



STRANGERS & PILGRIMS

Summer 2008

**Newsletter of St Francis House
A community of the Oxford Catholic Worker**

House News

This year our celebration of Holy Week and Easter involved hospitality, resistance and worship, just as it should in a Catholic Worker community! On the Wednesday of Holy Week we joined other Oxford peace people to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the illegal war on Iraq. We gathered in the city centre and held a silent witness to pray for the dead and hand out leaflets. We had large signs to show what we were about and received some good responses from passers by. On Holy Thursday Susan went to London to join a Voices witness on a walk through central London, calling for the arrest of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown for war crimes. The group was dressed as judges and carried a large banner. Again, the response was positive.

Daniel and Susan worshipped together and in their own churches during the Easter Triduum. On Good Friday the Oxford Catholic Worker community joined other Christians for the traditional Cowley Road Stations of the Cross. On Easter Sunday we had a celebratory lunch with our guests and other visitors.

On Easter Monday Daniel, Miriam, Susan and two friends of Susan's, Theresa and Caroline, went with thousands of others to Aldermaston to mark the 50th anniversary of the first CND London to Aldermaston march. It was a great occasion, and some of the participants had been on the original march. One of them, our friend Virginia Brookes, was there this time with her daughter and grandchildren.

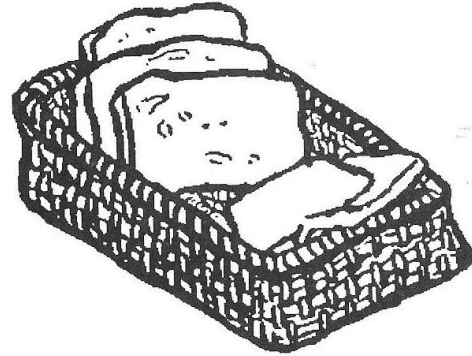


Susan and friends from Preston at Aldermaston

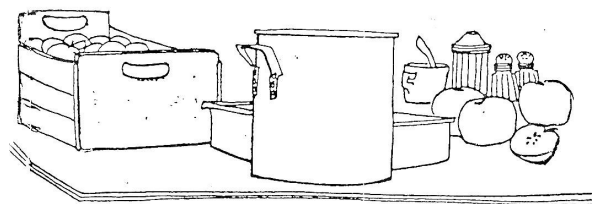
We continue to be blessed by the presence of our three guests, who teach us so much about patient endurance. The room we have set aside for emergency use has been used, and we feel it was a good move to create such a space. The people who have occupied it have been in precarious positions and their courage again inspires us.

More and more, our guests - long term and short term - are taking part in the life of the community by cooking for everyone and sharing household tasks. We even had our first community outing last week when two of our guests shared with us a typical Oxford experience, a punting trip on the River Cherwell. We invited everyone to join us but one guest had a hospital appointment and the other was practising a work of mercy, visiting the sick. The weather was grey and muggy but all the time we were on the river it was very peaceful, and the sun shone for about thirty seconds. Amazingly, as soon as we set off home the rain started and carried on all day!

The weekly sandwich distribution is a highlight of the week and we are happy to say that we are gradually building up a small team of local people to help out if one or other of us is away.



We are increasingly aware of the importance of having a meal together each day, so that people can drop in to share with us. It also means that we can invite those who want to know more about St Francis House and the Catholic Worker. Over the past few months we have also had several overnight visitors, friends of the Catholic Worker who happen to be passing through Oxford.



Each month we continue with our social evenings. We have celebrated St. Patrick and St. George recently, with poetry, music and anecdote, as well as watching the film *Millions*. In our Catholic Worker study evenings we have

looked at some texts of Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day which have inspired some interesting discussion.

