

COMPANIONS NEWSLETTER *October 2024*

Br Finnian - The Companions' Secretary

Dear Companions,

I hope you are all doing well. This year has been a wonderful year for the Companions! Lots of people have joined us and we have had a Companions Retreat. We met at Alnmouth friary and had a wonderful time. You're welcome to come to the next one. If you'd like to come to a Companions Retreat in 2025, please let me know. We can discuss dates and a theme as a group. One of the take-aways from the Companions retreat was to explore having a 'Companions' Prayer'. Here is a proposed prayer Companions can use:

'O God, you ever delight to reveal yourself to the childlike and lowly of heart: grant that we who seek to follow the humble example of Saint Francis, may count the wisdom of this world as foolishness and know only Jesus Christ and him crucified, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.'

Companions Facebook Page

You are welcome to follow the Companions Facebook Page. ([Facebook](#)) We now have 1,000 people following us. This is a great way to raise the profile of the Companions on social media. Lots of people have made contact after discovering the Companions on Facebook. If you would like to be an Admin or a contributor, please email: companions@franciscans.org.uk

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Companion's Week: Jane Robinson - Companion

On Monday May 13th 2024, a small group of 'Companions SSF' met up at Alnmouth Friary for a Companions' Week, the first event of its kind. (Why should Tertiaries have all the fun!!) Our meditations and discussions were ably facilitated (she doesn't like the term Led) by Rev Jo Drew C.SSF, from Grange Over Sands. Over the 3 full days we meditated around the San Damiano cross. Its central Corpus, the figures and symbols around it, and its meaning for St Clare and her Community. We also had plenty of time and space for personal reflection (and in my case, a trip to Barter Books!!) Mealtimes, as usual at the Friary, were filled with fun but deep chatter and discussion. For the Led meditations the resident group was joined by local members. Both groups were sadly depleted by illness, but this enabled an unspoken intimacy in the group which was left. The consensus at the end of the week was that being a Companion of SSF, is a distinct calling in itself, not just 'inferior' to the Tertiaries. Perhaps Companions tend to be more contemplative in nature, hence there being nothing in their Rule about regular meetings. I hope this event can be repeated next year and I would encourage many Companions to sign up for it.



St Mary at the Cross, Glasshampton: Br Nicholas Alan



Walk about Zion, go all around it, count all its towers (Psalm 48:12). I often think of this verse from the Psalms when I return after a time away, driving or walking up the pot-holed track that leads to Glasshampton Monastery in Worcestershire. I count its four towers, still standing after all these years, still announcing peace to the weary traveller returning home, or to those arriving for the first time.

I have lived here for over twenty years, and it is more my home than anywhere else. This is for me Mount Zion, God's dwelling place, a shelter from the storms of life and the busyness of the world. The house has been a monastery for over a hundred years. Before that it was a stable block to a mansion built in 1810 and then burnt to a cinder after a major renovation – a house-warming party that got a little too warm. The stables, being set somewhat apart, survived the great fire. Perhaps that was an intimation of its

future use. In time the building became a house warmed by the love of God, a spiritual blacksmith with a fire at its heart that would warm even its cool corridors and towers. The founder of the monastery was a member of the Society of the Divine Compassion, who had been working on behalf of the unemployed and poverty-stricken residents of east London. Father William Sirr SDC longed for an Anglican monastery to be founded that would enable the members of the community to live a hidden life of prayer, study and work. Men came and went, but none stayed. Perhaps the chapel was too cold, the soup too thin and the cloister too quiet for those more used to the sounds of city life.

Fr. William lived and was buried here without a community forming around him, but in 1947 the monastery was entrusted to the Society of St Francis as a house for training the brothers in the ways of prayer and study during their noviciate years. This is still the case today, but over the years the guest ministry has become more central to the work of the house. Today people of all walks of life seek a temporary respite and come to immerse themselves in the atmosphere of prayer that has seeped into the walls over the last century and more.

