

Franciscan Angles

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Bringing a Franciscan Presence to Justice and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka

Whenever I talked to Brother Leo about my dream of initiating a Franciscan movement in Sri Lanka he would reply, "Keep dreaming!" So in holy obedience I kept dreaming and now it is the time- the *kairos*- to pass from dream to actuality. The critical dialogue within my community and with friends, colleagues and the Bishops in Sri Lanka helped no end to clarify and sharpen the promptings of the heart into a clearer vision of what I believe is God's call for me. A call I share with the entire Society of St Francis; very much in the spirit of the poor one of Assisi who never ceased to bring the Good News of God's *shalom* to all of God's creation, without exception. His prayer and action for each and everyone, in fact his entire mission is succinctly encapsulated in his salutation, "Pax et Bonum". He crossed the human made boundaries and divides of race, religion and ideology to unconditionally embrace, and be embraced, as brother/sister all he met. He practiced a radical *ahimsa* which grew out of a profound and experiential knowledge that every particle of the creation in its unique specificity is an equally important manifestation of the *Logos*; to be loved and venerated as the Father loves the Son. This explains Francis's reverence of the sacred texts of all faiths as recounted by Thomas of Celano.

I thank God for leading me to the Society of St Francis and the Franciscan formation that I have had, the opportunities to study Pali Buddhism at the University of Queensland, and the enriching ministries and experiences that the Society encouraged me to engage in. They have all prepared me for the mission that lies ahead.

I am going to a people caught up in a savage and bloody civil war, deeply wounded and divided. As many as 80,000-100,000 men, women and children have been killed; many thousands have been bereft, orphaned, and left homeless. Many have been traumatised, brutalised and perhaps scarred for life. State terror and counter terror, the violation of fundamental human and civil rights breeds fear, insecurity and despair amongst the people especially the poorest of the poor. The world food and fuel crisis has led the greater majority to abject and grinding poverty-starvation is not too far away! There are those who have decided to take a stand against this trend and to demand an end to the military option and to call for talks to arrive at a political solution that recognises the just demands of the Tamil people who are the most disadvantaged. I see myself as being in solidarity with this movement and will attempt to be a Franciscan presence among them.



After 13 years in the ANZ province Br Lionel will return home to bring a Franciscan presence to Justice and Reconciliation work in Sri Lanka

On earlier visits to Sri Lanka I have been able to dialogue with several concerned people from a wide range of backgrounds, Christians lay and ordained, Buddhists including monks, Hindus, Muslims and those who follow secular ideologies who were very interested in the vision of Francis and the possibility of forming an interfaith community to be engaged in the struggle for justice and reconciliation. Anglican bishops of the Church of Ceylon are most enthusiastic and have invited me to come and be involved in this process.

I shall be staying in an Ashram that was formed by Sevaka Yohan Devananda many years ago, called Devasaranaramaya in a village area some 100 miles from Colombo and situated in the diocese of Kurunegala. Yohan's vision has had a profound influence on my life and thinking. I shall be working very closely with him.

While all this is exciting and something I am convinced is where my vocation is leading me, there is much that is at present well hidden in the mind of God. What form will it take? Where will it lead to? Only time will tell. I need your love and support and your prayers.

Br Lionel ssf

Honest to God

I have been re-reading a book that caused a sensation in the Anglican Church some forty-five years ago, when we were more concerned about outreach than sex. Bishop John Robinson believed that the Church had a deep-seated problem in presenting God to the contemporary secular society. He described the problem at length in his book *Honest to God*¹. It is interesting to reflect if things have changed since that time.

Robinson believed that the problem was, basically, the Church's tendency to talk of God as a being that exists alongside other beings (creation), and that he is somehow "out there" in a place called heaven beyond the bright blue sky, beyond creation.

In the 1960s quite a lot of people still went to church, though the number was smaller than during World War Two, and shrinking. Robinson attributed this loss of belief mainly to a reified, "out there" kind of theism: God as a discrete entity in the midst of nothingness. He was also concerned about the popular idea of Jesus as not quite human but only partly divine – a sort of God-man. His experience told him that, while churchgoers were still content with those notions, increasing numbers of people found them incompatible with reason and modern-day thinking. Atheists were having a field day.

However, he thought there was hope for a "new reformation". He cited the writings of radical theologians like Bonhöffer, with his enigmatic reference to "religionless Christianity", to Tillich with his notion that we should see God as the "ground of our being", and Bultmann, who stressed the mythological nature of much Biblical writing.

The book raised a storm of protest from conservative church people, clerical and lay. Some accused Robinson of being an atheist and demanded his resignation. I believe that, today, such a book would cause less outrage, it would probably attract little interest in fact. However, numbers in the pew have continued to decline and the average age to climb, but people mostly don't actively deny Church doctrine; they see it as irrelevant to their lives. Apathy is a greater threat to faith than atheism, which is an act of faith anyway. In 1963, Robinson was able to say that the word 'religion' still stood for the highest values in life. I doubt if we could say that today.

