

DEEP CALLS TO DEEP: MONASTICISM FOR THE CITY

Experiences from East London

*By Tim Thorlby & Angus Ritchie
September 2015*



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Registered office: East Crypt, St George-in-the-East, 14 Cannon Street Road, London, E1 6BH
Registered in England no. 5848143 and a registered charity no. 1121648

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AFTERWORD: THE COMMUNITY OF ST GEORGE

CANON DR ANGUS RITCHIE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FOREWORD

It is a privilege and a pleasure to commend this excellent report by the Centre for Theology and Community on the contribution of monastic and apostolic religious to life in East London. Profoundly ecumenical in its vision, it is a timely and inspiring contribution to a wider discussion about how the Christians in this part of the world are to live out their vocations with both creativity and fidelity.

There can surely be no doubt that we are living through a time of transition from one historical period to another; it is as turbulent and traumatic as it is challenging. Such epochal shifts have always been marked by a re-imagining of the Christian life as radical discipleship, by a seeking-out of new ways to position oneself as a disciple in relation to the social mainstream, and by the quest for a more thorough integration of the 'outward' life of work and community with the 'interior' journey into the mystery of God. The sharp decline of the forms of Church-going and Christian identity which have served us so well for over a century tells us that we in our turn will need to find something new, to experiment and to take risks, if we are to fashion forms of life which are truly adequate to the emerging context and which will bear lasting evangelical fruit.

The risk to such an enterprise in our present cultural setting is that, in spite of our eagerness to forge something authentic, we end up baptising the values and instincts of the age. In the current period, that can only mean those which have been inculcated in us by the mentality of the all-conquering market. In the past, it has usually been religious whose patterns of life placed them in direct opposition to the great danger of the day. When the Church was at risk of being swallowed whole by the newly Christianised Roman Empire, it was the emergence of monastic communities that guaranteed her integrity. When the Church's wealth and power threatened her evangelical simplicity, Francis and his Friars rose up to keep her close to Jesus, poor and humble. And then, when European Christendom became static and inward-looking, along came the apostolic orders from the 16th century onwards to keep her on the road.

As we reflect on what it means to follow Christ in these early years of the 21st Century, the consecrated lives described in this report can inspire us in our quest, keeping us real about our world and rooted firmly in the Gospel.

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1 INTRODUCTION

***“You have made us for yourself, O Lord,
and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”***

St. Augustine, Confessions, 397AD

There is a restlessness in much of today's Church - a recognition that we do not always offer a faithful and compelling witness to Christ in the midst of today's urban consumer culture.

What should Christian living look like? How can we build lives of genuine, wholehearted devotion to Christ? How can our common life reflect the love we see at the very heart of God? Above all, how can we respond to the Great Commission to 'make disciples', and indeed, become disciples ourselves? As Bishop Graham Cray has noted:

The ultimate test of any expression of church...is what quality of disciples are made there? The discipleship question is the critical question facing the Church in Western culture. And it is an unanswered question. We are in new territory.¹

Nowhere is this challenge more pressing than in our cities - and especially in their most deprived neighbourhoods.

In our life and work here in east London, we daily press up against the challenge of living faithfully in a fragmented, consumerist culture - one riven by huge social inequalities.

It seems to us, as to a growing number of others, that monasticism has something to offer the wider Church as it searches for answers to these vital questions.

1.1 THE PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

Since the earliest desert fathers and mothers, living amidst the sands of fourth and fifth-century Egypt, such people of faith have challenged and inspired the Church in equal measure. Monasticism has something to say about whole-hearted devotion, about community life, about incarnational mission. In our consumer culture, it has something to say about commitment.

¹ Graham Cray (2010) *Why is New Monasticism Important to Fresh Expressions?* in Cray, Mobsby and Kennedy (2010) *New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church*, Canterbury Press

Because of this, there is now a growing trend for experiments in ‘New Monasticism’, drawing on ancient practices to develop new expressions of being church.

This report is not about New Monasticism, although we happily encourage that. Nor is this a history of monastic life in past centuries, although that is vital to understanding monasticism today.

Instead, we have sought out and listened to the monks and nuns of the 21st Century, living and working in our midst in east London. As we will show, there are a surprising number of them. And they have something to say to the Church today.

We hope and pray that this report encourages greater engagement with existing Religious Orders, encourages New Monastic initiatives and inspires the Church to listen harder to the insights of monasticism.

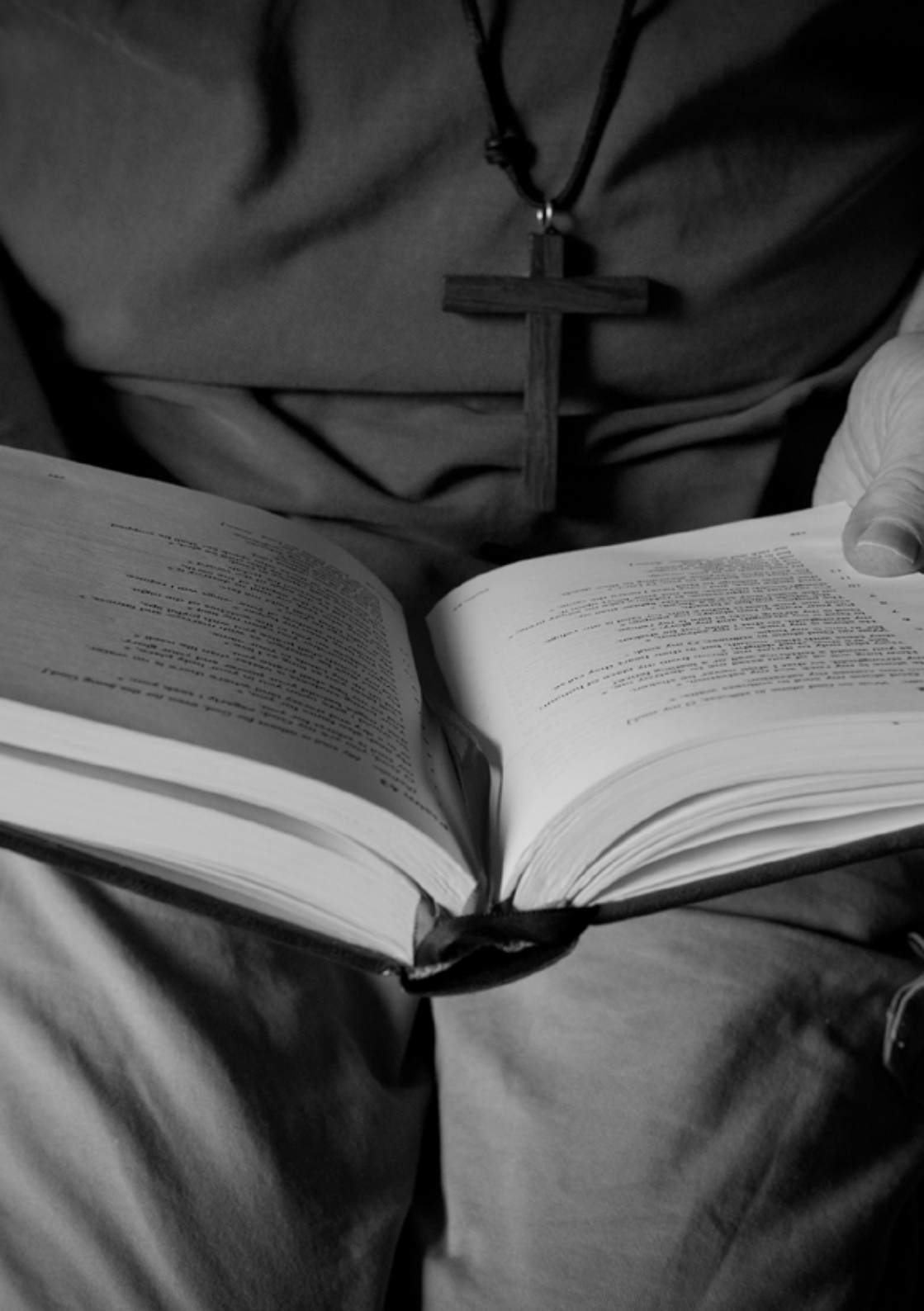
1.2 A BRIEF NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

