

THE THIRD ORDER:

Australian Province Newsletter

Volume 7.4 Advent 2007

And the Word was made Flesh: Glory to God in the Highest!

From the Minister Provincial

Dear brothers and sisters in St Francis.

“Preach everywhere. Use words if necessary.” Many of us have been struck by this word of St Francis, but I consider it has lost some of its sharp edge. Our ears and eyes normally focus on the second sentence, “use words if necessary”. We hear St Francis telling us that our deeds are a powerful witness to the Gospel.

This is certainly consistent with Franciscan Christianity, but there is more to the saying than this. St Francis is talking about *preaching*, not only about witness through our actions. Our actions can certainly witness to the Gospel, but St Francis uses the word ‘preaching’ in its more specific sense. Preaching is interpreting the Bible. Preaching is that witness to the Gospel that comes directly from the Bible.

“Preach everywhere.” St Francis was part of that movement in medieval Christianity that attempted always to “perform the Scriptures”; to do what the Bible says. It sounds simple, and St Francis interpreted it radically. Thomas of Celano tells us,

His highest aim, foremost desire, and greatest intention was to pay heed to the holy gospel in all things and through all things, to follow the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and to retrace his footsteps completely. (First Life 30 in Early Documents 1:254).

St Francis was challenged by the Gospel which told him to “sell all you have and give it to the poor” (Matt. 19:21), and “take nothing for your journey” (Luke 9:3). He did exactly as

the Gospel told him. Literal poverty was simple obedience for Francis.

We Franciscans hear these Bible texts resounding through the tradition, and we too are challenged by them. Franciscans cannot escape wrestling with these commands and asking ourselves whether God is calling us to a life of literal poverty, to “sell all you have and give it to the poor”. I believe this question never lets go of us, even if most of us will answer (as the Rule has it) that we will accept Jesus’ challenge “in spirit” (Day 12) and not literally.

And St Francis did not take every text literally. He was a sophisticated interpreter of the Bible. But he consciously saw the Bible as a *script to be performed* and not a *complicated text to be understood*. The Bible is a Word to be obeyed, not words to be analysed.

Christmas celebrates the Word that God gives us in Jesus. Francis encourages us to perform the Word. May God continue to grace us with the energy and wisdom to interpret the Word we hear and read this Christmas, to preach everywhere, using words when necessary.

May the joy and peace of Christmas fill your hearts.

With love in Christ,

Ted Witham

For more thoughts on St Francis performing the Scriptures:

James C. Howell, “Christ was like St Francis” in Ellen F. Davis, & Richard B. Hays, editors, 2003, *The Art of Reading Scripture*, Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, (89-108) (available in most States through the Public Library system.)

Elizabeth of Hungary: Third Order saint

*From Dorothy Brooker TSSF,
Minister General*

On 19 November 2007 we who are part of the Third Order of St Francis throughout the world will be celebrating the 8th century of the birth of St Elizabeth of Hungary.

“The Third Order honours her as its patroness and the whole Franciscan family counts her as one of their examples of Franciscan living.” So begins the letter by the Minister General of the Third Order Regular from Rome 2006. We also as an Anglican Third Order join with our Roman Catholic Third Order, both Regular and Secular in honouring her.

Elizabeth will be remembered for her exceptional devotion to God in following Christ and her short life was dedicated in living a life in the love of God. Love was the axis around which St Elizabeth's whole life revolved and through her we may glimpse a better understanding of God's love and as we remember her it may be our faith in the same love is strengthened.

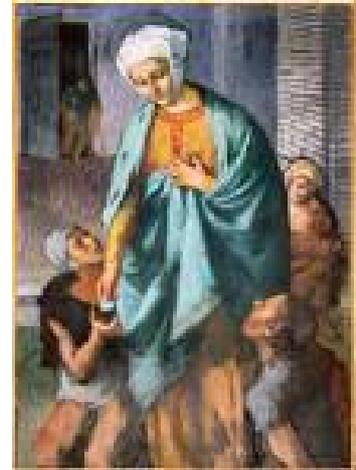
Elizabeth's life was a crossroad of actions which literally reflect the Gospel of Jesus Christ. With daring courage she heard the message to strip herself of everything and make herself like a little child in order to find the Kingdom of God. Her life is intertwined with legends and these legends can help us capture important aspects of her personality and as one sifts through some of the legends it is not the stories of the miracles that surround her but her great love that we could reflect upon.