St Francis of Assisi also longed for a life of contemplative prayer. He wrote a short rule 'for those who wish to live in hermitages', with the dream of three or four brothers coming to live together, two as 'sons' given in large measure to solitary prayer, and two as 'mothers' looking after the daily needs of the hermits, providing food and the necessities of life, and dealing with those knocking on the door or calling out from the gate of the hedged enclosure. Then periodically the roles would be reversed and the mothers given the chance to become sons and enjoy an undistracted life given whole-heartedly to prayer. This was truly a Franciscan way of life, seeking God in all things, giving oneself to the prayer and devotion of a heart enflamed with the love of God, and responding to the needs of others as they care for one another. The dedication of the monastery is to St Mary at the Cross, remembering the words of the dying Jesus entrusting his mother and the beloved disciple to each other, to care for each other in the love of God. This is the companionship that we can all share, to care for one another, to be with them in prayer. May all Franciscans know this love of God in their hearts, and be warmed by the devotion of lives wholly given to God, in the spirit of St Francis and St Clare.

Alnmouth Friary Update: Br Benedict

Dear Companions, where to start? In June, we were hosts to a dozen or so artists, workers in wood, glass, paint and stone, exhibiting their wares as part of the local annual Arts Festival. This was only the second year we had been asked to host and over the course of the Festival Weekend more than 2000 people came through our grounds, to admire the exhibits which were set out in the friary hall and library, and to browse in the gardens. The stunning view over Alnmouth Bay from the library windows was a particular favourite. Again, we were delighted to meet so many people who had lived locally all their lives but had never been inside the friary before. We provided tea/coffee, cakes, fruit juice, as well as selling plants grown in the friary, second-hand books and a selection of greeting cards. This brought some welcome income into our funds. (We should add that the cakes were homemade- but not by the brothers!) The weekend was considered a huge success by the Arts Festival Management Committee and they have booked the friary as a venue for next year. Special thanks must go to Maureen Best who made the majority of the cakes, and to Christopher and Gill, and Jan and Carol, Catherine and Jo who served the teas, or did the washing up and clearing away and without whose help the brothers would have been hard pressed to entertain in this way. The gardens are enjoyed by a large number of folks who find them an oasis of peace; we try and keep them attractive all the year round; they are not pristine and several have mentioned that they like the natural look they have- referring, we think, to the weeds which have their place!



Reflection for Franciscan Morning Prayer at Canterbury Cathedral. Br Samuel SSF



'...two very small coins dropped into the Temple treasury' Luke 21.v 1-4

I think St Francis must have been drawn to this story of the poor women who was noticed by Jesus because he, Francis, was attracted by things that were small. The Portiuncula, the Little Portion of St Mary of the Angels that became home for him. The smallness that he knew himself: *'your little brother Francis'* he writes at the end of his

Testament, *'your very little servant'* he writes in his Letter to the Entire order. And then there is the title he gives to his followers: *'everyone shall be called a lesser brother'*; brothers who were to *'beg alms as poor little ones'* and who were to *'rejoice when they live among people considered of little value'*. He was a person who delighted in small birds of the field and small weeds in the garden. For Francis small was beautiful.

For him smallness was beautiful not simply in an aesthetic sense (although he must have had a good eye for beauty), but because it was revealed to him that smallness is the way that God makes himself known. Almighty God operates in and through smallness. Francis was overwhelmed by the humility of God in Jesus, who as St Clare puts it in her Letter to St Agnes, on *'coming into the Virgin's womb, chose to appear despised, needy and poor in the world;'* Francis' heart was bowled over by the recognition that the Lord of heaven and earth should *'hide himself daily within an ordinary piece of bread'*. To borrow the title of a Booker Prize-winning novel, for Francis, God was 'The God of Small Things'.

So, smallness is intrinsic to our Franciscan vocation. I hesitate to say it's a Franciscan virtue; more an aspiration than a virtue because I'm conscious of how often we fall short of it, both individually and corporately. It's a Franciscan charism which, when it is present within and among us, is both beautiful and effective.