We are following less specialist discussions of the religious life by using the term “monasticism” in a rather loose way to embrace all Religious Orders, whether they involve living in a monastery (e.g. Benedictines) or a more apostolic ministry which is less rooted in a particular place (e.g. Jesuits and Franciscans). Likewise, the report sometimes uses “monks” as a term to include all male members of Religious Orders.

1.3 THIS REPORT

This report draws on both desk research and face to face interviews with a number of people in east London.

In section 2, we provide a brief overview of the various Religious Orders at work in east London. In sections 3 – 5 we relay the personal stories of members of three different Religious Orders in east London. In section 6 we offer some concluding reflections and identify some practical challenges for churches. Finally, in a brief Afterword, we introduce a new initiative which is growing out of our own engagement with monasticism at CTC.



2

MONASTICISM AND EAST LONDON

This section introduces a brief overview of Monasticism and its place in east London, including the results of our recent mapping.

2.1 A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF MONASTICISM

Monasticism first emerged within Christianity at the very moment that the wider Church was gaining secular influence. After the conversion of Constantine, the Church's involvement in the Roman Empire fundamentally altered its relationship with worldly hierarchies of status, violence and wealth. It was at that moment that the first desert fathers and mothers began to feel called to a solitary life of prayer and radical discipleship. As Thomas Merton explains:

These were men who believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster. The fact that the Emperor was now Christian and that the “world” was coming to know the Cross as a sign of temporal power only strengthened them in their resolve.¹

This flight to the desert was not an abandonment of the residents of the city. Monasticism, even in this solitary version, was undertaken for the health of the whole Body. The desert fathers and mothers prayed for those they had left behind in the city, and their way of life helped them to embody the subversive vision of the Gospel to the wider Church. This is why Christians flocked to them for spiritual direction and counsel.

While the desert monks and nuns lived a largely solitary life, there were important ways in which they shared a common life, most of all in the celebration of the Eucharist.

In the following centuries, more obviously corporate forms of monasticism developed, each with its own distinctive charisms.² There was never thought to be one “right way” to be monastic. All monasticism exists for the wider Body, and is indeed only possible because some in that wider Body are called to other vocations (not least to that of

1 Thomas Merton (1960), *The Wisdom of the Desert*, New Directions, p.3

2 Religious Orders each have a distinct ‘charism’ which defines their particular character and spiritual orientation as a congregation

marriage and family life). Over the centuries, different Religious Orders have emerged with different “Rules of Life”, bringing different gifts to the wider Body.

This study is focused on the religious orders within western Christianity - although the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches have also been greatly influenced by monasticism. Within western Christianity, the vast majority of monastic communities are Roman Catholic, although monasticism has also been rediscovered within the Anglican Communion, and exists on a smaller scale within some other denominations.

Among the most significant Religious Orders are

- the Benedictines, with their focus on stability - rooted in one particular place for life, with a rhythm of prayer, common life and hospitality, which continues to be shaped by the foundational *Rule* written by St Benedict of Nursia (c.480-547)
- the Augustinians, and other orders (such as the Dominicans) governed by the Rule of St Augustine of Hippo (354-430). Following Augustine’s maxim that “Nothing conquers except truth and the victory of truth is love,” a particular charism of the Augustinians is learning and education, as well as practical service of those in greatest need.³
- the Franciscans, who follow the teaching and example of St Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) and his early companions – who were both mendicants (owning no property collectively as well as individually) and itinerants (travelling from place to place, to preach and serve the poorest)
- the Jesuits, founded by St Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) – who follow and teach his *Spiritual Exercises* and have a particular focus on teaching, evangelisation and scholarship.

Each of these streams of monasticism has adapted to a wide range of situations. They have sought to witness to the Gospel in contexts where Christians are at least nominally in the majority, ones where they are an often small minority, or ones where the faith was previously unknown (for example, monks played an important role in the spread of

3 St Augustine, *Sermons* 358,1 “Victoria veritatis est caritas”



Christianity across Europe, not least St Columba and his companions, who led the evangelisation of Scotland in the sixth century).

What might monasticism offer western churches and society today – contexts in which at least nominal Christian practice was once almost universal, and is now becoming a minority pursuit?

In *After Virtue*, the philosopher Alastair MacIntyre argues that our society is moving towards an increasing irrationalism and fragmentation in its ethics. This moral incoherence will make it more and more difficult to live together peaceably, and to engage in serious debate about our purpose and direction. MacIntyre argues powerfully that secular liberalism cannot provide a credible, over-arching moral framework. Rather, he argues that virtue and meaning can only be nurtured in communities of value. With no common moral narrative, we are in danger of entering a ‘new Dark Age’. MacIntyre argues that the points of light will be the communities (often of faith) which continue to proclaim and to embody ongoing traditions of value. MacIntyre ends *After Virtue* with the claim that modern society is ‘waiting not for a Godot, but for another - doubtless very different - St Benedict.’⁴ Christians can no longer hope to impose their vision upon the world (a dubious pursuit even when it could be done). They can, however, continue to embody this vision as their act of witness.