Elizabeth's birth in 1207 a daughter to King Andrew of Hungary and his wife Gertrude coincided with St Francis of Assisi's struggle in his search for a new identity. He had already turned his life around and was completely committed to a life of penance among the people.

In the custom of her time, Elizabeth was promised in marriage to a German Prince from Thuringia, Ludwig IV, when she was four years old, and she began her journey to her new country at that tender age, being entrusted to

the German delegation who took her to Thuringia where she was brought up in her future husband's household, he himself a child of 10 years of age.

She married at the age of 14 and they had three children.



This was a marriage of love and indeed did not follow the common style of that time by motives of politics or convenience. They both shared the same ideals of living the faith with Elizabeth having been influenced by the Franciscans, and they were responsible for helping the poor and providing for orphans as well as being responsible for two hospices being established for the poor.

With all this Ludwig was a soldier of the Empire, and was Lord and Judge of his castle. His death in 1227 left Elizabeth a widow at only 20 years of age, her youngest child Gertrude (also to become a Saint) only a few weeks old.

Her life changed dramatically with Ludwig's death. She was expelled from the castle by her brother-in-law Heinrich Rasper, and she and her two daughters went down into the valley to her own people, but she was not welcomed. Her son was taken from her to be reared by her brother-in-law. They survived with great difficulty and some friends or her late husband persuaded Heinrich to give her a small allowance which she spent in caring for the poor.

She had already begun to explore the life as a Franciscan penitent before Ludwig's death and this journey had begun with a whole series of converging testimonies. The Friars Minor had guided her to the life of Penance and it was through them she learnt the personality of St Francis. Brother Rudegar became her Spiritual Director when the Franciscans settled in Eisenach and Conrad of Marburg, a harsh priest, having been a member of the Inquisition,

became her confessor.

Ludwig had entrusted Conrad to care for his family during his absences. Under his guidance Elizabeth lived her life as a Penitent in the castle making her first Profession in front of him. She was never alone as her ladies in waiting also made vows of obedience. This small fraternity lived a life of prayer and ascetic living with Conrad as superior and visitor. Conrad treated her with great severity, and under a discipline of fasting, penances and vigils her health deteriorated.

When Elizabeth was expelled from the castle her attendants followed her into exile and in the bitter hours of loneliness and abandonment they supported her as she begged for shelter and food. She in turn urged them to do the will of God.

When she became a widow she could easily have entered a convent but the Franciscan family have never doubted that she was a Franciscan at heart and wanted to live and work with the very poor. Since the 13th century she has been seen by the Franciscan family as one of their most eminent members.

She made arrangement for the care of her children so she could live out her Franciscan calling. There have been claims by other Orders that she was one of them, but the evidence stacks high towards her and her Franciscan calling.

She identified fully with the poor, preparing meals in the kitchen, doing it as a servant of the poor, and as she washed dishes she had to repeatedly send her handmaidens away when they attempted to stop her. She learnt to spin wool and sew clothes and offered the money made from this at the altar. Her father's Emissary, who wanted to bring her back to Hungary, was recorded as saying "never has a Princess been seen spinning wool before."

At the hour of her death Elizabeth declared expressly that everything that was still left belonged to the poor with the exception of her habit as a penitent. She died very young, aged 24 years, surrounded by her beloved companions. She brought light into the darkness of many and much happiness to many afflicted souls.

The Third Order of St Francis, Regular and Secular (in which we as an Anglican Order

have a place) encourage the remembrance of Elizabeth. As a Franciscan family we have the first woman who achieved sainthood following the footsteps of Christ in accordance with the way of St Francis.

"We must make people happy", she kept saying to her handmaidens. She was extraordinary joyful, even though at times tears flowed serenely down her face.

We remember her as a laywoman, wife, mother and a member of the Order of Penitents now known as the Third Order.

