



# A Franciscan Way

Why Religious life?

Why Francis and Clare, founders of the Franciscan way of religious life?

Why our Society of St Francis in the Anglican Church?

Because God calls, that's why.

And why does God call?



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Because that's the sort of God our God is.

Not a God who set it all up and then lost interest, but a God whose concern is for every last one of us, and who has a purpose, an intention, for every one.

God's purpose for the infant who dies because of famine has to remain a mystery, God's secret – but the purpose for every human person remains, unique for each. The goal and sum of all these purposes is the reign and glory of the God whose supremacy is expressed as service and whose splendour is love.

That's true for everyone – whether or not they encountered Jesus or his church in this life.

In his life on earth Jesus called the disciples, men and women. After his resurrection he called Paul, and multitudes since have known and responded to that call. Today Jesus continues to call. He calls us, in the first place, to repent and to be baptized.

In the first place. And then?

'This is the way – follow it.'

Within that primary call to follow Christ are many paths.

For most people the way includes those activities which promote the welfare and ensure the continuance of human society – marriage, children, a materially productive occupation.

For some the way is of self-denying service of the community, for example in medicine, education, the arts, the church's ministry.

And, for a few in the church, the way is the way of the religious vows – poverty, chastity, obedience – usually lived out in community.

By any reasonable standard this is a crazy way, but there it is, it won't go away. It has deep roots in the Christian story. Jesus didn't marry, the first Christians lived in community and shared their possessions, and ever since the Christian story has thrown up various expressions of what came to be called 'the Religious Life' – a way among the ways in which God calls people to repent, to turn, to become who they truly are, and to live out baptism in the name of the Trinity.

Of course questions arise.

How can a few, by following this call, make, as they might put it, 'a difference to God's universe', 'bring about God's reign, radiate God's glory'?

A definitive and certain answer isn't possible. At the heart of God's purpose is mystery but some Gospel parables come to mind – the tiny mustard seed which grew to be a tree, the yeast which leavened the lump of dough, the pearl of great price, the treasure buried in a field.

One person who literally gave everything he had for the treasure which God offered him lived in Italy in the thirteenth century. Few of his contemporaries would have guessed that this playboy- turned- beggar would start a movement that still influences the lives of men and women throughout the world.

Francis Bernardone, the son of a prosperous cloth merchant in Assisi, underwent a conversion which tarnished the glamour of his former life. Now he tried to live out a Gospel life, imitating Jesus Christ in humility and absolute poverty, preaching to everyone – men and women, old and young, rich and poor, even to birds! Soon other men wished to join him and thus the Order of Friars Minor (Little Brothers) was formed. Today there are OFM Brothers throughout the world still living by his rule.



Clare was a young noblewoman who, inspired by Francis and his way of following Christ, ran away from home to join him. Soon she was joined by other women and together they founded a community in the Monastery at San Damiano, near Assisi. The sisters lived a life of prayer, in enclosure, seldom leaving the Monastery or having visitors. □ There are still Poor Clares living this hidden life of prayer and poverty.

Many married, working people were also attracted by Francis and his way of life but their existing commitments made it impossible for them to become friars or sisters. So Francis wrote a rule to help them also to live in simplicity and humility, and the Third Order came into being. Among Anglican Franciscans, the Third Order is the largest group.

During the Reformation all Religious Orders, including Franciscans, were banished from Britain. Not until the mid-nineteenth century were the first Sisterhoods founded in the Church of England, in response to the social needs of the time. Then came a revival of interest in Francis. The Community of St Francis (CSF) was founded with sisters living in poverty and working in the East End of London. Several groups of men started Franciscan Orders and these eventually came together with CSF, the Community of St Clare, and the Third Order to form the Society of St Francis (SSF) as we know it today. Men and women, joining with Francis and Clare, following in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ.



What does that life in the footsteps of Christ and the way of Francis and Clare look like in the 21st century? Follow us on a lightning tour of the Province ....

Spinning coloured lights and an electronic alarm – together with a cry of frustration – let Darren know that the laser from his gun has found its target. Moments later, a dozen Birmingham

teenagers trace their way through the half-light and smoke to consult the electronic scoreboards. One of the Brothers has done it again. When it comes to laser combat, he seems to be unbeatable.

Eighty miles away two brothers, living a life based on St Francis' Rule for Hermits, prepare to use a very different weapon – prayer – in their work for the Kingdom of God. It is early Sunday afternoon and they are preparing for one of their daily 'offices' or Chapel services.

Meanwhile, at Alnmouth, on the Northumberland coast, the weekend guests have left promptly after lunch and one brother sets to work cleaning fifteen lavatories while a resident Third Order volunteer lends a hand with the hoovering and dusting.

Down in Somerset, a sister at Compton Durville would dearly love to make a start on their guest cleaning too, but she has promised this weekend's student group a 'question and answer' session before they leave. Having preached that morning in Chapel and cooked the lunch (think small hotel rather than large private house) she is a little frustrated by one of the questions: 'What do you actually do all day?'

Well perhaps that student can be forgiven. Even if you could share the experience of living inside C/SSF as a sister or brother you might be hard pushed to paint a picture of what goes on outside your particular part of the community.