It is no coincidence that Popes Benedict and Francis chose the names of the two great fathers of western monasticism. These two Christian leaders, with very different styles and temperaments, speak of two of the great monastic charisms - the common life and vision of Benedict (with a focus on stability, and the preservation and distillation of the wisdom of Christian tradition) and Francis (with his emphasis on the radicalism of that tradition - and the way it subverts worldly hierarchies of status and of wealth). Both aspects of monasticism are needed urgently today, so that our society can “come and see” what the Gospel looks like when it is lived out with radical faithfulness (cf. John 1.39).

4 Alastair MacIntyre (1983), *After Virtue*, Duckworth Press, p.263

2.2 MONASTICISM IN EAST LONDON TODAY

Perhaps surprisingly, monasticism is still widely practiced across east London.

We have sought to map every established Religious Order that has a presence in the four London Boroughs of inner east London (Hackney, Tower Hamlets, Newham and Waltham Forest). This is an area containing great deprivation and a resident population of over one million people.⁵

It is a complex picture, with a rich and varied history. Religious Orders have come and gone from east London over the centuries, arriving in waves and meeting varying fortunes.

We found 40 different Religious Orders represented today in inner east London, with many of them having more than one resident community within the area. The vast majority of the Orders are part of the Roman Catholic Church and most are international in nature, with communities in numerous countries. A couple of Orders are part of the Church of England.

Over three quarters of the Orders are female, reflecting the wider international pattern.

The total number of Religious living in our study area of inner east London is hard to measure precisely as numbers are not always readily available, but based on the evidence we collated, we estimate that it probably comprises 150-250 Brothers and Sisters in total. That is an approximate average of one Religious per 5,000 residents, which is probably a comparable density to the number of ordained Clergy (of all denominations) working in the same geographical area.

So is Monasticism a thing of the past? Apparently not.

Monasticism is a way of life, not just a set of ideas and values. That is why, at the heart of this report, we have placed a set of stories of local members of Religious Orders. As Christians, we will learn most from monasticism by discovering how it is lived out in our midst.

⁵ Census 2011, Office for National Statistics



3 AN AUGUSTINIAN STORY: OBLATES OF THE ASSUMPTION

Order	Oblates of the Assumption (Missionary Sisters)
Tradition	Augustinian
Denomination	Roman Catholic

3.1 ORIGINS AND CHARISM

The Oblates (Missionary Sisters) of the Assumption are part of a family of several different Religious Orders which share a common heritage as ‘Assumptionists’, originally founded in the 19th Century.

The first Assumptionist Order – the Augustinians of the Assumption – began as a congregation of Catholic priests and brothers, founded in southern France, by Fr. Emmanuel d’Alzon in 1845. Their Rule of Life was inspired by St. Augustine of Hippo (hence they are ‘Augustinians’). The Oblates of the Assumption¹ – a congregation for women - was founded in 1865 by Fr d’Alzon.

There are now Assumptionist congregations living and working in many countries around the world. New recruits come through regularly in SE Asia, South America and Africa, but less so at present in Western Europe.

Charism

The Oblates of the Assumption have a ‘charism’ which reflects their role as missionaries and which has a focus on Christian unity. As missionaries, they tend to take secular jobs and work out in their local community – they do not live cloistered lives in a convent. This often includes a particular concern for the poor. They also prioritise ecumenical work, promoting Christian unity where possible.

3.2 ORGANISATION

The Order is an international family, with hundreds of Sisters living in communities around the world.

The Order has its own Constitution and is independent organisation. It is not under the authority of local Bishops, only Rome itself, so it has a fair degree of autonomy. The Order is democratic in its governance. Each Province within the Order elects representatives to attend the international Chapter, which in turn elects a Council and a Superior-General to oversee the Order. The Superior-General serves for six years.

¹ An ‘oblate’ is ‘someone who has been offered up to God’

Every six years, the Chapter reviews the Constitution and ensures it is still fit for purpose. When they gather, they reflect upon the world, the church and how they have been living for the last 6 years.

The Order is also financially independent, although it has a significant financial challenge as the balance between working Sisters and retired Sisters continues to shift towards the latter. Most of their income is earned from paid work, supplemented with some donations. Resources are shared internationally between the different Provinces within the Order.

The Province of England will soon become part of an amalgamated European Province.

3.3 THE VOWS AND RULE OF LIFE

Members of the Order take lifetime vows, but they do not rush into this. After an initial period of training, young Sisters take annual vows at first, and only after eight years do they take their lifetime vows.

Sisters take three vows:

- poverty
- celibacy
- obedience

Their Rule of Life has been developed and refined over the years, but is based on that of St Augustine. It is described as a rule based on love and community living. Some of the core practices are described below.

As missionaries they may move from community to community during their lifetime, they are not rooted in one place.

The Sisters can wear their Order's habit, but are not obliged to do so, and some choose not to.

3.4 PRACTICES - DEVOTION, COMMUNITY, MISSION

Here, we give a flavour of the pattern of life within the community in Chingford, Waltham Forest, and what the Rule of Life looks like in

practice. (Note that the quotes are from Sister Josephine, unless stated otherwise.)

There are currently four Sisters living together in a couple of semi-detached houses that face each other on a quiet residential street. The houses are owned by the Order and can accommodate up to nine Sisters in total. One of the houses is just bedrooms, and the other has the kitchen and dining room, a lounge and a room that is laid out as a chapel.

Over the years, Sisters have come and gone from the house as they have moved between communities. At present, there is a Sister from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who works in a care home, and one British and two Irish Sisters who are retired, although all remain actively involved in church and community work. The Sisters often have very different background.

“where you come from is not important”

Devotion

One of the vows taken by Sisters is celibacy – as a means of helping them to be devoted to Christ.

“Christ is the love of your life”

The Sisters pray the Divine Office² three times a day, praying for the world and themselves:

- Morning prayer, with 30 minutes of meditation and then Mass
- Vespers, with 30 minutes of adoration
- Compline, at night before bedtime

Prayers are said in the chapel in the house – a lounge converted into a simple chapel, with small benches and an altar.