One of the Collects set for her day is as follows:

**Ever-loving God,
The comforter of the suffering and the hope of the poor;
you gave Elizabeth strength and love to minister to those in need;
give us grace to seek out those in trouble or in want and to serve you faithfully
by our compassion to others;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**

Australia and St Elizabeth

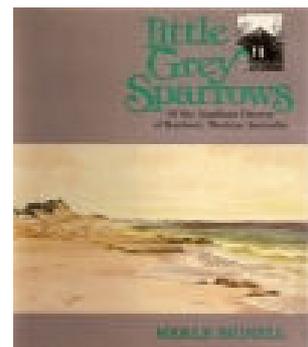
From 1928-1957 an Anglican Franciscan Order, the Sisters of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary worked in the Diocese of Bunbury in Western Australia. They ministered especially to new arrivals in the Group Settlement Scheme.



The Sisters burning up at one of their Convents with pail and broom.

Their story was told by WA author Merle Bignell in *Little Grey Sparrows* (UWA Press 1993).

The Sisters played a large part in the formative years of Canon George Harvey tssf, and more generally, their presence in WA is part of the Third Order Region's history.



Visit of Sr Jennifer Chan CSF

The WA Region was glad to welcome Sister Jennifer to a meeting during Jennifer's holiday in Perth. Jennifer spoke of her pastoral work at the Cathedral and hospital in Kuching and her outreach into women's groups in the Diocese.



Sister Jennifer reminded us of the remoteness of parts of the Diocese of Sarawak. Some parishes she will reach only after travelling by river-boat and then trekking through the Borneo Jungle.

The Kuching Tertiaries are finding Jennifer a focus and support for them – especially as her coffee-pot generates a compelling aroma after the early Eucharist!

The WA Tertiaries realised that Sr Jennifer is the closest First Order member to WA, and we assured her of our prayers.

"Chasing Francis – a pilgrim's tale", review by David White tssf

I found this fictional narrative to be an interesting confluence of two important influences in my Christian life – the long-term journey with St Francis of Assisi and the more recent exploration and investigation into the emerging missional church.

The main story is about the senior pastor of a large contemporary church in north-eastern United States, Chase Falson, who during a crisis in faith, self-destructs while preaching to his congregation. Forced to take time off to sort himself out, Chase accepts an invitation

from an uncle to visit him in Italy. Uncle Kenny, one of the black sheep of this Protestant family, is a friar in the Catholic Order of Friars Minor (OFM) – the order of brothers established by St Francis. He and his fellow friars take Chase on a quite non-traditional pilgrimage.

Through the characters in his story and the famous sites they visit, Ian Morgan Cron, draws parallels between the time of St Francis at the beginning of the 13th century and our own times. Within the society in both eras, there was an abundance of prosperity for the newly rich, while the divide between them and those on the fringes greatly widened. The greed and corruption of the Church in Francis' time has remarkable parallels with the worldliness of today's televangelists and mass-marketed consumer Christianity.

While there are many quotations from Francis' works and others, rather than detract from the story, Cron has chosen to provide a study guide, and an extensive bibliography, which he urges the reader to obtain and read.



Cron argues that there is more to faith than academic argument and assent to "The Truth" that is clearly known in black and white. Rather than intellectual faith, Cron presents a case for an all-encompassing faith that takes our thoughts, emotions and feelings equally seriously.

In the 13th century, Francis was credited with saving the Church from fragmentation and irrelevance.

Whether you have read much about St Francis or not, you will find this book an entertaining, yet challenging read. In this postmodern, post-Christendom society, perhaps St Francis can be an inspiration to guide us as we walk forward in faith to discover our mission to be God's people in this brave new world.

Ian Morgan Cron 2006, *Chasing Francis*, NavPress, ISBN 1-57683-812-9. \$14.95 from Koorong.

For the first time, the official *Anglican Religious Life* lists the Third Order along with all other Anglican religious orders. Copies at £5.99 are obtainable through *Ted Witham*.