The life and work is as varied as the dozen or more houses in this province – or perhaps, more accurately, as varied as the individual brothers and sisters who inhabit them.

But even that won't do. As the bard might have said, one brother in his time plays many parts.

Franciscan houses, like their members, have to get used to change. Particular times and places have their own opportunities, and ministries grow, flourish and fade like the flowers of the field. Certain 'high visibility' roles tend to dominate the perception of the Christian public and many will have met a habited Franciscan as part of a team leading an evangelistic mission or a parish quiet day, or speaking in an assembly or a lesson in a school.

These more traditional roles remain important, but Franciscans are to be found serving Christ in the world in all sorts of ways.

Many have secular jobs, paid or voluntary, from a few hours each week assisting in a primary school or a drugs or homelessness project to practice as a clinical psychologist.

Indeed, for members of the smaller houses, like Brixton, Plaistow, Stepney, or Cambridge, where one of the brothers is also a vicar, 'going out to work' is very much part of the routine, though on an urban estate, such as the one where the Franciscans live in Glasgow, much of the work is at home or on the doorstep.

All houses seek to be places where God's welcome can be experienced, but the work of hospitality is particularly seen in a large house like Hilfield where forty or more people – brothers, long and short term guests and homeless wayfarers – often sit down to a meal together. Some sisters and brothers engage in the ministry of 'spiritual direction' as part of this hospitality.

Glasshampton in the Worcestershire countryside, with its quieter style of hospitality and emphasis on simplicity and silence, focuses with greater clarity something which is a 'family trait' in all the houses, namely the regular daily pattern of prayer.

In all their varied forms of ministry sisters and brothers are also encouraged to remember that they are called to form community. □The needs of members who are now less able than they once were sometimes come to the fore, as is the case particularly in the sisters' house in Birmingham.

Whether the tools of the trade are a nursing kit, a Bible, or even a laser gun, the final aim is the same, to reflect the love of Christ and to serve him in his brothers and sisters in the world.

What forms and sustains these many expressions of Franciscan life? Relationship is at the heart of the life now as it was for Francis and Clare. Francis of Assisi didn't set out to found a religious order, or even to establish a community, but simply to live life in accordance with the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. There was no 'master plan', just a relationship. Through knowing 'Brother Jesus', Francis came to recognize himself and all creation as belonging together in God's family.

Franciscan life is about discovering for oneself and then sharing with others this relationship of brotherhood and sisterhood in Christ.

Franciscan community is the primary place in which this relationship is experienced and expressed.

Franciscan hospitality is about welcoming others – young and old, rich and poor, believer and non-believer – as brothers and sisters.

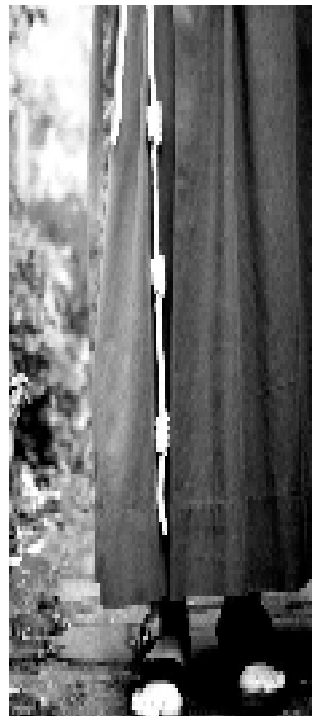
Franciscan work is about serving and caring for others from the perspective of this relationship.

Franciscan love of the world around us is about honouring all creatures, even the inanimate creation, as belonging to God and reflecting the goodness and glory of God. All people, animals and things are part of God's family.

Franciscan brothers and sisters commit themselves to a growing friendship and a deepening love for each other – yet without sexual intimacy. The vow of celibate chastity, though a costly renunciation, can free them to live as witnesses to this new kind of family, and to share this friendship with those whom they meet.

Such a life requires trust and openness among the brothers and sisters, and a great deal of generosity.

Within the community the household tasks of cooking, cleaning, gardening, and above all, caring for each other are a shared responsibility. Meals and recreation together are important occasions for building up this life in community. As well as the daily work around the house, brothers and sisters undertake many forms of ministry inside and outside the houses. Some is paid, some is unpaid. Any money earned or given goes into the common fund, from which whatever



is needed for personal expenses is received. The vow of poverty witnesses both to our own emptiness and insufficiency and also to the huge generosity of God which is known, above all, in Jesus Christ.

This life of brotherhood and sisterhood may seem a beautiful ideal, but it isn't an easy one – and it doesn't suit everybody. Not everyone who feels drawn to it is in fact called by God. Living at close quarters with people of different backgrounds, ages and outlooks can be a testing experience which requires a certain robustness and stability of temperament. So the first three years as a franciscan brother or sister – the period of noviciate – is a time of discernment, both about oneself and about the shape of this life. Then both the individual and the community can come to a decision about a longer term commitment to life under vows.

