Chapter 15: Tom Johnson, TSSF Minister Provincial



2014-

As the son of missionaries, Tom spent much of his early life overseas, first in China and then in Bolivia. In his late teens and early twenties Tom was employed by the American Bible Society – in Venezuela for two years, and later in Colombia where, at age twenty, he was placed in charge of the entire Colombian enterprise with two local offices and over 20 Colombian employees. After two years in Colombia, he identified and trained the first Colombian national executive.

Tom graduated from UCLA and Fuller Theological Seminary and was ordained a minister in the United Presbyterian Church. He served for another 11 years with the American Bible Society, first in Chicago and then at New York headquarters where he became a senior executive in charge of the "Ways and Means" Division, including direct mail fundraising, church relations, public relations, and deferred giving. In 1979 he joined the Russ Reid Company, a major advertising agency, as its Vice President for Direct Mail

Fundraising. Eight years later, he established his own advertising agency, Tom Johnson & Associates, specializing in raising funds for nonprofit organizations and raising millions of dollars for charitable causes with award-winning direct mail campaigns.

In 1997, Tom was ordained a priest in the Episcopal Diocese of San Diego, and served for five years as Vicar of St. Hugh of Lincoln, Idyllwild, CA, followed by four years as Rector of St. John's, Indio, CA and, concurrently, Vicar of Santa Rosa del Mar, Desert Shores, CA. While Vicar of Santa Rosa del Mar (a Spanish-speaking congregation) he arranged the purchase of property and supervised the installation of a church building. He retired at the end of 2006.

Tom was professed in the Third Order in 2002 and served as retreat leader for a Southern California Convocation and, briefly, as convener of the St. Bernardine Fellowship. He and his wife Susan (also a professed member of TSSF) moved to Northern California in November 2008, where they are active in the Living Waters Fellowship. Tom had been TSSF Bursar since December 2009, (replaced by David Lawson-Beck in 2014). He is currently a Priest Associate at Trinity Episcopal Church in their hometown of Folsom. Tom speaks Spanish fluently, Portuguese passably.

Letter to Fellowship Convenors, March 2014

"I cannot easily find an example of a church that since the end of the Roman Empire has found renewal without there being flourishing religious communities." "...we need a wild burst of fresh and Spirit-fuelled imagination about Religion (religious communities) in the 21st Century." Archbishop Justin Welby

March 28, 2014 Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ and Francis,

At our recent Chapter meeting in Boston, Bishop Scruton, our Bishop Protector, spoke movingly about the rapid and enormous changes that are taking place in the world around us, including in the Church itself. We are living in a 21st century that has quickly left the 20th Century way behind and is thrusting us ever deeper into a world of dizzying change. In our own Franciscan world, we see the struggle with change that our First Order brothers are confronting. And the Community of St. Francis, too, has embarked on a new direction.

In this context of a changing world, and as we approach our 100th anniversary, I believe we in the Third Order Society of St. Francis Province of the Americas must take time to re-evaluate who we are. I am asking that we place a high priority on *re-envisioning* what "...<u>rebuild my Church</u>" means for us in the 21st Century. That we place a high priority on *re-envisioning*, to paraphrase Francis, "what is ours to do" as we move into our next 100 years of service to the Church.

I have arranged for Jeff Golliher to lead Chapter – at its next meeting – in an in-depth time of reflection, discussion and discernment centered on the kind of *re-envisioning* I'm calling for. This will be the beginning of a longer discussion as we move toward our Centennial Provincial Convocation.

I am writing to you, because I want every tertiary to be a part of this discussion in one way or another. Thus, I am asking you as a Fellowship Convener to plan for your Fellowship to have some serious discussion about this in one or more of your meetings and to share your opinions and insights with me so that you will have input to our discussions next October.

As a religious community within the Anglican Communion, we can – and should – be a channel of God's Spirit to bring renewal to the Church (i.e., rebuild) as we, like Francis, experience renewal ourselves. I pray, that through the commitment of each and every tertiary, we can experience what Archbishop Welby called "a wild burst of fresh and Spirit-fueled imagination" that will define a truly Franciscan walk that is a powerful witness in the 21st century world.

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Tom Johnson

Several tertiaries helped to develop a study guide to assist in the "re-envisioning" exercise. Fellowships, Convocations and many individual tertiaries responded to the call with a plethora of thoughts, ideas and suggestions that formed the basis for Chapter in 2015 to continue the discussion, pointing toward our Centennial Convocation in 2017.