St Francis and the oneness of creation

Brother William SSF

at Melbourne TO retreat 2007

St Francis is the most popular saint in Protestant Christendom. Even agnostics and atheists have a soft spot for him. And, of course, pet-lovers adore him - the patron saint of birdbaths! No man among the saints of Christendom has had more written about him; none enjoyed so wide a popularity as Francis of Assisi. I'm not thinking of the little prayer cards with a handsome, tall young Anglo-Saxon wearing a funny haircut and a cute brown costume and surrounded by tame animals. This doesn't present, to me, a true image of the eccentric little man in the (short) peasant's tunic of unbleached wool preserved under the Basilica at Assisi. The fact that so much has been written about him (a new book appears almost every year) is not because he is easy to write about, but rather because the enigma is so fascinating, the impact of his life so powerful. Rémy de Gourmont wrote:

No man since St Paul has had as much influence on the orientation of the human spirit as the founder of the Friars Minor: a new poetry, a new art, a renewed religion, have radiated from the humble Porziuncula convent through the Christian world.

In Francis' time, the Church hierarchy was frantically focussing people's attention on themselves but Francis focussed attention on Jesus. His was an incarnational theology rather than an ecclesiastical one.

An important insight came in G K Chesterton's popular biography where he says that Francis was one of the great nature mystics. Nature mysticism has had a revival recently. New-agers, post-modern philosophers and theologians, and even scientists, have been rediscovering what Western society lost during the modernist era and the industrial revolution, namely, our

sense of unity with the living organism we call the universe.

During the modern era of the 18th, 19th and most of the 20th centuries, people were taught to regard humankind as separate from the rest of physical nature. We are still in the eventide of that era. Some theologians and scientists (dinosaurs like biologist, Richard Dawkins, and biblical scholar, Bishop Spong) still wave the frayed banners of modernism. Post-modernism, slowly emerging, tends to abandon the old dualisms and dichotomies of modernism, seeing more clearly an overall unity of everything.

St Francis seems very much in tune with the new age. As a mystic he saw things monistically rather than dualistically. (I suppose you've all heard about the mystic ordering a hamburger. He said, "Make me one with everything.") Though Francis never expressed it in philosophical, theological or scientific terms, he felt deeply his unity with all things in God. Everything was God's offspring, God's family, and, therefore, Francis' brother or sister. His feeling for the natural world around him was joyful and affectionate. Only in self-centred, self-destructive humans, including himself, did Francis see grounds for sorrow and penitence.

People don't always appreciate this unity of spirit and matter, yet it is definitely expressed in the Nicene Creed. God is spirit, yet also embodied, incarnate in physical nature – the cosmic Christ. In God, spirit and matter are not two entities; they constitute one dynamic total reality. Ultimately, God, transcendent and immanent, is the only reality.

During the industrial revolution, people lost the sense of our unity with the rest of nature. The consequent poisoning and destruction of land, sea and air, of trees and plants, birds, fish and beasts, now threatens

even our own survival. I don't think Francis would have been worried so much by the affluence of the industrial world as by the mindless and destructive exploitation, the rape of Mother Earth.

I'd like to explain that further. The fragmentation of the early Franciscan movement into mutually hostile groups was mainly due to a misunderstanding of Francis' love of the Lady Poverty. Francis' devotion to radical and heroic simplicity of life was not an exercise in self-denial, of making himself uncomfortable, nor was it based on an interpretation of scripture. He fell in love. It is described thus in the early biographies. It was an erotic thing. His love of God, embodied in the natural world around him, was a love affair. His stripping of himself of everything that could separate him from the natural world was like taking your clothes off when you have sex. (I hope that metaphor doesn't shock you.) There is a danger of Franciscans getting scrupulous and screwed up about poverty, getting critical and cross if they think others are not making as big an effort as they are. That is the mistake many of the first Franciscans made, and it had some very ugly consequences.

Mother Earth is finding humankind a source of harassment and stress. The first to notice the symptoms have not been religious prophets but scientists - the sceptical, inquisitive, rigorous interrogators of nature, and also the principle generators of modernism and industrialisation. But scientific enquiry is not only a dialogue with the rest of nature; it is also self-exploration; it raises introspective questions: what are we? What is our relationship to our universe? This is where science interdigitates with philosophy and, eventually, with theology.