The vow of obedience witnesses to the need for a patient attentiveness to oneself, to each other and to the world, in order that God's purpose may be recognised and fulfilled.

Some of this attentiveness takes the form of study. Novices are given various opportunities to study, depending on their own previous experience and the ministries which they are being asked to undertake. But the habit of study needs to continue throughout life, so that each may continue to grow and change as they become more deeply part of the family of community.

Franciscan family cannot be created artificially; it is the gift of God, and it takes a lifetime and more to grow into fruition. Everyday life together, and study, promote this growth. However, prayer and worship form us at a deeper level than anything else can, and this is why they play such a central part in the franciscan life. Brothers and sisters are committed to times of personal prayer every day. They also gather together four times a day to pray together, to listen to the scriptures and to celebrate the Eucharist. All this so that they may be constantly focussed on the life which is given them, and shaped to the pattern which is essentially not an abstract idea, but a person – Jesus Christ.

Today in our world we are seeing the emergence of a global consciousness; we can feel a part of what is happening far away; we are able to travel and to communicate with each other instantly. Yet at the same time our society is experiencing deeper divisions than ever before between races, between religions, between rich and poor. Local communities are often fragmented, and individuals are increasingly isolated. In such a world the way of Francis doesn't provide a cosy refuge, but it does point towards a radically alternative vision for the human race and all creatures – a vision based upon the relationship that is given through Jesus. By living and working, praying and celebrating as brothers and sisters a new world is proclaimed and a new community is begun.

# Becoming a franciscan

Do you think you may be called to be a Franciscan? ☐ Men and women join us from a variety of backgrounds – evangelical and catholic, lay and ordained, those with university degrees and those who left school at 16, Christians for many years and those newer to church life.

If you are aged between 21 and 45, single, with no dependent children, and free of major physical or emotional health problems, contact the Novice Guardians:

For men: The Novice Guardian SSF, Saint Mary-at-the-Cross, Glasshampton, Shrawley, Worcester WR6 6TQ.

For women: The Novice Guardian CSF, St Francis Convent, Compton Durville, South Petherton, Somerset TA13 5ES

## Other ways of being Franciscan

The Second Order are enclosed contemplative sisters, following the Rule of Saint Clare, a contemporary of St Francis. They are at Saint Mary's Convent, Freeland, Witney, Oxon OX29 8AJ. Tel: 01993 881225; fax: 882434; e-mail: [freelandosc@franciscans.org.uk](mailto:freelandosc@franciscans.org.uk).

The Third Order is open to men and women over the age of 18 who feel that God is calling them to live out their Franciscan vocation in the world. While committed to family responsibilities and engaged in the ordinary tasks of life, the Third Order offers a life of challenge and support for those called to a deeper commitment to Christ and a life under vow. For more information contact the Administrator, 19 Nolan Street, Southport PR8 6QQ. Tel: 01704 532121; ☐email [calvey@btinternet.com](mailto:calvey@btinternet.com). ☐Or visit the TSSF website at [www.orders.anglican.org/tssf/](http://www.orders.anglican.org/tssf/)

Companions support the Society in prayer and through giving. ☐They keep a simple Rule of Life, and some meet in local groups. For more information contact The Secretary for Companions, Hilfield Friary, Dorchester, Dorset DT2 7BE; e-mail: [companions@franciscans.org.uk](mailto:companions@franciscans.org.uk).

# Want to know more?

Visit our website: [www.franciscans.org.uk](http://www.franciscans.org.uk)

Read all about it – subscribe to Franciscan. Contact The Subscriptions Secretary, Hilfield Friary, Dorchester, Dorset DT2 7BE, for current rates.

Come and stay with us. (&Sisters, %Brothers)□These houses offer hospitality as part of their ministry.

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Arrange to visit us. Our other houses are:

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&Saint Francis House, 113 Gillott Road, Birmingham B16 0ET. □Tel: 0121 454 8302; e-mail: [birminghamcsf@franciscans.org.uk](mailto:birminghamcsf@franciscans.org.uk)

&43 Endymion Road, Brixton, London SW2 2BU. Tel: 020 8671 9401; e-mail: [brixtoncsf@franciscans.org.uk](mailto:brixtoncsf@franciscans.org.uk)

%Saint Francis House, 14 Botolph Lane, Cambridge CB2 3RD. Tel: 01223 353903 & 321576; e-mail: [cambridgessf@franciscans.org.uk](mailto:cambridgessf@franciscans.org.uk)

%Alverna, 110 Ellesmere Road, Gladstone Park, London NW10 1JS. Tel: 020 8452 7285

%&62 Dalserf Street, Barrowfield, Glasgow G31 4AT. □Tel: 0141 550 1202; e-mail: [glasgowssf@franciscans.org.uk](mailto:glasgowssf@franciscans.org.uk)

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The aim of this short booklet is to introduce the reader to the First Order brothers and sisters of the Society of St Francis in the European Province – and impossible task.

Nothing can take the place of meeting sisters and brothers, or visiting our houses.

The Franciscan way is a life to be lived, and only in encountering that life can the way be understood but this may be a starting point for those who haven't yet met us, and answer some of the questions of those who have.