

## **The Franciscan Friars in Britain Since 1829**

It has always been difficult to answer the question, “What do Franciscans do?” for they exercise a variety of ministries and exclude very little. The answer given in the documents of the Order today is that they are an evangelising fraternity, but for what that means in practice, and Franciscanism has always been eminently practical, it is most instructive to look at what Franciscans have done in these lands.

The English Franciscan Province began in 1224, with the friars establishing their first residence in Canterbury at the time St. Francis received the Stigmata on Mount La Verna. From the small group of nine who arrived, the Province grew with breathtaking rapidity. Within fifty years it contained 1,500 friars. That medieval province gave glory to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge and provided the Church with luminaries such as John Duns Scotus, Roger Bacon and William of Ockham. If the medieval period provided the province with thinkers, the Reformation gave it heroes: the Observant Franciscans were the first religious to be attacked and dissolved by Henry VIII (not surprising since they lived next door to his palace in Greenwich and in his presence one compared his marriage to Anne Boleyn with that of Ahab to Jezebel!). Many were imprisoned, martyred or exiled. Restored under Mary, the friars were again expelled by Elizabeth, and relocated to Douai in northern France, whence they sent missionaries to England, providing an uninterrupted presence throughout penal times.

The French Revolution deprived the English friars of their base at Douai and the Province, unable to establish a stable novitiate and student house, went into decline. From twelve missions in 1800, the friars were reduced to four missions served by nine friars in 1838. The renaissance of the Province began with the attendance in 1848 of the Bishop of Liege at the consecration of St. George's Church in Southwark. From Southwark, Bishop van Bommel visited the Franciscan convent in Taunton, where he was begged by the nuns to ask the friars from Belgium to send reinforcements. The English friar Bishop Francis Hendren, Apostolic Vicar of the Western District, lent his support and that of the remnant of the Province to the project, provided they would not be obliged to live under obedience to a Belgian Minister.

The Belgian friars were not easy to convince. They were jealous of the strictness of their literal observance of the Rule of St. Francis and feared that England, with its paucity of Catholics, might not be propitious ground for an Order that lived off the alms of the faithful. Furthermore they were not used to parish ministry and feared it might render friary life impossible.

It was not until 1858 that they were able to help their English brethren. In that year they sent three young men (aged 31, 30 and 28) to establish a house in Sclerder in Cornwall. The ageing English friars handed them the seal and signed over entitlement to the goods held for the old Province, thus ensuring its continuity. The goods would have been considerably greater had the friars' Benedictine Apostolic Visitor Bishop Brown not previously used a large part of the Franciscan funds to build Belmont Abbey. Nevertheless, the Belgian friars arrived thinking big – they engaged Edward Welby Pugin to design a friary and church for them. But Sclerder did not prove a long-term home. The Trelawny family fortune, which underwrote the presence of the friars, passed to a Protestant heir and Sclerder was impossible to maintain. In 1862 the friars moved to Gorton in Manchester, where in subsequent years the beautiful Pugin-designed church and friary were built.

In 1860 the Belgian friars also established a friary in Killarney to help in the reform of the Irish Province which was then being undertaken by the Belgian and German friars. This house became the novitiate for the friars who joined the English Province until Chilworth was built. It was sold to the (by then satisfactorily reformed) Irish Province in 1902.

The return of the pre-Reformation men's religious orders to Scotland was spearheaded by the friars when they established a presence in Glasgow in 1868. Further friaries were added in Stratford 1873, Bristol 1889, Chilworth 1890 (which became the province's novitiate), and Buckingham 1898. With recruits joining the Province from Britain and Ireland and further friars sent from

Belgium, the group became a Commissariate in 1872, a Custody in 1887 and was restored as a Province in 1891. Further foundations followed and the Province was reinforced when houses founded by the French friars in England, as a refuge from persecution at home, were integrated into the English Province in 1902.

The life of the friars of the early twentieth century was centred on a monastic routine adapted to parish ministry. Mornings and evenings were spent in prayer and study, afternoons spent visiting parishioners. Each friar was assigned a district to visit and friars walked around their district to meet parishioners in their homes. Thus they became intimately acquainted with the life of their parishioners and gained a reputation of approachability and practicality. Their rhythm of life of study, prayer and parish visiting, unencumbered by pretensions or property, attracted a growing number of men.

While parochial ministry occupied most of the friars in Britain, as numbers grew the Province was asked to undertake foreign missions. The first was in Peru. A group of seven undertook in 1912 to alleviate the plight of the Putumayo people, whose exploitation by a British-registered company of rubber planters had been revealed by Sir Roger Casement. The British government asked Rome for missionaries and the friars were sent. However, the region they were assigned was disputed between Colombia and Peru and, when the friars learned that their presence was designed to give the British government a cause for intervention should the dispute erupt into war, they left.

In 1928 the friars began their more successful mission to Bellary in India, where they laid the foundations of the present diocese and, together with the Dutch, of an Indian Franciscan Province. The last friar of that mission, Joachim Tinneney, died in 2009.

The third mission undertaken by the Province was in South Africa. In 1948 the Province began work around Ermelo in the Transvaal. The friars established a mixed-race formation programme that cunningly survived the Group Areas Act owing to the unsure status of its location. Later they joined forces with missionaries from the Irish and Bavarian Provinces to found the South African Province of Our Lady Queen of Peace. In recent years missionary efforts have been in collaboration with other Provinces. The Province's youngest missionary, Joe O'Toole, died tragically in 2009 in Zimbabwe.

It is now in these young Churches that the Franciscan Order is thriving and growing so that Franciscan missionaries today are more likely to come from Africa, Asia and Latin America, than from Europe or North America. At the door of the Antonianum, the friars' university in Rome, you will be greeted by a friar from the Ivory Coast, not Italy.

As well as running parishes and missionary work the Province has always had an academic apostolate. In 1973 the British Franciscans, OFM and Conventuals, opened the Franciscan Study Centre in Canterbury, where they continue to train their friars, promote the distinctive Franciscan intellectual and spiritual traditions to religious and laity alike, and prepare Franciscan formators for the English-speaking world. One of the friars who founded the Study Centre, Eric Doyle, was a frequent contributor to *The Tablet* and is also fondly remembered for his humour and wisdom in the religious television programme *The Big Question* of the 1970s and 80s.

The OFM Province in Britain has recently grown smaller, but the Franciscans are a diverse group. With our brothers the Capuchins and Conventuals, and their offshoots the Friars of the Renewal and the Friars of the Immaculate, with the nuns of the Poor Clares and the Sisters of the Third Order Regular congregations, with the laity in the Secular Franciscan Order, the Franciscan family is a broad movement that witnesses and serves in every diocese in the country. The diversity of the family, like that of the Church, is its strength. The faithful fraternity of the evangelical life binds the family together and ensures that the Franciscan witness continues to be quietly fruitful in building God's kingdom.