Continuing to focus on "re-envisioning," my most recent pastoral letter asked us all to shift our focus from TSSF as an "organization" to TSSF as an "organism" in which each member, as part of the body, has an essential role in expressing her/his unique gift and function that together become the "leaven" that can transform the Church and the world.

Responding to a growing interest in the Third Order in Spanish-speaking countries in Central America and the Caribbean, I asked Jim Hagen to take over responsibility for promoting TSSF in those countries. Jim travelled to Guatemala, El Salvador, Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, discovering a vibrant interest among Spanish-speaking Anglicans. In order to properly address unique cultural and geographic situations, Chapter agreed to appoint a Special Formation Director for Latin America to work with Jim Hagen and **local individuals** to create appropriate formation programs in each country. This is a three-year program with the Special Formation Director for Latin America reporting annually to Chapter.

With Rick Simpson as our new Provincial Chaplain, we have been working to invigorate the Area Chaplains, particularly to encourage a more pastoral ministry rather than just receiving reports. Newly elected Fellowship Coordinator, Peter Stube, has articulated an ambitious vision for helping TSSF Fellowships to become active mission centers. Liz Peacock and her Assistant Formation Directors have been working to infuse into our Formation program a strong sense of "shepherding" by the Formation Counselors. Through these Pastoral Officers we are endeavoring to open our lives and our Province to "*a wild burst of fresh and Spirit-fueled imagination*" as called for by Archbishop Justin Welby.

Minister's musings...

Tom Johnson

While reading Professor Pazzelli's book, *St. Francis and the Third Order*, I recently found myself disturbed–at least initially–by his use of the term *evangelical* to characterize the Franciscan movement. However, I soon realized that I was reacting to what the term *evangelical* had come to mean in the current Christian context, which had evolved into something quite different from what Professor Pazzelli was describing.

The Reformation brought to life the term *evangelical* to describe the Protestant Churches who based their teaching on the "Gospel." It also came to contrast the Reformed Churches from the Calvinists. Gradually, the term came to describe various movements in the Church that hung onto conservative theological stances. And in our own time, the term *evangelical* frequently describes those churches often called fundamentalist and which are politically aligned with the "right wing;" thus my initial dismay at Pazzelli's use of the term with reference to Francis.

However, as I looked a little more closely, I came to realize that he was using the term to describe the Franciscan "way of life" that was patterned according to the "Gospel" in imitation of Jesus. He was translating "vita apostolica" as "evangelical life." So, once again I was drawn back into the basic Franciscan charism–living as Jesus showed us and told us to.

This reminded me of another word from the early days of the Third Order that has come to mean something quite different in our own time. The early members of the Third Order were called the "Brothers and Sisters of Penance." In the early church, penitents were those who had been excluded from receiving communion through the sacrament of Penance. Over time, the administration of Penance became less burdensome, but nevertheless continued as a way to atone for one's sins.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, however, there developed a number of penitential movements – including the Franciscan Third Order – that described those who "repented" and "turned to follow Christ" (metanoia) as Brothers and Sisters of Penance–or often as Penitents. This somewhat different use of the word, once again, points to the Franciscan emphasis on living the Gospel.

I recently read an interview of Pope Francis published in *America*. In it he was asked about the specific place of religious men and women in the church of today. He said, "Religious men and women...are those who have chosen a following of Jesus that imitates his life in obedience to the Father.... In the church, the religious are called to be prophets in particular by demonstrating how Jesus lived on this earth."

This brings me to what I feel is a very important statement in a document from our Formation Team – Formation Guidelines: Reporting, Part 1: "The old view was, counselees were expected to write six postulant reports and 24 novice reports, then would be considered eligible for profession. The reports could be done at their own pace. If they didn't report monthly, the process would simply take longer."

That approach had some serious drawbacks, and we're doing things a bit differently now. It isn't the report count that qualifies a novice for profession. The focus now is on whether or not the applicant is living the Franciscan life, and growing in humility, love and

joy. The reports are merely a tool for reflection and personal growth, to allow the counselor to provide support and guidance, and as a way to gauge whether or not the candidate is suitable for making life vows in TSSF. (Emphasis is mine.)

As we all think and discuss and pray about how we can best be Third Order Franciscans in the 21st century, let us not forget that it's all about **living** the Gospel life as exemplified by our little brother Francis.