One of remarkable things about the arrival 800 years ago of the first brothers of St Francis is how small, precarious, risky was their mission. It seems that they set out across the Channel with no material resources, no advance publicity, little in the way of obvious organisation (Franciscans have never been very good at that), and no letters of recommendation - Francis himself forbade any seeking of privileges. This little group of friars arriving at Dover, moving to Canterbury and then pushing on rapidly to London, Reading, Oxford and Northampton, depended entirely on the goodwill and kind-heartedness of others. The fragility and vulnerability of their mission, mirroring the fragility and vulnerability of God in Jesus Christ, was its only resource, its sole strength.

And it was hugely, powerfully, attractive. Dr Michael Robson in his lecture yesterday afternoon emphasised how rapidly the order grew in England. It seems that the brothers just picked up followers on the way; there was a kind of snowball effect. People were drawn by the message of God's mercy, compassion and vulnerability that was enfolded, embodied by the life together of these small bands of brothers.

One of the things that Thomas of Eccleston often refers to in his 'Coming of the Franciscans' is their fraternity. Brothers sometimes huddling together to keep warm, gathering around a stove to share the warm thick dregs of beer (it sounds disgusting), caring for each other in sickness, encouraging each other in hardship. And the joy and laughter and playfulness among them. Moroseness and mission do not go well together. Br Marco, a Third Order Regular friar, whom I met in Assisi earlier this year, told me that when he was in charge of novices, he used to make the new brothers read Eccleston's account in order that they might glimpse and hopefully share those bonds of fraternity.

And of course it's this vulnerable, fragile, joyful fraternity, this minority, this littleness, which leads us to recognise and bond with others in their vulnerability. As we gathered on the beach at Dover on Monday evening and yesterday morning to commemorate the

arrival of the first brothers our thoughts and our prayers were with those who are arriving in small boats today – vulnerable, fragile, isolated; despised and feared by many. Twenty-one thousand this year – so far. As I searched for a stone with a hole in it as we were asked to, it felt as though I was looking for a person washed up on the shore, perhaps Jesus himself. A sign of God's Kingdom.

For this is where the green shoots of that Kingdom – referred to in the reading from Luke - are to be found. Amongst the dross, amongst the weeds, in the small things, in the widow's mite (all of them seeds of peace), God hides himself in order to welcome us and all creation into the perfect joy of his Kingdom. To the God of Small Things, the God whom Francis discovered and rejoiced in, be all honour and praise for ever.

David Walford – Journey into joining the Companions

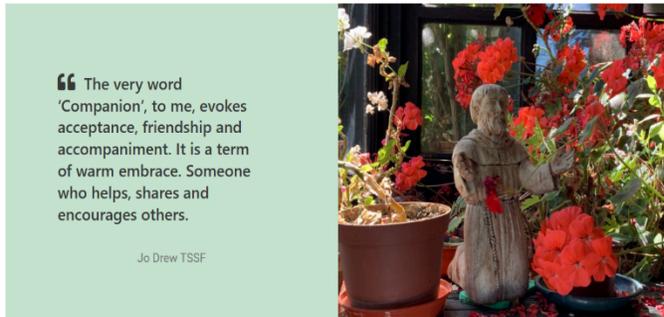
My Background: I was born into an agnostic family. I see that as having some advantages as I had no models of faith or the church imposed upon me. My enquiring mind and spirit, with some guidance from an inspirational vicar, became captivated by Jesus. Reading the Gospels for practically the first time as an early twenty-year-old was a transforming experience. This led me to my baptism and confirmation at the age of twenty-three. After a rigorous acceptance procedure and studies on the Southwark Ordination Course I was made deacon at Michaelmas 1978 and ordained priest the following year. After a few years in non-stipendiary ministry, I believed myself to be called from my work as a London local government officer to parish ministry. I joined the staff of the large parish of Fawley in Hampshire. There, I was able to make links with several schools and local organisations as well as making my first attempts at leading imaginative worship alongside regular services.