At the end of April Clive, Daniel and Susan set off to join in the European Catholic Worker Gathering in Germany. We travelled to Brussels by Eurostar, where we met up with Martin from the London CW, and then by hire car to Dulmen to join the others. It was wonderful to share time, leisure, ideas, music and prayer with our German and Dutch Catholic Worker friends. Jim Forest, who wrote *Love is the Measure* (a biography of Dorothy Day), and who lived as a young man at the New York Worker, was the main speaker. His reflections on his time spent in community with Dorothy were revealing and inspiring and it was lovely to talk with him one to one. We had a tourist trip to Munster, a barbecue and a cabaret, at which you will be happy to know the Oxford Trio gave a spirited rendition of *The Manchester Rambler*, accompanied by Clive on melodeon and Daniel on guitar. We didn't win but we were good!



On the Saturday a few people who were interested went with Chris to help out at the Kana soup kitchen in Dortmund. We peeled potatoes, set the tables and served the soup

and coffee. It was very interesting to see how another project serving the homeless works, and Kana certainly offers a good service to those in need. Susan's most abiding memory of the day was the experience of sitting among a group of people speaking a language she did not understand and being unable to communicate. It made her even more aware of the difficulties asylum seekers have on arriving in a strange new country.

Have a peaceful, relaxing summer, one and all!

Susan



Martin, Susan and Clive in Germany

Waiting Together

*"I am still confident of this:
I will see the goodness of the
Lord
in the land of the living.
Wait for the lord;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the lord."*

The Psalms resonate with deep cries of longing: sometimes sliding

towards despair; at other times – as here in Ps 27 – breaking out in affirmations of hope and praise. It's a theme that resurfaces throughout Scripture, for example in the passage in Hebrews 11 from which the name of our newsletter is taken, celebrating the *strangers and pilgrims* who have lived in expectation of promises still far from fulfilment.

The experience of waiting, with its extremes of hope and despair, is something shared by almost all of our guests and visitors here at St Francis House. Many have been living in a kind of limbo for years, never sure whether they will be removed to their home countries, and still clinging on to the possibility of a successful appeal or a change in policy. In the meantime they find themselves unable to work, travel or do many of the things that most of us take for granted.

“Waiting is OK when you know that what you're waiting for is coming,” a Somali visitor said to me recently, “but waiting without knowing if it will come, or how long it will take, is unbearable.” He described the options he and so many others must choose between; going back to a place where he has lost everything – even his family – or staying here in the UK, becoming increasingly depressed and disempowered, with a sense of life, energy and youth going slowly to waste.

It's hard to listen to such laments, because there is so little you can do to help. I always want to suggest some activity that might fill the time constructively, but I also recognise how all consuming the sense of loss and frustration can be. “I try to study,” explained my Somali friend, “but always I'm thinking about my situation and my country; then I can't sleep and it's hard to concentrate. The doctor gives me tablets to take, but they don't change anything.”

The persistence of these weary people, and their concern for those they've left behind, is a challenge to us to keep going in our own areas of involvement. In particular to keep remembering what has happened and is still happening in the countries our friends have fled, and to speak up when we are able. In some cases their stories are linked directly to our own country's disastrous military incursions into Iraq and Afghanistan; tragedies whose origins are hastily forgotten as the reports of death and destruction slip out of the front pages.

“Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” we pray. *Your will be done on earth....yes, on earth, in the land of the living.* What a prayer that is, if we take it seriously, and what patience and determination it asks of us in our seeking and serving.

At our Catholic Worker gathering in Germany recently, we were reminded of Dorothy Day's words “What we do is very little”, and we

thought about Jesus' parable of the mustard seed, and of ripples spreading out from a small stone as it falls into water. So we take heart, and try to be faithful in doing what we have been given to do, especially in waiting alongside those who really know how much there is to lose. It is important to acknowledge and celebrate every consolation and encouragement, however ordinary, and to draw nourishment from prayer and our reading of Scripture. *The goodness of the Lord* is revealed to us every day, if our eyes are open to see it.