The resurgence of mysticism in the West, some of it in the church but most of it not, may have come at a providential time.

Those with a mystical and contemplative bent were probably the first to grasp what the scientists were saying.

There are mystics in the science community too, of course, and particle physics has made a strong appeal among many who are drawn to what we loosely call "spirituality". Quantum physicists have discovered a fundamental unity of everything in a mysterious, dynamic, multi-dimensional dance of energy. In the last analysis, everything is simply energy, including matter. (Solid matter is not really solid at all.)

Personally, I find it hard to distinguish between what I vaguely call spirit and what scientists (with more precise analysis) call energy. I can say that God is pure spirit, but I can also say that, in the Cosmic Christ, God is pure energy, formed into matter. That's a bit metaphysical I suppose, but the real point is that each of us is not only related to every other person; we are related in cosmic energy fields, gravity for example, to everything, even to the most distant galaxies. It is not only because we are members of the Church that we are in Christ; it is because we are members of the universe.

Anyway, coming back to Earth, it has been geologists, biologists, and meteorologists, who have finally seen most clearly Earth's worrying symptoms of stress. But hope for the future requires more than intellectual assent and pious aspirations; we don't all have to be nature mystics, but we need real compassion. We need to feel the earth's sickness. Indeed, millions of people are already suffering from catastrophic natural events caused by climate change. Our planet needs sympathetic care and therapy: the kind of sympathetic care our indigenous people have been giving for thousands of years.

Francis would have understood all this completely, but the therapeutic measures proposed by scientists are unattractive to us and worrisome to politicians who are afraid to make

unpopular decisions. We grieve over our withered gardens; we are shocked by catastrophic floods, droughts and fires; but we are still inseparable from our air conditioning, our cars and our jumbo jets, all, at present, dependent on burning carbon. Our industrial-commercial organism urgently needs something like a heart transplant, and it looks life-threatening.

Jesus said, "Unless a seed falls into the ground and dies, it remains a bare grain." Continuation of life involves dying, and we do our dying even while we live. Francis probably loved life even more than we do, but he welcomed "Sister Death". For him, life and death, death and resurrection, were one glorious process.

The post-modern philosopher Don Cupitt once experienced, over a period of only a few weeks, three close encounters with death through heart attacks. Reading his reflections on this experience I came upon these words.

"We seem to have forgotten how to die. . . . We live by dying, pouring ourselves into the flux of life in such a way that death, when it comes, is not a threat but a consummation."

He could have had St Francis in mind, but such thoughts of total absorption into the flux of life totally contradict the individualistic spirit of our age. Francis would be an eccentric individual in any age: he had a passionate desire to pour himself, destitute, into the flux of life – the life of Christ. The focus of Francis' life was the living and dying Christ, the glory of God, manifest in the world around him. If only we could focus our own lives so sharply.

Don't forget to read Brother William's blog at www.thedivineuniverse.info

Franciscans International.

The Bangkok Office should be open early 2008. If you are interested in social justice training offered by FI, contact **Ted Witham**.

Visit our website at www.tssf.org.au

A message from Hong Kong:

Dear brothers and sisters: if anyone is coming through here do look us up. We would love to see you. We don't see anyone unless we go to Australia or UK and most of the people in the group, including both novices professed recently (one of whom is an expat) have never seen a real, live tertiary other than for Peter Gregory and myself, let alone caught a glimpse of mysterious people in brown habits!

The more the merrier.

Good wishes to all and Pax et Bonum

John Davison tssf

Message from Br Clark Berge SSF in Long Island NY

Happy St. Francis Day! I hope this finds you well, as we celebrate this wonderful saint who inspires so many people around the world to live courageous, creative lives in the service of the Gospel.

Please pray for me too, as I learned yesterday that I have been elected the Minister General of the world-wide Society of St. Francis. I'll be working with the brothers in all four provinces. Much love,

Clark

A message assuring Br Clark of your congratulations and prayers was sent to Long Island in time for his commissioning.