I moved on after five years to a time overseeing the construction and funding of a church building in the largely new area of Boyatt Wood, Hampshire. During that very busy and stressful time, I took a day a week away from the parish in term times over a two-year period to train on the London course "The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola and the Art of Spiritual Direction." What I learned and experienced there has shaped my ministry ever since. I used what I'd been shown to add at-home retreats into normal parish life, and to offer spiritual direction within the parish, the Diocese, and the leading of quiet days and retreats.

I left Boyatt Wood thoroughly exhausted after the church building project had been completed and took some rest. After helping in various parishes in the Southwark Diocese I was appointed onto the chaplaincy staff of the Epsom and St Helier NHS Trust, where I was privileged to work in acute care. Through this appointment I also worked with our local NHS Primary Care Trust at homes for people having extreme learning disabilities and challenging behaviour until my retirement in 2010. Healthcare certainly grounds faith in life's realities. My wife and I have stayed in Assisi twice. **There's something unforgettable about the impact that town had on me. The surroundings are so beautiful, the atmosphere is truly inspirational.** Since retiring I have explored spirituality further through my reading and devotions. I also write

published fiction and poetry (at times with spirituality clearly at the centre), have worked as a semi-professional singer of popular music in the London area and in Spain, and enjoy sport, especially international test match cricket and football.

Why am I a Companion of St Francis? Jo Drew



Companions of St Francis are those who, in the course of their Christian journey, have met or heard of the Sisters and Brothers, and have a desire to accompany them in the way of Christian commitment. While they do not wish, or are not in a position to live a life in community, Companions wish to support those who have been

called to this way of life.

I have been a visitor to Alnmouth friary in Northumberland for over 17 years, off and on. And on reflection it has been a 'thin place' that has accompanied, sustained and provided a healing place on my Christian pilgrimage journey. However, it hasn't just been the worship, building or environment that has led to my deeper Franciscan relationship but the very many people that I have had the privilege to encounter who have freely offered their spiritual support, their wisdom and memorable conversations as 'companions along the Way.'

The very word 'Companion', to me, evokes acceptance, friendship and accompaniment. It is a term of warm embrace. Someone who helps, shares and encourages others. Companionship is a reciprocal action of relationship that embodies compassion and love. St Clare referred to herself as a 'helper'. I like the simplicity of that statement. And this is what, I believe, attracted me to become a Companion of St. Francis. It is walking alongside others on their faith journey. And they on mine. I often think of the Road to Emmaus. Two people walking along a dusty track encountering Jesus. As a listening presence. As a concerned and attentive soul. Eager to reassure, and ensure, that He becomes known to them.

My Commitment as a Companion: After I was accepted as a Companion, I committed myself in several ways. I try to support my local Society of Saint Francis community – in prayer and Franciscan reflection; with my time as a fairly regular Guest Worker usually in the scullery or garden; through the provision of alms and subscription to The Franciscan magazine; and in generally being – hopefully – a companion to those I meet – whether on the street, at a place of worship, in the wider community – by referring to Jesus and the Gospel, St Francis and St Clare life's teachings – and by offering hospitality at home. This is also integral to my calling to chaplaincy to the marginalised, community and in my offering as a Spiritual Accompanier through my training through the International Franciscan Studies Centre.

Elizabeth Cook - On Being a Companion

So, the privilege of reciprocal companionship and accompaniment is one that provides me with so much joy and sometimes much sorrow since life, in all its fullness, has so many ebbs and flows embracing brokenness, healing, reconciliation and transformation too. It is also a great happiness to meet with other people who embrace the Franciscan life and to travel along the road with them in often the most surprising, unexpected and illuminating ways! It would also be a joy to encounter or contact other Companions of St Francis but I am fully aware that distance and circumstances only separate us physically but not spiritually. St Francis said – What you are before God, that you are and no more. I just pray, with an open heart, that the Lord will use me as He will in my desire to serve Him as a Companion of St Francis.