Kathryn Challoner, TSSF–California Doctor in Medical Missions to Africa (Professed 2005)

For years, Kathryn Challoner has traveled to Liberia on medical missions to Liberia on vacation from her medical work in the Department of Emergency Medicine at the Keck School of Medicine of University of Southern California. She has created a scholarship fund, Challoner Medical Mission Fund, and Tom Johnson both as bursar and then as Minister Provincial has been a big supporter of her work as well as financial intermediary. You can read about her Medical Missions in 2003 and 2011 (Summer 2003 issue and Winter 2012 issue of the *Franciscan Times*), a report of how she received a grant from Franciscan Aid to fight Ebola in Liberia (Epiphany 2015 issue of the *Franciscan Times*), pictures of medical graduates who have benefitted from her scholarship fund (Fall 2015 issue of the *Franciscan Times*). Kathryn was awarded the 2015 Humanitarian Award by the California Chapter of the American College of Emergency Physicians.

Ground Zero Liberia-Ebola

Kathryn Challoner (from Franciscan Times Summer 2015)

That is what the Liberians call the northern part of Lofa County. This is where the Ebola virus killed two-thirds of the villagers and left hundreds of orphans. And this is where Benedict and I travelled this week. We crossed the St. Paul River and drove to Bolahun where Benedict was born.

There at Ground Zero, Benedict and his group (Baffa) are building a huge new school, and a dormitory (orphanage) for the Ebola

orphans. The school is close to completion. Classrooms have blackboards but no desks or seats yet. We have a computer room almost assembled. We have just installed a generator so adults can attend night classes. We have a new library and we are installing shelving. All school supplies are free and the minimal tuition for all Ebola orphans has now been paid (thanks to several donations from members of my parish, Bishop Breidenthal of Southern Ohio and the generous work and gifts of the Third Order). I wish you could see it!

We already have 320 students enrolled. Benedict and I attended the opening day Eucharist with the students in the old packed St. Mary's church (once used by the Anglican Order of the Holy Cross). And suddenly the children began to sing and to dance in their places. A girl would lead off then the whole congregation would join in. The percussion drums played by one of the boys would begin to beat, and one of the girls would chime in with the *shekere* (a percussion hand drum from Africa, consisting of a dried gourd with beads woven into a net). All I could think of was "Dear Lord, with all these children have been through and they can still sing like this".



Benedict, of course, had to make a speech as the President of Baffa, and he stated I was his American Mom. The priest then-not to be outdone-stated that since Benedict was everyone's Father, it followed that I was everyone's Grandmother. Here I had been hoping for grandchildren and suddenly I had 320 of them.

We also travelled to the Anglican Leper Colony just up the hill -the oldest in Liberia. The WHO provides the boxes of medicines but we have developed shortage problems with food and dressings. Benedict and I made hasty arrangements for immediate deliveriesalong the way scooping up "Uncle," a frail emaciated old man, to drive him to the nearest hospital for a chest XR. In Liberia, sputum for AFBs are 85 % unreliable but there are so few places where a Liberian can get CXR. His CXR, when he got it, cost \$20 US dollars, which of course, is prohibitive for the average Liberian and so was covered by the medical mission fund of the Third Order.

In the leper village, babies clung to Benedict's and my clothing whimpering to be picked up. I was trying to follow the no contact



Ebola rules, but I sure felt sympathetic when Benedict suddenly scooped up several in his arms.

Then an even more gut-wrenching point of the day – we travelled to the Ebola villages. Benedict's truck was loaded with rice, schoolbooks, hand sanitizer, crayons, pencils and pens. As we made the deliveries, we faced the devastation this virus had caused. One village had an Ebola memorial- 27 names out of one small village were painted on a simple stone. The children in the village wandered with hurt lost eyes and clenched fists –signs, Benedict told me, of severe depression. We told them that we loved them, that these gifts were from others who loved them and a new school had just opened where they were welcomed and which was free to them.

The village leaders—Christian and Muslim—encouraged the little ones to try and go. One day they would have a story to tell of what had been lost in their villages—a story to be remembered when there was no one left to tell—of this horror that had destroyed their families and lives. I met the wife of the first nurse who died of Ebola while trying to care for his patients. She had five children and was destitute. Benedict spoke to her promising, rice, food, a free schooling for her children, and that we would always be there for her.

How right this place was for this new community. "Ketobaye" is the Liberian word for Hope.

I awoke the next morning with a song in my mind. Now before you think I am writing poetry or something, this song was actually composed by the Paul of Peter, Paul and Mary (which probably dates me big time).

For the Love of it all I would go anywhere. To the ends of the earth, What is it worth if Love would be there? Walking the thin line between fear and the call One learns to bend and finally depend On the Love of it all.

For the Love of it all We are gathered by grace We have followed our hearts To take up our parts In this time and place. Hands for the harvest, Hear the centuries call: It is still not too late to come celebrate The Love of it all.

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