"The Catholic and Evangelical Origins of the Anglican Franciscans: how receptive ecumenism can work and where it might be leading us"

Fr Thomas Matthew Sharp nTSSF SCP
t.m.sharp@durham.ac.uk – fr.tomsharp@gmail.com
Durham University – Newcastle Cathedral – Anglican Third Order Franciscans

The reception of Roman liturgy into the Church of England was largely facilitated by the Anglican Franciscan communities and their disobedience (or flexible relationship with the spirit of the canons of the Church of England) and by their background both catholic and evangelical. They provide a model for receptive ecumenism within experimental communities and projects which can test elements of reception before their adoption into wider church structures.

On the 13th of March 2013 as we sat eating dinner at Hilfield Friary, Brother Sam burst in. "We've got a new Pope," he shouted, "and his name's Francis!" Much laughter and a few cheers. And the voice of Brother Hugh cutting through it all: "He's not my Pope!" Ecumenical rubber meets the Anglican road. Today I want to offer the evolution and influence of SSF, in its sometimes ecumenically messy way, as fruit for the wider church as we attempt to grow together in unity.

Defining Terms

Before we begin, let us start with some terminology. I won't describe the Church of England as "protestant", partly because the meaning of the term is so contested within Anglicanism, but really because I want to avoid the term protestant being applied as "not catholic" or even worse "against what is catholic." I don't want, from the very start, to set the Church of England and the Church of Rome against one another conceptually.

And here I must make another terminological move, which might I admit require some suspension of disbelief in a "Catholic Theology" conference. When Anglicans hear Roman Catholicism described simply as "Catholicism", what we often hear is a branding of Anglicanism as "not catholic", of course in a way which is not intended to be insulting, but which often is! And when we consider the "other side", for many Anglicans who are involved in ecumenical mission and fellowship, it can be really hard to find a way of balancing the Roman Catholic church's claims to universality (church unity as coming home to Rome!), with the fact that Rome seems to have become over the past 100 years increasingly embarrassed about
its historic claims to exclusivity, especially as Roman Catholic ecclesiology is influenced by ongoing ecumenical dialogue. When discussing Roman Catholic and Anglican ecumenism, I find myself forced back to the basics, naming our churches simply according to their historical administrative and political focal points: the Roman and the Anglican. When catholicity is the very question in ecumenism, I don’t think the label "catholic" does much to clarify who we are talking about.

The "Via Media" as Foundation for Anglican Ecumenism

I want also to introduce the term via media, a concept which to many outside Anglicanism (and if I am honest to many within it) is utterly confusing and misleading. To many, the desire to pursue a “middle way” leaves Anglicanism open to charges of being muddled and confused... I once heard said in Durham’s Theology Department, “What even is Anglican theology anyway?” But via media has had in Anglican history two very distinctive meanings.

Nowadays, we think of the middle way wrought by Anglicanism as being between the two poles of reformed and catholic. Folk from outside England and Wales might particularly recognise this in the character of Anglican provinces in other nations. But this, like the concept of the Anglican Communion, is an innovation. Until the 19th Century, the via media attempted by the Church of England was not between Geneva and Rome: it was between Geneva and Wittenburg: between Calvin and Luther. Until the 19th Century, the Church of England (the retention of the three orders of ministry aside) was definitively reformed, and definitely "protestant". It was only in the 19th Century that this via media shifted.

Anglicanism had a sort of ecumenism in its DNA, emerging from the reformers' dialogue with other protestants and patristic sources. But it was only in the 19th Century Oxford Movement that this fledgling ecumenism was opened up. Anglicans who read newly available patristic sources were able to critique the Tudor reformers in their interpretation of the Fathers, and attempted rather daringly to retrieve the reformation baby that might have been thrown out with the medieval bath-water.

But they met resistance from both the bishops and the judiciary. As late as 1868, Lord Chancellor Cairns in his judgment in Martin v. Mackonochie forbade the practice of bowing to the elements at the Holy Communion (heaven forbid genuflection!), and in a series of prosecutions well into the 1890s, clergy were prevented from elevating the elements, using incense or wafers, from kissing the Gospel book... and of course, they were condemned in no uncertain terms and adjured to refrain from that most pernicious of Papistical practices: the use of candles! I wonder how many on-trend evangelical churches know this history. Eventually however these practices were so widespread that the bishops simply gave up, and
though many of them are still technically illegal, they agreed not to prosecute clergy who were involved in this new Anglo-Catholic movement.

**Revival of Religious Life in the Church of England**

In the midst of this movement were those who looked to religious communities on the continent and wondered whether this might have something to offer. Anglican Benedictines and various other new but historically inspired communities sprang up in every diocese in England and Wales. They looked Roman, they dressed as Roman as they possibly could... and many of them even used the Roman seven-fold office. But they were Anglican.

And in the midst of this strongly Rome-ward looking movement... emerged the Franciscans.