As our guests need what we are able to provide at St Francis House, so we are sustained by the help and support of our friends. During the last few months I've often reflected on the difference this makes, not just in practical terms, but to our morale as well, as we glimpse the love and goodwill which surround us. So many of you dropped us a card or a note or even some chocolate eggs over Easter; and almost every week

someone sends a cheque or calls at the door with a bag of shopping, or just offers their cheerful presence. We can't adequately convey how much this means, or express how grateful we feel.

Daniel



Guest Interview

Ghasem is an asylum seeker in his forties, who lives with us at St Francis House.

How long have you been living in the UK?

I came in 2000, though I have been away for a year in the meantime. I've lived at St Francis House since January 2007.

What has been your experience of life here?

I am so happy to be living with people at St Francis House, but I feel angry about the situation with the Home Office. When you can't earn money it is difficult to get even basic things like clothes or

razors. If this house wasn't here for me, I don't know what I'd do. There are thousands of other people in my position, and how can they survive unless they turn to crime? Who will help all these people?

How do you spend your time in Oxford?

Three times a week I go running. It helps me to be healthy and feel fresh, and to forget the past. On Tuesdays and Thursdays I have an English class at the Community English School. Every weekend I watch football on the screen at a local pub, especially if Manchester United are playing.

What makes you happy?

I am happy that I'm able to learn English, and I passed my last exam. I like eating meals with other people at St Francis House.

This month I am so happy because Manchester United has won the double title. I've supported them ever since I was a ten year old child in my country.

What do you worry about?

I worry all the time about tomorrow, about my future, and about my children.

What is your hope for your country?

One day everything will change. I want my country to get better again, like it was thirty years ago. At the moment people are still

running away every day, because the regime treats them very badly. It isn't safe even to talk about what is wrong.

What do you hope for in your own life?

I will be happy if I can live together with my children one day. I don't want any benefits from the government, but I hope for permission to work, so that I can support myself.

Good Friday Meditation

The following is the text of our reflection for the Cowley Road Walk of Witness, based on Luke 23: 32 – 43.

Jesus, as you are hoisted for all to see, naked, nailed,
You feel the whip lash of jeering tongues,
The sharp thrust of mocking stares,
The cold ring of laughter.
You have become the trouble maker,
The enemy of the state.
On your back lands all the scorn of the powerful,
The blood lust of the crowd,
The indifference of the passer by,
The anger of the disenchanted.

*A friend of sinners, they used to call you,
And now you cross the line, to stand with them,*

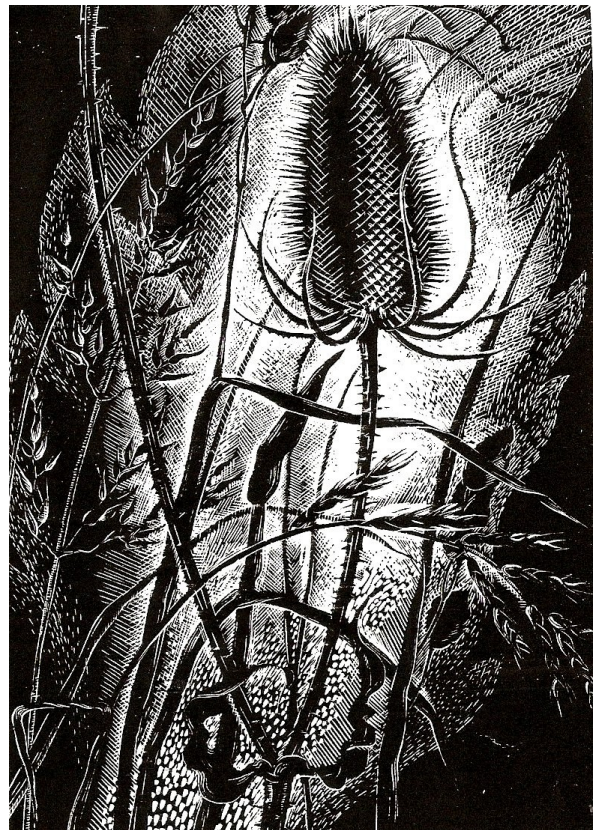
Swallowing the insults and
insinuations
Of the righteous:
*Whore, blasphemer, Gentile,
unclean.*