The ongoing decline of church attendance has been attended by other significant changes over the years. One has been the emergence of a popular hunger for spirituality, often expressed in so-called "new age" cults, often focussed on our relationship with the natural world. Many people today say they are interested in spirituality but not in institutional religion. Even those who are respectful of religion still feel no desire to be involved. Conservative Christians are sceptical about a spirituality focussed in nature. They tend to see the environment as something separate, something to conquer and control. They are sceptical about climate change and the need for environmental care. (Cardinal Pell is an example.)

Another development has been a growing interest in other religions and in interfaith dialogue. There might be as many people interested in religion now as there were in the 1960s, but there is more diversity.

The rising average standard of living has also had an impact. With more money, families and individuals have more ways to enjoy themselves at weekends. Young people have cars. Even retirees can afford to do more interesting things than going to church.

Of course, the simplest answer to all this is to say that all these people *ought* to go to church like I do and my ancestors before me, but wrapping oneself up in a warm blanket of self-righteousness, relieved that we're not gay or lesbian, doesn't really help. Jesus told his disciples (not just clergy, because there weren't any) to go out and proclaim the Good News.

Jesus did this, not by issuing a new set of dogma, but by telling made-up stories about daily life with a challenging twist to them. We need to be able to communicate the Good News in terms of modern life and modern thinking in this affluent, materialistic, sceptical, scientific age.

In relation to this there has been one significant development during the last hundred years; that is the radical change in scientific thinking. Relativity and quantum theory has revolutionised the scientists' view of reality. It is much less materialistic. The more physicists learn about the fundamental nature of matter, the less material it seems to be. They explore the ubiquitous fields of energy and the intricate dance that goes on in them to create the illusion of solids, liquids and gases. They talk like mystics at times. This has led to a new burst of dialogue between academic scientists and theologians, and they are finding an astonishing degree of resonance between the two fields of study. Palaeontologist, Teilhard de Chardin, was a pioneer in this process, writing about the same time as Robinson. He had a mystic's understanding of the material world. If this were to flow down to ordinary church people or even to the clergy, it would open a new channel of communication with scientifically minded society. More importantly it opens up for us a new vision of God in the material world around us.

Generally, the Good News is most effectively communicated, not through theology or dogma, but by opening people's eyes to God around them. The Nicene Creed is a useful tool for certain occasions, but I've never heard of anyone being converted by it. Even more effective is action: acts of love, compassion, forgiveness, attitudes of tolerance and a gift for non-judgmental listening.

There is much debate these days among the clergy about how to "be church" in new ways. Perhaps there is now more general agreement about the need for a "new reformation". Perhaps we still need to be more honest to God.

Br William ssf

¹ SCM Press 1963

A Sermon Preached at the Profession of Br Joseph ssf

When Joseph asked me if I would preach at his Profession service I was very humbled. I consider the invitation to share this reflection with you as he prepares for his profession in first vows a great honour.

I wonder if you ever had an experience, perhaps as a child, when you went out somewhere, perhaps for a walk or to play, and a dog you met while you were out playing followed you home. I remember a time when my mother looked at me in surprise as she saw me coming home one day and asked "where did you find that". Looking behind me I saw a scruffy stray that I had played with earlier had been following me all the way home. "Can we keep him", I asked.

After I got Joseph's phone call asking me to preach today I was reminded of the circumstances under which he and I met. In 2003 Br Lionel and I were invited to conduct a mission to parishes in Perth and Esperance. One of the parishes we visited was St Brendan's Warnbro. Rev Bob Hoskins had arranged for me to stay with a man "who had been searching to find the way in which he could live the life God was calling him to".

When I first met Joseph I saw a rough and ready character; very much a person of his own mind. As I learned about his life, the fisherman, the grave digger, the navy cook and later the military policeman, Vietnam vet and biker, I came to realise that there were no airs or graces about Joseph; what you see is what you get. I add what you see, is what you get.

If one passes beyond the rough and ready ex-navy vet and biker, you see something very special. You see a man who has a profound love of God and God's creation, a man who is deeply aware of the presence of God in his life, a man who cares profoundly for others. It was clear from talking to Joseph that he had been on a long search to find, as Rev Hoskins put it, "a way in which he could live the life God was calling him to".

Now I don't want to imply that Joseph is a scruffy stray dog. However, not long after Br Lionel and I had arrived back in Brisbane Joseph had been in touch and was considering a visit to spend a little time with the brothers. To my surprise and that of the brothers, he packed his Ute, placed his bike on a trailer and drove all the way from Perth to Brisbane and landed on the door steps of the Brisbane Friary. He was there to stay.

As I got to know more of him in Brisbane it was clear that he had finally found what he had been searching for all his life. Even last night when he drove here from the airport he made it clear "you'd have to use a box of gelignite to get rid of me".

The call to religious life, or life in Holy Orders, is not an easy one. I have often remarked to inquirers to religious life or

Holy Orders "if you can find anything else to do that will make you happy, go and do that". However, as the psalmist writes, it is hard to hide from God, from the life God calls us to live. The poet Francis Thompson (1859-1907) aptly described the psalmist's sentiments in his poem *The Hound of Heaven*.