“...we always give the Lord the best room in the house”

Once a month, the Sisters gather for a day of reflection, and once a

² The Divine Office is the term Catholics use for the prayers set for public, non-Eucharistic worship each day, particularly (but not exclusively) by clergy, monks and nuns. It is largely made up of Psalmody, other Scriptural readings and canticles.

year they go on an 8 day retreat.

Community

Community life is fundamental to the Order.

Across the Order, many Sisters take up paid work out in the community as part of their vocation as missionaries and that is how much of the Order is financed. All income goes into a common fund and is then shared out. The Sisters do not own any money personally.

Sharing is on the basis of needs, not equality. In his Rule, St Augustine says that *“it is better to need less than to have more”*.

“the person who has the least needs is the richest”

The Sisters meet as a Community every two weeks to discuss any business and also to have fun. Every three years, they elect a new Superior from amongst them, to run the Community, and one of the Sisters will also act as Bursar, looking after the finances.

The Sisters eat together at least once a day.

“meals are sacred”

They also regularly show hospitality to visitors, of whom they have a fair number.

On Sundays, they attend the local parish church and participate in parish life, but they don't officiate at church. They help out with the St Vincent de Paul (SVP) group in the parish, caring for the sick and housebound, taking them Mass each week.

Mission

The work that Sisters of the Order do varies enormously – from journalism and teaching to physiotherapy, radiography and medicine. In France, the Order now runs a large Catholic publishing house, publishing the daily French newspaper, La Croix, amongst others.

As well as paid work, Sisters also support the work of the church in many ways – supporting the teaching, caring and pastoral work.

3.5 SISTER JOSEPHINE: A SKETCH

Sister Josephine took her Vows in 1968 and has been living and working in east London for the last 35 years.

Growing up in Ireland, she remembers some of her earliest church experiences as being ones full of mystery – church as a place to think and wonder.

“I loved the mystery of it all”

When Sister Josephine joined the Order, she trained in France for three and half years, then spent time studying and working in London and Northern Ireland before moving back to London in 1979, where she has been based ever since.

She trained as an administrator in Whipps Cross Hospital, took on more responsibility over time and ended up working there for over a decade.

“I loved my work”

Her work gave her an opportunity to meet people at all levels of the Hospital – patients, nurses, doctors and managers.

“...most contacts came from working at the photocopier...”

In her spare time, she helped to run youth groups and took young people to Taizé. Eventually, she moved on from working at the Hospital to become a full-time youth worker in Waltham Forest, engaged with a number of schools and parishes. She also became a part-time Chaplain in Trinity Green School, Woodford Green for 20 years.

Sister Josephine served as their community’s Superior for many years.

She is now retired from paid employment, but still fully involved in church and community work, both in her parish and more widely. She continues to train younger members of the Order and is involved in mentoring and developing young people. She has a passion for helping people to find their vocation in life.

She also continues to work ecumenically, promoting good church relations. As part of this, she is also heavily involved in community organising with London Citizens, working alongside many other community organisations of all faiths (and none) to promote the London Living Wage and other campaigns. (She was London Citizens' 'Leader of the Year' in 2007.)

Sister Josephine reflected on the difficulty of recruiting new Sisters in Western Europe (although they continue to recruit in numbers elsewhere in the world). Although there is a mix of reasons, she particularly highlighted the trend amongst younger generations to resist making commitments in life. When there are so many options available, to commit to one path may "seem like an impoverishment", but in reality, the reverse is true:

"you only really grow when you commit yourself"



4 AN IGNATIAN STORY: FAITHFUL COMPANIONS OF JESUS

Congregation	Faithful Companions of Jesus
Tradition	Ignatian
Denomination	Roman Catholic

4.1 ORIGINS AND CHARISM

The Society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus (SFCJ) is a small Congregation, with approximately 200 Sisters around the world, including several groups in the UK. They are a Congregation (rather than an Order) and draw on the practices of St Ignatius of Loyola and the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) which he founded.

SFCJ was founded nearly 200 years ago in 1820 by Marie Madeleine d'Houet, a young French widow. She felt called to found a new Society of

**“
SHE HAD
PARTICULAR
CONCERN FOR
THE POOREST
IN SOCIETY**

women who would take their inspiration from the original ‘faithful companions of Jesus’ – Mary and the other women of the Gospels – and spread the Good News. She began by teaching disadvantaged young women practical skills as well as teaching them about the Christian faith.

Impressed by the spirituality of the Jesuits, she adopted the Constitutions of the Jesuits, as her ‘rule of life’, and that

is still the basis of the Society today.

Maria Madeleine travelled widely, establishing new communities of Sisters, including some in London. She set up numerous day schools and boarding schools, orphanages, night classes for women and retreat centres. She had particular concern for the poorest in society.

The first school that she ran in the UK still exists today - Maria Fidelis Catholic School for Girls in Somers Town, north London. Maria Madeleine began her work at this school in Somers Town in 1830.

Over the years, the Society spread, with groups eventually established in every Continent.

Charism

The ‘Charism’ of the Congregation is to seek to be ‘faithful companions of Jesus’ in all that they are, and do. They also have a clear missionary focus, and their spirituality is firmly Ignatian in nature.

4.2 ORGANISATION

The Congregation is led by a Superior General and is organised into different geographical Provinces.

Every five years, the Society has a general chapter meeting – which brings together representatives of the different communities around the world - and which reflects on the recent experience of the Society and the emerging needs of the Church. It makes decisions about how the Congregation is organised.

Life in the Congregation is much more democratic today than it used to be. Sisters have the opportunity to make an input and discuss decisions before they are made.

4.3 THE VOWS AND RULE OF LIFE

There is a process of eight years of training and commitment before the final Vows are taken. It has evolved over the years, although the main structure remains the same:

- Postulancy – the process begins with a time of ‘asking’, a 6 month stage that includes a 30 day Ignatian retreat, which is meant to be a life-changing experience.
- Novitiate – this is a two year period of study and training.
- Temporary Profession of Vows – the first Vows are then taken for a period of three years. They are then renewed for another three years, during which there is further training and another 30 day Ignatian retreat.
- Final Profession of Vows – at the end of the training period, after 8 years, there is the final profession of Vows for life.

The Faithful Companions of Jesus make the three Simple Vows:

- Poverty
- Chastity
- Obedience

Although training and study is a key part of this process, it is not full-time – it is important to know that most Sisters take up paid work

during their training period and subsequently and are, between them, involved in a wide range of careers.