A variety of Franciscan-inspired communities sprung up under the leadership of staunchly Anglo-Catholic clergymen, beginning with the Society of the Divine Compassion (the Anglican name for the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus)... that was under Father Andrew in Plaistow, in the east end of London; and later the Brotherhood of the Holy Cross under the saintly Father Potter of Peckham, in South London. These found acceptance and adulation in the Anglo-Catholic movement (even if no one wanted to sit next to the lice-ridden friars in church).

But bucking the trend rather was an evangelical minister who went by the name of Brother Douglas. Douglas had established the Brotherhood of Saint Francis of Assisi at Flowers Farm near the Dorset village of Hilfield, where wayfarers and friars lived alongside each other; the rites of the Church of England were administered, and everyone was called brother. The Church Times, the voice of Anglo-Catholicism in its day, was enthusiastic about the religious life, but conspicuously did nothing to publicise Brother Douglas’ community at Hilfield. Being evangelicals, they simply weren’t proper.

And here is the first lesson which I think Anglican Franciscanism has for the church. A Roman or reformed inheritance is no excuse for a closed mind when it comes to ressourcement. It is in a sense not surprising that the Anglo-Catholic fathers in the London slums should look to Saint Francis for inspiration... but that an evangelical minister should do the same? Both were called to a ministry amongst the poorest and most vulnerable. And both saw in the Franciscan charism a home as well as an inspiration. If we are really serious about strengthening the mission of the church, we won’t be snobbish about where wisdom might come from.
Diversity

These separate communities got off to a good start, but by the early 1930s the communities were waning. They quickly realised that a shared noviciate and ever closer union was the way forward, and in 1934 a fledgling and loosely gathered Society of Saint Francis (or SSF) was formed. But when they finally merged with a common rule in January 1936, it was not an English or even a Roman rule which united them.

In Poona, India, in June of 1922, the English priest Jack Winslow had, along with men and women, married and unmarried, formed the Christa Seva Sanga, an ashram-style community which cut across racial and caste divides and experimented with communitarian Christian living. Its third order and first order spread to London, and so they came into contact with the Franciscan communities in the Church of England. As the Ashram in Poona was torn apart by rising nationalism in India in the 1930s, Father Algy of Christa Seva Sanga joined the fledgling SSF. It was from the Indian Christa Seva Sanga that SSF received the bulk of its rule.

So the spirit of equality and cooperation despite cultural divisions, including the equal ministries of clergy and laypeople, married and unmarried, as well as a spirit of experimentation and creativity, lay at the heart of SSF’s common life. And as SSF has expanded around the world, particularly in North America, the Pacific and Asia, this has historically stood it in good stead.

This, I think, is the second great lesson which SSF has for the church: that a receptiveness to non-European cultures is vital if the church is to flourish. One of the things the Synod of the Amazon has recently highlighted for all churches is that flourishing in common life with profoundly different cultures in other parts of the world continues to be a problem for us in Europe. For Church History is taken so often really to be a subspecies of European History. But the mission of the Church has at its heart a continual call to discernment, a willingness to follow the Spirit, or (as the anglican ordinal puts it) to proclaim afresh in each generation the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds.

One of the reasons for SSF’s success has been its willingness to listen to the experience of ecumenical endeavours and to build on what has gone before, always (in theory) seeking to maintain that same openness. That is probably something which many international religious communities share in common. But what is particular to SSF is how that openness has provided a gateway for receptive ecumenism for the whole Church of England.
Liturgical renewal of the whole Church

Between 1662 and 1928, no real efforts were made to update the Church of England’s liturgy. The Book of Common Prayer of 1662 remains the authorised liturgy of the CofE, and the default in cases of liturgical dispute. But faced with the widespread influence of the Anglo-Catholic movement, as well as evangelical calls to modernise, the Bishops attempted to pass a revised Book of Common Prayer in 1928. Due to the opposition of the Welsh, Scots and Irish MPs, this could not be approved by parliament (establishment can be a pain!). And so the Church was stuck with a Tudor liturgy which was in need of revision.

But the religious communities had not necessarily kept to the legal liturgy. I have already mentioned that the Anglo-Catholic Franciscan communities used either the Roman Office, or a version of it produced by Dr. Pusey, one of the founders of the Anglo-Catholic movement. And so when Brother Douglas and Fr Algy were forming the fledgling SSF, they had a decision to make. Retain the use of the Book of Common Prayer, as Douglas had done in the chapel at Hilfield, or adopt the Roman Office as had the Anglo-Catholic communities.

Both Douglas and Algy had the twin strengths of ecumenical experience and a grim sense of practical reality. Algy had been formed not only by the Christa Seva Sangha, but also by his curacy at St George’s Cullercoats, in the Diocese of Newcastle, where he had regular friendly spats with the Evangelical curate of North Shields. We don’t know how the decision was taken, but the Roman Office won out, perhaps because this brought SSF into line with most of the other religious communities in the CofE.