From where you hang, you know
the pain of all
Who are judged for their mental
illness,
Their homelessness, their
sexuality,
Their youth, their religion, their
passport.
You feel, like thorns, each secret
thought and careless comment,
Each indignant newspaper
headline:
*Weirdo, waster, yobbo, benefit
scrounge.*

What will you do with all this hurt
and shame?
Will you throw it back, return
hatred for hatred,
And evil for evil?
Now, when you are broken,
cornered,
You unleash all that you have left
to fight with -
A force the world has never known
before
In its long history of tit for tat, of
terrible war
And war on terror,
The only power capable of
transforming it:
*Father forgive them,
For they know not what they do.*

Jesus, victim, scapegoat, Healer,
Nothing now can be the same
again.
And your arms, spread wide on the
cross

Are forever open, reaching out to
all people
In forgiveness, in invitation, in
promise,
With the power of unconquerable
love.



Nora Unwin

Supporting St Francis House

As always, a big thank you to
everyone who has supported us
over the last few months. We
greatly appreciate your prayers
and words of encouragement, gifts
in kind and financial contributions,
large or small. Your donations, as
well as helping to pay the bills,
have enabled us to access
treatment for one of our guests

with a back problem, and to make improvements around the house. We've just had our carpets cleaned, for example.

Community members are self supporting, but our guests are denied any income, so whatever contribution you can make will be gratefully received. Without the support of our friends we would be literally unable to continue.



Practical needs

We're always grateful for donations of any of the following:

- Clean socks and small bars of chocolate, for our Monday night outreach.
- Teabags and coffee

- Cooking oil
- Rice and pasta
- Tinned tomatoes
- Dried lentils and beans
- Fresh fruit
- Biscuits
- Sugar
- Flour and oats
- 2nd class stamps

Any surplus will be passed on to Asylum Welcome, who are collecting items for the growing number of destitute refugees they are seeing. In addition to the needs above, they are looking for tinned foods (especially fish and non-pork meat), jams and hygiene essential packs (toothpaste, soap etc.).

Summer Barbecue

Everyone is welcome to join us for an open house with barbecue (weather permitting!), on Saturday 30th August, from 12 till 5pm. As well as relaxing and eating together, this will be a chance to say goodbye to Daniel, who will be leaving Oxford for Southall (West London) shortly after.

Regular Events

We love to have guests at our evening meal (most weekdays, 6pm). Or why not join us for one of the following gatherings (all starting at 7.45 pm)? To be safe,

please call to let us know you're intending to come.

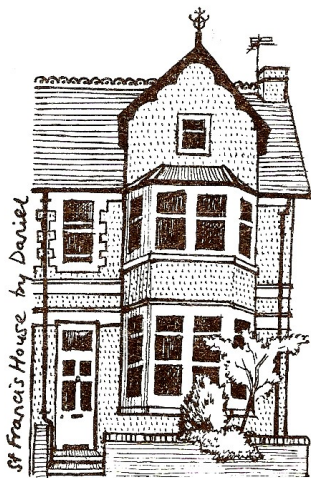
- Every Tuesday: Reflective Scripture reading and sharing.
- 2nd Thursday of the month: open house, with some sort of homespun entertainment, eg poetry, music or a film. (Call for details; suggestions welcome). *Please note that in July we'll be meeting on the third Thursday instead, that is, the 17th.*

Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin and others, with discussion.



If you do not want to receive this newsletter, please let us know.

St Francis House
227 Cowley Road
Oxford
OX4 1XG
Tel: 01865 248288



- Last Wednesday of the month: Catholic Worker study night. A beginner's guide to the writings of