Laity

Since 1993, a group of women and men, in various countries, have chosen to make a formal commitment to live the charism of faithful companionship with Jesus, although without taking vows. These people are called 'FCJ Companions in Mission'.

4.4 PRACTICES - DEVOTION, COMMUNITY, MISSION

The Congregation has been living and working in east London for over 100 years. In 1881, the priest of the Parish of Saints Mary and Joseph, Poplar (in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets) invited the Society to work with him, partly to help him with the education of the newly arriving Irish immigrant community. The Sisters have been working in Poplar ever since.

Devotion

Sisters who live together establish a daily and weekly rhythm of prayer and worship. This might typically involve an hour of prayer each morning, alone, and then several times a week saying Morning Prayer together.

Sisters will also usually undertake the Examen (the Ignatian practice of self-examination before God) each day, individually, in quiet moments. Years of spiritual training leads to regular habits.

On Sundays, the Sisters will take part in their Parish Mass.

Sisters also take the Vow of Chastity, as an act of devotion.

*“you have given your life to the Lord – a very positive thing...
it frees you to belong in a way that you couldn't if you were married...
it's the most difficult Vow to explain...”*

Community

Most members of the Society live together in groups – there are currently four small communities in London, including one in Poplar in Pope John House, comprising 5 retired Sisters.

Money and resources are shared communally, so earnings from work are collected centrally and then distributed to members according to need. Sisters share tasks around the house too, living communally and often eating together. Feast days are also celebrated together.

Mission

The Sisters usually work for a living. They work in a wide range of jobs – these days not just teaching – and very much as part of their local communities.

“what is the role of a consecrated Religious in the inner city?....we are inserted into the life of the community to somehow give people some direction as to where life is going and to find meaning....I hope that we are saying to people that they matter and that they matter to God”

4.5 SISTER CHRISTINE: A SKETCH

Sister Christine vividly described how much had changed within her Congregation during her lifetime. When she first joined, as a 17 year old girl from Ireland, the life was very ‘monastic’ – very strict, with a lot of silence. But the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s brought a lot of change, and today life in her Congregation is quite different.

The Congregation has also shrunk significantly over the last few decades – from over 1,000 to about 200 now.

Early days

Sister Christine is from the city of Limerick in Ireland. She joined the Congregation as a young woman aged 17. She could have been a physiotherapist, but her convictions led her in a different direction. When she undertook the initial 6 month Postulancy, she had to wear a habit for the first time, sleep in a dormitory and adjust to having no



privacy – “quite a culture shock”. (It is different now.)

She served her two year Novitiate in Broadstairs, Kent. A typical day would involve rising at 5.30am, an hour of meditation and spending much of the day in silence whilst undertaking both manual work and study. She remembers a cold house with no central heating.

“we put newspapers between the sheets to keep warm although we were never allowed to read them....”

After taking her first Vows, she studied for three years at University in Dublin, and did a teaching diploma in Manchester.

She then lived and worked in Calgary, Canada for 7 years, teaching in a primary school. Her first class was 42 children, mainly of Italian backgrounds, aged 6 and 7, whom she taught in a Portakabin from 9am to 4pm each day. Two Sisters taught 80 children between them. It was as difficult adjustment, not least as she had originally been trained to teach secondary school children.

“somehow we managed”

She describes a rather austere monastic way of life at the time:

“we would leave the house in silence, wearing our long habits, go to school....and come home in silence...there was no TV...”

“there was silence all day! How we managed to teach I don’t know”

Life in the Congregation changed significantly after the reforms to religious orders and congregations arising from the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

“it opened the windows...it was very refreshing”

“silence which leads to prayer is a good thing, but silence for its own sake isn’t”

Sister Christine described a new focus on ‘getting back to the gospel’ and getting out and meeting with people in their own homes – a much less monastic life, and a less austere way of living. Although this was very different, she points out that it wasn’t necessarily ‘easier’:

“religious life is as hard to live now as then – you’re on your own more now....there are no bells ringing now to tell you what to do, now you have to think for yourself”

After taking her final Vows, Sister Christine returned to the UK, and to east London, in 1970, where she has been ever since.

Living in London

Sister Christine originally lived with other Sisters in Pope John House in Poplar, living communally as she had done for many years. After a few years she got permission to live in a flat on a local council estate, where she has lived for the last 30 years. The Estate’s residents today are mainly Muslims of Bengali origin.

*“it’s about presence....to show that God cares.....
when I shout and scream about the litter,
noise, overcrowding...
I’m not talking second-hand”*

*“I’ve been called a ‘Bangla-lover’ by some people as
an insult...
...we have to learn to respect each other...although it is not
always easy”*

She notes that her neighbourhood is constantly changing. It has had waves of immigration – people from the Caribbean, then Ugandan Asians, then Bangladeshis. Now the Bengali population are beginning to think about moving on, and Eastern Europeans are moving in.

Devotion...

Sister Christine follows a less formal rhythm of devotion but usually spends an hour praying each morning, and will pause for 10 minutes to do the Examen perhaps in the middle of the day and at the end of the day. She also meets with others from time to time and attends Mass on Sundays.

Work and mission...

Sister Christine taught for a number of years at a Catholic Comprehensive School in Poplar, but is now retired from teaching, although she is still working.

She set up a volunteering initiative when she arrived, which became the charity ‘Neighbours in Poplar’ which she is still running 45 years later. The project recruits volunteers from the community, including younger people, to befriend and serve the needs of older people, particularly those who are housebound. The project now has a team of full and part-time workers, 40 volunteers and works with hundreds of elderly people each year, providing a range of services. They cook over 300 meals on Christmas Day.

‘Neighbours in Poplar’ serves the E14 area (Poplar and the Isle of Dogs) and is funded by grants from charitable trusts and donations. Sister Christine is still at work by 7am most days, unpaid. They are currently fundraising so they can employ a manager from next year.

“I live on a pension, quite small – it makes you aware of what people are actually living on”

Sister Christine also works with SPLASH (South Poplar and Limehouse Action for Secure Housing), which is a local group that campaigns on local issues and also provides a range of services to local people – from ESOL classes to summer holiday coach trips.

Sister Christine enjoys encouraging her fellow Catholics to get involved in local politics, quoting the new Pope’s own words:

“a good Catholic meddles in politics” - Pope Francis¹

¹ http://en.radiovaticana.va/storico/2013/09/16/pope_francis_christians_must_pray_for_their_leaders/en1-728870

Another role that Sister Christine currently has is the convenor of Churches Together in Poplar. She organises meetings every few months, bringing local churches together to consider local issues and how to respond.