My first contact with SSF was as a child. I grew up in the west country and a wayfarer who regularly stopped off at our house (my mother gave him her bicycle) told us that he liked to spend Christmas at 'the friary'. 'The Brothers do a good Christmas' he said. Something I could later confirm. When I was in my 20s I visited Assisi for the first time. I was moved by the smallness of the Porziuncola and wondered why the great edifice of the larger church had been built around it. It seemed to be missing the point. In Assisi itself I felt a quality that no amount of tourist tat was able to destroy. Many more years later, a family member – then a novice at Hilfield invited me to visit. By this time prayer had become important to me. That first, and subsequent, visit to Hilfield with its liberating, gentle, accepting hospitality, led to my feeling increasingly attracted to the Franciscan way of living the Gospel.

I have never been much of a joiner and but when I read the 4 'Obligations' for the Companions I was struck by how they described ways in which I was already trying (and usually failing) to live my life. I felt that if I were to become a Companion I would feel supported and encouraged in my attempts to live in this way, in the knowledge that there were many others doing the same. I like the idea of 'companionship.' It feels gentle, un-coercive, side by side: we share bread. We walk together, in spirit and sometimes in body. I also liked the echo of the *compañeros* of the Spanish Civil War who fought against fascism. Brother Vincent admitted me as a Companion at Hilfield Friary on June 28th 2006. A late friend of mine – a Reader in the Church of England – told me that he was often asked if he wanted to be ordained. 'No', he'd reply. He wanted to be a Reader! Companions of the SSF are sometimes asked if we really want to join the Third Order. I for one don't. We're not would-be Tertiaries but glad Companions.

The Call to the Sacred Ministry: Fr Ray Best. A Companion

At my Forthgoing Service at Salisbury Cathedral in 1974 we sang the hymn, “All my hope on God is founded”. I remember it vividly and it has remained a source of inspiration to me for the past 50 years. I now have time to reflect on the journey and on the people, places and opportunities that directed and formulated my Ministry. Several people have asked me about the “Call to Ministry”. What is it? How do you receive it? What does it feel like? I was Ordained in 1974, but I need to go back long before then for a true understanding. The influence that my parents and grandparents had upon my upbringing cannot be underestimated. Unknowing, my uncle was a Sunday School Teacher at St Luke’s Church, Wallsend and I have a desk ink stand, dated 1891, which was presented to him in recognition of his devoted service to God and the Church. My Grandmother was renowned in the local community and was regularly called upon to minister when a birth or a death occurred in the locality. My mother took my brother and I to Church from birth and we always sat in the front row, to see all that was going on. I joined the Church Choir at the age of six and by the age of 15 years I was encouraged to play the organ and took up the position of Organist & Choirmaster at the age of 20 years.

Thanks to the dedication of faithful vicars and assistant curates I received guidance and encouragement in the Christian Faith and became immersed in the ongoing life of the Church. It seemed good and right to be of Service to God and his Church. However, I was not aware of a calling to priesthood. It was members of the congregation who first posed the question and suggested that I sought advice as to how I might proceed. Maureen and I had been recently married and we bought a house in Wallsend, and I was content and secure in my job at the Town Hall. In addition, we had Angela aged 3 years and Elizabeth who was six-months old.

However, the thought remained in the back of the mind, and I wrestled at length with the possibility, to the point where I had to respond and sought advice from my incumbent Fr John Clay. It was there and then that the journey really began. Resigning from my position; selling our home; finding a Theological College and the finance to support the family for three years were major tasks. Leaving our place of birth and saying farewell to the wider family was challenging. Having achieved what was thought impossible we were ready to move South, when informed by the College that the property in Salisbury, which we were to occupy as a family, was no longer available and Maureen and the girls had to move into the Curate’s Flat in Wallsend for three months and I travelled alone to Salisbury. Our time in Salisbury proved to be life changing and we were eternally grateful to the Principal Canon Harold Wilson, staff and fellow students who supported and cared for us as a family for three years. With the limitations of a secondary modern education, I struggled with the academic side of college life, although I felt blessed because of the ‘life skills’ I had previously experienced. So it was that in June 1974 we left Salisbury and returned north to begin my Diaconate in the Worlton Team Ministry.

I continue to sing with even more confidence,

“God unknown. He alone. Calls my heart to be his own”