Thompson, as with the psalmist, gives an image of the ever persistent God who seeks us out calling us to put ourselves aside and to give ourselves over to the hands of God.

The psalmist begins "you have searched me out and known me". The opening verses of psalm 139 describe a God who is intimately acquainted with us; a God who knows every aspect of our lives, the parts we know about ourselves that others know, the parts others know about us that we don't seem to know, the parts that we know about ourselves that others don't know and the parts of our lives that God alone knows.

Whilst this can sound and feel quite daunting, even scary there is also a profound sense of acceptance and love in it as well. Imagine for a moment everything we have ever done, the good the bad and the ugly, the things we don't even talk about at parties and despite this God loves and accepts us and still calls us into a deep and profound relationship.

It is often this daunting realisation that God knows the good, the bad and the ugly about us, that lead us to want to hide from God. We feel we cannot live up to the life God calls us to. For those contemplating religious life it seems to feel an even greater burden. How can we, in all our human frailness live a life which calls us to put on a habit by which we ourselves, and others, place an expectation that we will live a saintly or Christlike life? It is no wonder that the urge to climb up to heaven or dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea becomes strong.

There is however, as I indicated, a greater realisation, one of love and acceptance. Despite our urge to run, despite the frailness of our humanity, God is there to place his hand in ours and lead us; "you're right hand hold me fast. With this love and acceptance comes awareness that regardless of the good, the bad and the ugly in us God will always see the beauty in us; "darkness and light to you are both alike".

There comes a point in the journey to religious life that one realises that despite the inadequacies we feel if we are willing to surrender ourselves to God's hand that God will lead us "in the way that is everlasting". There comes a point when the realisation that total abandon and surrender to the will of God is the only way to tame the *Hound of Heaven*.

(cont. p.4)



Br Joseph made his first profession in vows on the feast of St John the Baptist, 24th June, 2008 at the Monastery, Stroud NSW

A Sermon Preached at the Profession of Br Joseph ssf (cont)

It is likely that this realisation is what has brought Joseph here before us today to offer himself to God in profession of vows.

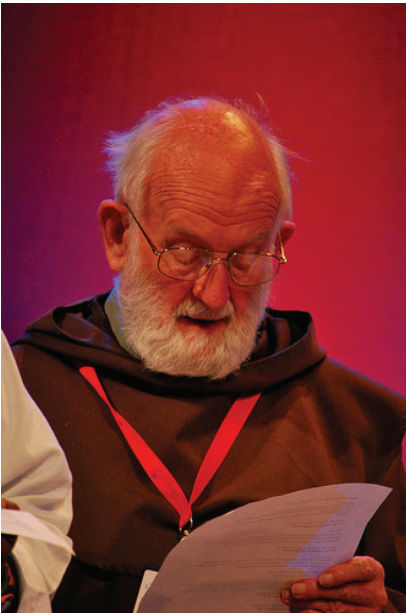
At schools I visit students will often ask which is the hardest of the vows to keep; anticipating that I will respond by saying the vow of Chastity (especially testosterone filled boys). The vow of obedience, I reply to their surprise. It takes a great deal to fully give oneself over to the will of God. To set aside living just for our own wants and desires to place our hands in God's hands, allowing God to lead us. It is the hardest because it means traversing the chasm between the inadequacy we feel in the realisation that God knows every inch of our being and the realisation that God loves and accepts us just as we are. And we can only bridge

that chasm through total surrender. This makes the vows of poverty and chastity seem like a walk in the park.

Joseph, Bob Hoskins recognised that you were searching to find the place where God was calling you to be. Others have affirmed his and your instincts that religious life, in the Society of St Francis, is the answer to your searching. You have begun to see and experience how a life of surrender of self can bridge the chasm between feeling unworthy and unconditional acceptance. As you move now to make your profession in vows let those vows, and the Rule and Principals of this community you are affirming your place in, be the way in which God reaches out his right hands to hold you fast, to guide you into a way that is everlasting.

Br Nathan – James ssf

SSF and other Religious offer Chaplaincy at Lambeth Conference



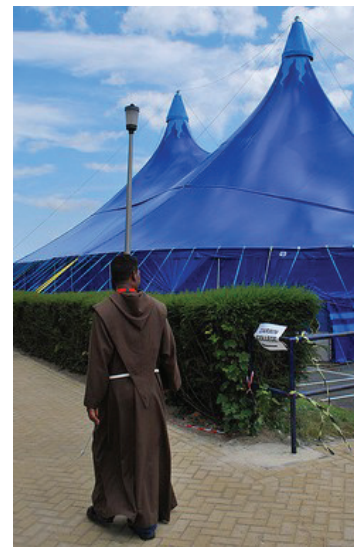
Br Brian leading intercessions at Eucharist



Br Daniel and Melanesian Religious during evening prayer



Religious from the Church of the Province of Melanesia entertain at Lambeth



SSF brother walking past 'the big top'

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