In the past she has also undertaken formal roles in parish life, teaching the faith to young people and adults, although she has retired from this now.

Final thoughts...

Sister Christine wants to see more people getting back into the habit of praying – saying Grace before meals, prayers in the morning and evening, praying with their children.

“our Muslim neighbours are praying five times a day!”

“we are far too reliant on set prayers...people need to learn to pray through the day...at the drop of a hat....saying the Morning offering and at the end of the day, close it with a prayer”

Would she recommend the religious life to others? Yes.

“you are privileged...you can get into people’s lives and hearts and they trust you....it’s the faith”

“there is lots of fun too...life can’t all be serious”

But she acknowledges that it is not easy.

“religious life isn’t for everybody”

She also reflected that there are fewer young people in the UK opting to take Vows today, because it is so out of kilter with the prevailing culture.

“it’s difficult to encourage people to do something permanent with their life at the age of 22”



5 A FRANCISCAN STORY: THE SOCIETY OF SAINT FRANCIS

Congregation	Society of Saint Francis
Tradition	Franciscan
Denomination	Anglican

5.1 ORIGINS AND CHARISM

All Franciscans seek to follow Christ in the way shown by both St Francis and St Clare of Assisi in the 13th Century. These saints lived in poverty and brought the Good News to the poor, living lives of peace and justice and respecting all of creation. They developed simple rules of life to encourage others to do the same.

Franciscan friars lived an ascetic way of life, renouncing property and traveling the world to preach. Their livelihood depended on the good will of their listeners. They were known as ‘mendicant’ friars - derived from the Latin word ‘mendicare’, meaning “to beg.”

“we sit lightly to where we live”

The Society of St Francis is Anglican, not Catholic – one of the relatively few Anglican Religious Orders. In its present form, the Society was founded relatively recently in the 1930s, as a coming together of several previous Franciscan organisations founded in the early years of the 20th Century. The Society is for Brothers, and there is a parallel Community for Sisters.

More recently, renewed attention has been brought to the life of St Francis by the unexpected decision of the new Pope to take the name Francis, even though he is a Jesuit.

Charism

Franciscan spirituality is inspired by the life St Francis, recognised as a Christ-like Saint. Franciscans seek to live in a spirit of humility, love and joy. They see the work of God in all of creation and therefore have respect for all of creation. They seek peace and reconciliation.

5.2 ORGANISATION

The Society is divided into Provinces around the world, with the UK being part of the European Province. There are currently over 250 Brothers in the Society, with nearly 70 in Europe. They have recently taken on six young men as Novices, from across Europe.

Companions of the Society of St Francis

A companion promises to keep the obligations and is encouraged to draw up a rule of life based on the guiding principles.

Obligations

- 1 To pray regularly for the Society of St Francis and support its life and work
- 2 To aim at simplicity of life, avoiding all waste and extravagance
- 3 To help those in need
- 4 To strive to bring others to the knowledge and life of Christ

Guiding Principles

- 1 To pray to God every morning and evening
- 2 To read some verses of the Bible each day
- 3 To regard the Eucharist as the central act of Christian worship and to have a rule of regular communion
- 4 To use sacramental confession when conscience requires
- 5 To devote some portion of one's money, on a systematic and thought out plan, for the help of the needy and the work of God's Church
- 6 To be ready to undertake some service for others in the sphere of one's life and work
- 7 To deepen one's knowledge of God and one's faith through religious reading retreats and conferences as opportunity allows
- 8 To review one's rule of life on or about the feast of St Francis (October 4th) each year

Source: Society of St Francis, 2014

The Society's 'Foundation House' is at Hilfield, in Dorset. They have eight different bases in the UK in total.

All of the Brothers meet together at an Annual Chapter each year in June, where they elect the Provincial Chapter to run the affairs of the Province. This smaller group meets four times through the year.

Different Orders

The Society is part of a group of Franciscan Orders which are closely related.

First Order brothers and sisters make life vows. The brothers (like Brother Philip) belong to the Society of Saint Francis, the sisters belong to the Community of St Francis.

There is a Second Order, of sisters - the Community of St Clare – who make life vows and live a more traditional enclosed and contemplative life together in a house in a small village in Oxfordshire. They earn a living through a number of small enterprises, and welcome guests to stay with them.

Third Order sisters and brothers are scattered around the world. They undergo three years of training and then make annual vows and commit to follow their personal Rule of Life, but continue their everyday day lives, living and working within their communities. This Order is open to lay and ordained, married and single people, of all ages. There are about 3,000 members today, throughout the world.

Companions of St Francis are people who do not take vows, but are linked to the Society through prayer and friendship. They promise to keep four ‘obligations’ and are encouraged to draw up their own simple rule of life to follow, based on a set of eight guiding principles (see inset box).

5.3 THE VOWS AND RULE OF LIFE

The Brothers of the Society of Saint Francis take the three simple vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience. The Society also orders its life according to a written set of ‘Principles’¹, which was originally shaped in the 1930s by a Franciscan community in India. The Principles are arranged into 30 daily readings, to aid their regular reading (see inset box for an example).

Franciscans normally wear a brown habit, although it is not obligatory. It is tied with a rope that has three knots on it, one for each Life Vow.

In their daily lives, they traditionally seek a balance between prayer, work and study.

¹ A copy of the Principles can be found at www.franciscans.org.uk/the-principles-of-the-first-order

The Principles

A brief extract from the Principles of the First Order:

Day 6 (Poverty)

The brothers and sisters desire to possess nothing which cannot be shared by those around them and such things as will help satisfy their needs.

The receive no pay and own no personal possessions. They live as a family having all things in common. They receive for their use the simple necessities of life. Yet what they receive they regard not as their own but rather as lent to them for a season.

Nor must they, while excluding the snare of the world from their individual lives, allow it to return in the corporate community, where it may work a wider and more fatal destruction. It would be small gain were they to surrender their personal possessions only to live in luxury through the abundance of the common stock. Therefore the community must turn away from excess. The buildings it erects and the style and manner of life which it permits must be the simplest that are consistent with good health and efficient work. If there is money beyond what such simple needs require, let it be spent in works of mercy and service, or else be used for the house of God, which it is right and seemly with proper moderation to adorn, or for the purchase of books which are necessary for the work of the study.