GOD SPEAKS INTO THE STORY

If human hope is like a bird in flight then story is the air. It's where we live.

Story fuels the fires of the mind

for when we find our theme, we find ourselves.

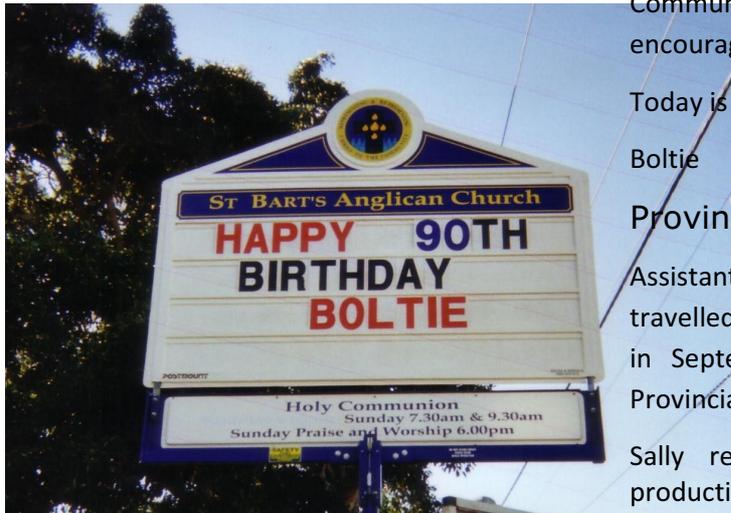
It is God who speaks into the story of our lives

for God is the meaning maker of the world.

– Rlid Cameron OSA, "The Australian Experience of the Sacred," Alcheringa, p.30
From *A Canopy of Stars: Some Reflections for the Journey* by Fr Christopher Gleeson SJ [David Lovell Publishing 2003]
Submitted by David White tssf

The picture on p.4 of St Francis and the infant Jesus is from www.qumran2.net/s/indici/disegni_25_2.htm

Congratulations to Boltie



I first made contact with the SSF when I met Brother Geoffrey in the late '60s, never thinking I would end up a part of the Community and work with the Brothers at Morris House in Brisbane. Morris House was a half way house for men needing rehabilitation.

I was professed in 1974. It has been a wonderful walk with Our Lord and to know the whole Community prays for me on my day and I guess at other times too.

I have always been lifted, even in the times I have been living far away from other Sisters and Brothers in the Community.



Some of my Monastery days were spent at Stroud, as the Guest Sister, and House Mother at

Morris House. I have spent times as a missionary in the Torres Strait and as a parish worker in far North Queensland.

I have now ended up here in Toowoomba where I have been able to meet with other TO and to attend retreats at SSA in Brisbane.

Life has been full and hectic. Being a part of our Community has no doubt been a strength and encouragement to me.

Today is a big day, my 90th Birthday. Praise God. Boltie

Provincial Ministers Meet in N.Y.

Assistant Provincial Minister Sally Buckley travelled to the friary on Long Island in New York in September to meet with the other four Provincial Ministers and the Minister General.

Sally reported that she had a busy and productive week in New York. Discussions at the meeting included:

- The joy and challenge for all Provinces (except Europe) in caring for tertiaries in developing countries;
- The Principles will not be re-written, but an Inter-Provincial group will prepare a commentary on the Rule (**contact Sally or Ted if you would like to be part of this.**)
- There will be a Franciscan presence at Lambeth in 2008. A place to pray will be set aside. All Franciscan Bishops (Third Order, Companions and Bishops Protector) have been written to with assurances of our prayers. **Please pray for the Bishops at Lambeth.**
- The Ministers are determined that if anything should divide the Anglican Communion, the Third Order will remain one.
- A safe community document mainly for Novices and their Councillors to provide procedures for complaints will be written by each Province for its own use.
- Youth Vocations were discussed, and Sally presented Australia's incipient plans for a Franciscan Experience for young people.

Please continue to pray for the Editor, Bill Gates, as he works through family difficulties.

It's unheard of for a newsletter like this to apologise for being early, but it is early! Ted Witham will be moving house at the end of November – no time then to work on the newsletter!