What is interesting about this shift to the Roman Office is that when the Roman communities reorganised their office into a fourfold daily office, the Anglicans followed suit (keeping neither the sevenfold old Roman office nor the twofold Anglican). Brother Vincent SSF recalls the delight felt by brothers who now had time in the day to actually get some work done, rather than constantly coming back to chapel! In 1970, SSF produced The Daily Office SSF, which offered a fourfold office along the modern Roman lines.

This coincided with the entrance into the Church of England of the liturgical movement, and the bishops of the Church of England approved for temporary use The Alternative Service Book 1980. This modernised the liturgy of the Church along Vatican II lines (only slicker), and even included the option for a communion service reordered according to the Roman Rite. The reception of Roman Catholic liturgy in the Church of England was up to this point due to a combination both of necessity - and a result of the newly renewed anglican interest in Liturgical Studies after the influential ministry of Dom Gregory Dix of Nashdom Abbey.

The Benedictines it seemed had the upper hand, but in the 1990s the liturgical renewal took a distinctly Franciscan turn. SSF had been experimenting with adapting their daily office according to the new language
of *The Alternative Service Book*, and very usefully Br Tristram SSF had been appointed as an advisor to the liturgical commission of the Church of England. In 1990, the decision was taken to publish a replacement to the daily office as found in *The Alternative Service Book*. Essentially, the Daily Office SSF was revised and published in 1992 with a brown cover for use by SSF and with a blue cover and the title "Celebrating Common Prayer" for use by the rest of the Church of England. The entire Church of England was authorised to use either the twofold office of the Book of Common Prayer 1662, or the fourfold Franciscan Office. Result.

But that wasn’t the end of the story. In 1993, David Stancliffe (a long time friend of SSF) was appointed as chair of the Church of England’s Liturgical Commission, just before his enthronement as Bishop of Salisbury in December of that year, the diocese which contains Hilfield Friary. After a period of rapid change and Romanisation of the Church of England’s liturgy, it was under Stancliffe’s oversight that a more permanent solution was found. Initially in 2002 and then in 2005, the *Daily Office SSF* was revised and the Church was gifted *Common Worship: Daily Prayer*, which was essentially the *Daily Office SSF* made user-friendly for deployment in all parishes in England.

**Conclusion**

Whilst the shape of the Eucharist in the Church of England was shaped by the liturgical movement and the influence of Anglican Benedictines, the Daily Office was entirely a product of the Franciscans’ reception of the Roman fourfold office. In only 35 years, Anglicans had moved from a self-consciously protestant liturgy last updated under Charles II, to praying in a way which is immediately recognisable to anyone used to the Roman Office.

But the openness of SSF in its three orders to Roman liturgy could not alone have effected such rapid change and ecumenical fruitfulness. SSF was able to exist as an experimental melting pot of ecumenical reception because it was legally ambiguous. Since the reformation there has never been any explicit provision in ecclesiastical law for religious communities until Amending Canon 40, section 1 was promulgated this summer. And SSF has often been seen as such an important resource that diocesan bishops have been happy to let the communities do their own thing.

But many brothers and sisters in all three orders SSF have not remained on the periphery. Rather, they have been coopted into positions of influence, and have used those positions to share their communities’ wisdom and experience with the wider church. Although there is only one diocesan bishop who is currently in franciscan vows in the Church of England, a good proportion of the current diocesans have close links with SSF. And as Archbishop Justin continues to encourage the formation of ecumenical
religious communities and new monastic groups within the Church of England, the influence of these ecumenical melting-pot communities is only likely to increase. Every diocese wants some sort of experimental community under its roof!

Admittedly, the lack of centralised authority and the continuing power of the diocesan bishops in the CofE lends itself to this sort of culture change: you only have to win over the diocesan bishop. But I cannot emphasise strongly enough that this began originally not at the top, but at the bottom. Actually, it began in disobedience. Ecumenism fundamentally emerged in the CofE from clergy and communities which needed to break canon law in order to resource themselves for common life and mission. Sometimes they did this with the blessing of their bishops, but at the beginning it was a difficult path for them to tread.

As churches across Europe and the world, and even the Vatican, wake up to the fact that neat and clean theological lines and absolute hierarchical authority may not be the best way to serve Christ's church, the spirit of collaboration emerges first in communities, parishes and associations, and when it has proven itself with good fruit, the bishops (by grace) often get on board.

The Anglican Franciscans had the good fortune to be driven together by providential necessity, not really choosing to unite by natural theological affinity, but rather because they realised that they had to work together if they were to effectively serve their Lord. The grounding they received from the Christa Seva Sangha in cultural and theological openness and the spirit of equality stood them in good stead as they discerned the way forward. By proving the effectiveness of their innovations and ecumenical receptions, they made themselves attractive to the institutional church, and managed to disseminate their more Roman liturgy throughout the Church of England. And not so many years later, what began as a somewhat disobedient and brazen ecumenical experiment has become the liturgical norm for the whole Church. May God in grace raise up more experimental ecumenism in our time.