

800th ANNIVERSARY OF FOUNDATION OF FRANCISCANS
HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

ST TERESA'S CHURCH CRAIGMILLAR

SUNDAY 18th OCTOBER 2009

INTRODUCTION

Many times I am invited to golden jubilees, centenaries or 150th anniversaries. However it is very rarely that I am invited to an 800th anniversary celebration — and consequently I am more than happy to be here with you all in this Franciscan Parish to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the Foundation of the Franciscan Order.

It is, of course, being an additional joy to be celebrating also today the 34th Anniversary of Ordination to the Priesthood of your parish priest, Father Antony — may God continue to bless him in his ministry. Here also are the members of our own community in Craigmillar, Fathers Reginald and Desmond, joined by Father Francis from London, as well as, of course, Father Kieran Brady from St Patrick's in Edinburgh. Thankfully, as well as so many members of the parish community, there are religious priests, brothers and sisters from different parts of our city and diocese, with a special mention of thanks to the Sisters of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God for their vitally important apostolate here in Craigmillar. I thank also our local MP, Mr Gavin Strang and our MSP, Mr Kenny MacAskill for their presence, which indicates something of the outreach from this parish throughout the City of Edinburgh from Craigmillar as we rejoice at the ongoing regeneration of this vitally important part of our capital city.

Here in Craigmillar I know that you have been celebrating a week of events marking this 800th anniversary — I believe the only Franciscan Parish in the Province to do so. May God indeed bless all of your endeavours, as you continue your celebrations and this Mass with our theme: 'Peace without Frontiers'.

EARLY HISTORY OF THE FRANCISCANS

As is well known the Founder of the Order of Friars Minor was St Francis of Assisi himself born in the year 1181. He was of a wealthy family who in his early years led a rather carefree life. However, one day in the Church of San Damiano he seemed to hear an image of Christ say to him: "Francis, repair my Church". Francis, thinking of people not of the building, took those words quite literally and he began a penniless life "to wed Lady Poverty".

Just three years later in 1209 Pope Innocent III authorised him and eleven companions to be roving preachers of Christ in simplicity and lowliness — thus began the Friars Minor.

Recruits flocked in to join Francis and his companions and shortly up and down Italy and then in most of the known world of the time the Brothers of St Francis called the peoples with whom they had

contact to faith and penitence.

It was in 1212 St Francis founded with St Clair the first community of “Poor Ladies” — and twice at this time he made abortive attempts to become a missionary among the Muslims.

Then in 1221 Francis produced a revised version of his rule which reiterated the poverty, humbleness, and evangelical freedom of which he had always set an example. Some three years later there appeared on his body the five wounds of the crucified Christ which never left him until he welcomed “Sister Death” two years later.

SPREAD OF THE FRANCISCAN FRIARS TO ENGLAND AND SCOTLAND

On Tuesday 10th September 1224, two years before the death of St Francis, Agnellus of Pisa and eight companions arrived at Dover having been given an “obedience” by Francis himself to found the Order in England. The Friars spread throughout Britain, establishing houses in most of the major towns beginning with Canterbury, London and Oxford in 1224, Northampton in 1225 and Cambridge in 1226. The first foundation in Scotland was in the then Berwick in 1231.

The Friars were true to the standards of St Francis himself. We are told by a doctor of that time who wrote: “They contrived to tend to the lepers and the sick, a practice which stimulated the study of medicine. In the frequent medieval pestilence they gained a special honour for their work among the sick and dying”.

The Friars had an influence on the universities through their Foundations in Oxford and Cambridge. And of course we can think of our own Blessed John Duns Scotus from the Borders in Scotland who travelled from Duns to Oxford University, then to Paris University and on to Cologne where he died at the early age of 42.

Their growth continued until 1534 when King Henry VIII decreed the dissolution of the monasteries. This ensured that the Friars could no longer live together and their ministry became illegal — although often they suffered for their faith and for their attempts to hand on the Christian message.

MISSIONARY APOSTOLATE OF THE FRIARS MINOR

St Francis of Assisi himself was the first founder of a religious order to put in his “Rule” not only a chapter on preaching but also a chapter on that which today we call “Mission to the Peoples. Consequently the Friars Minor were the first missionary order in the Church properly speaking — and the evangelising mission is acknowledged as part of the identity of the Order. Consequently, it is surely appropriate that we celebrate this 800th anniversary on the Sunday acknowledged worldwide as ‘Mission Sunday’. Down through the centuries Franciscans worked among peoples of Eastern religions, indigenous peoples, in African cultures and with Afro-Americans, among Muslims and with members of the Orthodox Churches. They have had a particular role as being the faithful custodians of the holy places — those places most closely associated with the life of Jesus himself.

Even in recent years foundations have been made in Russia and Kazakhstan, in Thailand and in Myanmar, in Sudan and in China, and in many other countries in the world.

We might say that the missionary history of the Franciscans embraces the East and the West, the North and the South of our planet — and has given a wonderful missionary impetus not only to other missionary orders and congregations but to the lay faithful who at present often carry the Gospels to the end of the world.

EXAMPLES TO US

When we look back on the 800 years of apostolic endeavour of the Franciscans in our own country and overseas we must ask what lessons we can learn from what they have achieved. This is ever more vitally important for us in *this* present time, having already seen so many changes in Craigmillar in recent years. with an influx of many members of a new community and our two new schools built as part of the regeneration of Craigmillar itself.

I think first of all we must be aware of that simple example of poverty of lifestyle of St Francis and his followers. As Francis himself was a man of tremendous spiritual insight and power whose consuming love for Jesus Christ and redeemed creation found expression in all that he said and all that he did — so too with each one of us.

Further, the **centrality of the love of Jesus Christ** in our lives and on each and every action must be something that inspires us each day. We must endeavour to make Christ the centre of our lives — through our prayer, our sharing in Mass and in the Sacraments and through our constant turning to Jesus in our prayer each day.

And linked with that love for Jesus Christ must go a love for others particularly those who are less fortunate than ourselves here at home and throughout the world. Francis and his Friars gave themselves for others — we too must be prepared to give to others in need around us or far away.

Many of us are aware of that Franciscan spirituality which appeals to us in our world of today when we are surrounded by so much wealth and increased secularism. As Francis called the peoples of his time back to the basic Gospel message and to the love of Jesus Christ in himself and in others so too must we. And we might say that as Francis was called to “build up the Church” so that responsibility falls on the shoulders of each and every one of us.

CONCLUSION

The message of Francis is clear to us in all its simplicity — love of Christ shown in a poverty of lifestyle, a lifestyle inspired by our own spirituality based on that of St Francis and his Friars.

Pope John Paul II used a wonderful phrase to the lay people of our world some years before he died, after the Synod of Bishops on the laity. He said then: “You have an exalted vocation — and there are many and varied forms of mission open to you!”. Here in Craigmillar you are called upon to live those words — aware of the example of St Francis who lived his life in imitation of the example of Jesus Christ himself.

Perhaps in celebrating this anniversary the reality of the lifestyle of St Francis might come to us more and more. In this world of plenty perhaps our lifestyle can be of **increasing simplicity**: in a world in which God seems to have no place perhaps we can continue to **make God and his Son Jesus the centre of our lives**: in a world in which so many millions are dying from hunger and poverty perhaps our lifestyles can be such that we **do reach out to those in need**.

The lesson of that great St Francis must always be with us to help us and inspire us live that life of Christ and hand on that life of Christ as he and his brethren have done for the past 800 years.