Source: Society of St Francis, 2014

5.4 PRACTICES - DEVOTION, COMMUNITY, MISSION

Devotion

The Brothers say prayers together (the 'Daily Offices') four times per day – first thing in the morning, midday, in the evening and at night, before going to bed. The times before and after the first and last prayers of the day are normally quiet times with not much conversation. Communion is also taken regularly.

In addition, Brothers will also spend an hour in silent prayer each day, either on their own or with others.



Sometimes the Brothers will have a small chapel set up in their house where they will meet, but sometimes not.

“it’s a very good thing to share silence together – you’re more attentive to people....silent prayer together and saying psalms together is a good way to build community life...don’t ask me how it all happens, but it does”

The vows include a commitment to chastity, which many find challenging, although it is an ongoing act of devotion too.

“it frees you up to give yourself to others”

Community

The Brothers do not possess personal property (except their clothing!), everything is shared, including income from work. They live together in different houses and seek to share their homes by offering hospitality to others.

“everything we have is a gift from God – we are to share it and pass it on...to hold it lightly”

“we’re all very different, but we manage to live together!”

Mission

The Brothers are involved in different kinds of work. For example, some Brothers work with the charity Praxis, supporting asylum seekers and refugees to establish their legal rights and taking part in campaigns to improve their situation in the UK. Others work as chaplains or local parish priests. Some have ‘secular’ jobs – one Brother was an ethics advisor to the NHS.

5.5 BROTHER PHILIP: A SKETCH

Brother Philip grew up in Northern Ireland in a mixed family of both Catholic and Protestant traditions.

“I was the product of a divided community”

He remembers becoming a committed Christian at an early age and choosing to join the Anglican Church.

“the Anglican Church became my family”

On leaving school he learnt how to build organs, and became a Master Organ Builder, going into business with a couple of others.

However, Brother Philip remembers feeling a strong desire for more in his walk with God.

In the late 1960s, as a young man, he met some Franciscan Brothers and Sisters living and working in Belfast. It was the start of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, as dividing lines were being drawn up, sometimes literally - across streets. As he got to know these Franciscans he was impressed by the way that they lived – right in the midst of the communal tensions and yet actively involved in work in prisons, in hospitals as well as their parishes.

*“it was not all ‘church’...
they were living a life of prayer and service in
the community”*

He saw a group of men, from all over the world, living and working together. He saw them debate vociferously with each other, and then shake hands and pray together.

In 1974, this young man offered himself to the Society of St Francis.

Joining

Brother Philip was offered a place to train with the Franciscans in 1977. He served 6 months as a Postulant (“looking and seeing”), then 3

years as a Novice. After this, he took his first Vows – which you promise to keep for 3 years. After this, he then took his Life Vows – offering a lifetime commitment. Not all Novices make it this far – some choose to drop out.

Brother Philip served his Novitiate from 1977 at the Friary at Hilfield in Dorset, the Society's 'HQ'. He remembers working in the kitchens, feeding 60 people every day a mix of resident Brothers and passing wayfarers. He also spent time at the Society's Monastery in Glasshampton, Worcestershire, experiencing monastic life and learning how to balance the daily round of work, recreation, prayer and study.

After this, he took up a job teaching in a Franciscan School for children with learning disabilities in Dorset, something he did for over 12 years.

After this he returned to Hilfield, where he lived for many years, becoming the Guardian of the Friary (he was responsible for overseeing its running).

Life in London

Brother Philip currently lives and works in the Parish of the Divine Compassion, Plaistow and north Canning Town, in Newham. The Parish is large, with 38,000 residents. It has four churches and several vicarages, one of which has been home to Brother Philip for the last 8 years. The local community is very diverse and one of many Faiths.

He was originally invited to come to the Parish at a time of need, after the Parish found itself significantly understaffed by clergy at short notice. The Order gets regular requests to assist Parishes around the country – most of which can't be met as they don't have enough Brothers.

Brother Philip is currently the acting Rector in this Parish, on a temporary basis, and is very involved in parish life.

Brothers from the Society have been living and working in Newham for nearly a Century. Currently there are eight Brothers – both younger and older - living in the area in four different houses.

“when I walk these streets, I feel this is where I’m supposed to be – in this parish at this time”

Having lived in Belfast and east London, Brother Philip has reflected on the differences and similarities. East London is far more ethnically

diverse, but he notes how some sections of the local community are disaffected with authority and the Government in a similar way.

The community is very mixed, with groups living side by side, but perhaps not always communicating with each other much. There are older white people who have lived in the area all of their lives, and do not want to move. There are many Asian communities who have now lived in the area for some time. More recently, people from eastern Europe have been arriving. There are some African communities too. Together with the constant turnover of population, it doesn't feel like a settled or cohesive community.

*“if you go down the Barking Road on the bus there is a great range of spiritualities on view....
people saying the Rosary, muslims reading the Koran....
on every street corner almost you will come across a place of worship—a church or a mosque....”*

The mission of the Parish, including his own work, includes community organising (the Parish was a founding member of TELCO - the east London chapter of Citizens UK), advocacy work with asylum seekers and work with people suffering alcoholism, as well as week-to-week church services, visiting and pastoral care. Brother Philip also works as a spiritual director with St Mellitus training college.

“we must encourage people who come looking for ways to deepen their Christian life....a lot of our work is listening to people”

Last words...

Brother Philip says that he must retire at the age of 70, and so will not be able to play his present parish role past that point. But he also pointed out that Brothers never really retire!

Would he recommend the religious life?

*“I wouldn't try to ‘sell’ the religious life – it's a calling...
we're just ordinary people struggling to live in a*



*particular way
....idealists can be disappointed!”*

“Archbishop George Carey described the religious life as the Church of England’s ‘best kept secret’. Maybe we’ve kept this secret for too long?”



6 REFLECTION AND CHALLENGES

6.1 REFLECTION

Some of the oldest writings on monasticism are the ancient and well-thumbed Rules of St Benedict and St Augustine. What is surprising about these key documents is how short and practical they are. They leap straight from a few well-chosen bible verses to instructions on how to manage a communal kitchen and when to set aside time for prayer.

It is in the ordering of our everyday lives that we find God at work. Christianity, and the monastic approach to living the Christian life, were never meant to be romanticised or over-spiritualised.

This comes across clearly in our interviews with our selection of some of today's Brothers and Sisters living the Religious life in east London. They are normal people, living surprisingly normal lives. But they have chosen to shape these everyday lives around the God of Eternity, and that is what makes them different. Each story reveals a clear commitment to God, which has worked its way out into how they live and what they do.

