambridge neighbourhood - and to know that it's still there though the brothers have (sadly) moved on.

At the turn of the millennium my time in Cambridge came to an end, and I exchanged Botolph Lane for Claerwen Grove in which stood the Birmingham friary of SSF on the Ley Hill Estate in Northfield. There was no Third Order presence on Ley Hill, and a scattering of tertiaries in other parts of the city - so there was an opportunity for providing a meeting place in the shape of a good old fashioned festival at Francistide. The place was found - St Francis' Church, Bournville. At midday, Sung Eucharist, preacher, David Walker TO, Bishop of Dudley, bring your own lunch, a talk by Brother Desmond Alban, about seventy people (yes, mostly elders) and a good TO presence including Peter Dixon the Area Minister. This was all in the noughties, and a part of the background to the brothers' work among young people with very little in the way of stability or education to give them a start in life. Andrew Anderson invited me twice in those years to Yorkshire to speak to his Area Meeting, in Ripon first, and then Pickering.

I write from Glasshampton which is a sort of crossroads for First and Third Orders - seldom are we without tertiaries in retreat or on a shorter visit, at present Bob and Margaret Bell from near Lincoln. Local tertiaries - Guy and Mary Smith, John and Cathryn Parkes - help us with the garden. We were able, with some of the Birmingham sisters, to join the Third Order at a recent Cluster Meeting and so meet with Joanna Coney, Ruth Wintle and others at a special occasion, including friends from Birmingham.

And that's the story so far. And the lesson? For me, that the Society of Saint Francis comprises in three orders and the Companions a body of people whose faith and vocation find strength and grace in mutual friendship - and for whom those friendships are enriched by a common membership of Christ.