What is also interesting is how they weave together their spiritual life with their community life and their work. Each affects the other, and each is part of their 'mission'. These lives look integrated rather than compartmentalised.

The stories in this report are challenging to our urban consumer culture. They are stories of people prepared to commit to something for life, living together in community, willing to forgo and to share money for the benefit of others, devoting their careers to pursuit of the Common Good.

The next section tries to address this challenge by identifying a handful of ways in which Christians and churches might respond to these stories.

6.2 CHALLENGES FOR THE WIDER CHURCH

The Religious Life itself is not for everyone but its insights can be useful for all of us.

Commitment as a counter-cultural act

Over the last few decades, many Religious Orders have experienced a reduction in the number of young people coming forward who are prepared to take life-long vows. The reasons for this are complex and various, but underneath it all lies a generation of people which is reluctant to commit itself to anything on a permanent basis. Making a permanent choice, renouncing all other options, is seen as ‘giving something up’ – as an “impoverishment” as one of our interviewees put it.

Yet Christian teaching tells us that committing ourselves to God and his ways is actually a route to contentment and enrichment – it is the foundation for a good life, not an inferior option. Today, this is counter-cultural thinking.

We need to rediscover the practice of commitment. It needs to be re-learned. The rewards of commitment need to be better understood.

Establishing new rhythms

A clear feature of monastic life – both ancient and modern – is the centrality of regular daily, weekly and seasonal patterns of prayer, eating together and work. Achieving a communal life is not possible without establishing a communal rhythm. They do not need to be onerous or all encompassing, but once established, encourage and support life-enhancing behaviours.

In our stories, we have numerous examples of regular daily and weekly prayer times (sometimes individual, sometimes communal), shared mealtimes through the week and regular points where people meet to discuss life, home, work and direction.

There is surely a challenge here for individuals, families and church communities to re-establish helpful rhythms of prayer, community and work. Is it time for us to be writing our own simple Rules of Life? Again, this is counter-cultural in a society which prizes flexibility above all else,



but we know from our own experience that regular actions can give birth to good habits, which can support and enhance our growth in faith.

For all monastic communities - even for the desert fathers and mothers in their more solitary life - the Eucharist has been central to this rhythm. That is no coincidence. The Eucharist is physical, making the universal Gospel visible and tangible in a particular time and place. Its materiality reminds us that God's love cannot be contained by words or concepts. And it is an antidote to our tendency to self-concern and individualism, reminding those who take part that they are not only united with Christ, but with his Body across time and space. The Eucharist both calls us to action, and reminds us that our action needs to be rooted in Christ's act of self-offering on the Cross if it is to be faithful and fruitful. Both a banquet and a liturgy, the Eucharist is always the very heart of the monastic life. Religious Orders have much to teach the wider Church about its riches, and the ways in which its celebration can be both accessible and deep - itself a powerful, evangelistic act.

Neighbour hospitality: allowing a space for mystery

In our (often appropriate) quest to make the Church accessible to others, to explain the faith and to present the truths of the Christian gospel, we need to be careful not to give the impression that all questions have been answered.

A key part of the hospitality towards neighbours and strangers described in some of the stories is a willingness to accept people along with all their questions and to do so without judgement. Those who are confident in their faith can accept questions from others without fear, in turn making the church more open and accessible to those who may not have much faith.

How do our churches provide the space for neighbours to bring questions? How do we allow the awesome mystery of God to penetrate our lives and expand our imaginations?

Renewed hope for Religious Life in the 21st Century

As our mapping showed, there are a surprising number of Brothers and Sisters in our midst, often in our own neighbourhoods. They have much to teach the Church. Such Orders also represent opportunities for at least some in the younger generation to join and learn how to live a committed life. How can our churches – whatever their denomination and tradition – build stronger relationships with these Orders, and learn from them? For example, Sr Josephine is one of many monks and nuns who play a very significant role in Citizens UK. This is one important context in which members of Religious Orders are becoming known and respected by churches with very little experience of monasticism. How might that be built on, so that working together for social justice leads on into the kind of encounter in which “deep calls to deep” (Psalm 42.7) – so that the wider Body of Christ discovers more of the riches of monasticism?

AFTERWORD: THE COMMUNITY OF ST GEORGE

One of the lessons of this report is that monasticism is always embodied in living communities. It is a complete misunderstanding to see monasticism as “other worldly.” Religious Orders teach the wider Church and society how to live - here and now - in the light of eternity. Those of us who are not called to the monastic life can learn most from it by face-to-face engagement with members of Religious Orders, and by considering how their wisdom and values can be embodied in the rhythms of our daily life.

This year, the Centre for Theology and Community is engaging in an exciting new experiment. A community of lay people, from different denominations, will live in the Rectory of the Parish of St George-in-the-East in Shadwell. They will engage in a common life of worship and of mission in one of the most deprived and diverse neighbourhoods in London.

Members of the Community will gather each morning for half an hour of silent prayer, and half an hour of liturgical prayer (usually the Eucharist) and gather again in the evening for some silence and for Evening Prayer. Each member of the community will have a prayer guide, drawn from a local Jesuit community and from the Oblates of the Assumption. The Community will also make corporate retreats to a Benedictine house outside London.

The Community of St George is a practical attempt to live out some of the lessons of this report

- in the commitment it demands of its members
- in its daily rhythm of worship, embracing silence, the Daily Office and the Eucharist
- in the work each member will do to help the Parish Church to show the love of Christ to their neighbours
- in the role Religious Orders in and beyond East London will have in supporting members of the community in their spiritual journey

This new Community is one of many ways in which Christians today are trying to learn from, and contribute to, the rich tradition of monastic life in the Church. We will be sharing news of the Community's development through CTC's website, social media and mailings, so do keep in touch with us - and pray for all those who are involved in this new venture of faith!

*Canon Dr Angus Ritchie
Director of the Centre for Theology and Community
and Priest-in-Charge of St George-in-the-East
Feast of St Benedict of Nursia, 2015*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the Dean and Chapter of Westminster Abbey for funding this report. We would also like to thank those who gave their time and participated in our research:

Sister Josephine Canny OA The Oblates of the Assumption (Augustinian, RC)
Waltham Forest

Sister Christine Frost FCJ Faithful Companions of Jesus (Jesuit, RC)
Tower Hamlets

Brother Philip SSF Society of St Francis (Franciscan, CofE)
Newham

Needless to say, any errors or misunderstandings are entirely those of the authors.

All photography by Joe D Miles - ImageCapture.



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