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A century and a half ago, the Capuchins began their mission in England and Wales, living among the poor and rebuilding the Church / **By LIAM TEMPLE**

In the footsteps of Francis

STOPPING BY the almost ruined church of San Damiano, Francis of Assisi was drawn to kneel in prayer before the crucifix in the chapel. As he did so, the painted image of Christ crucified moved its lips and commanded him, "Go rebuild my house; as you see, it is all being destroyed." Taking the command literally, for the next two years *Il Poverello* devoted himself to rebuilding and restoring churches. The third of these, the ancient and deserted church of Santa Maria degli Angeli at the Portiuncula, became central to the early Franciscan movement. One day, while attending Mass at the small chapel, Francis was profoundly moved by a sermon on the text of Matthew 10:7-12 detailing the poverty and preaching of the earliest disciples. From this he realised that Christ's command to him from the cross was more than a call to rebuild literal churches; it was a command to restore and renew the Universal Church by proclaiming the Gospel in the same manner as the apostles.

The importance of the crucified Christ's command to St Francis has ensured that renewal and revival of the Church have been at the heart of the Franciscan charism ever since. The emergence of the Order of the Friars Minor Capuchin in the sixteenth century was one such expression of this. Born out of a desire to return to a closer adherence to the life of evangelical poverty and prayer lived by St Francis, the Capuchins – so-called because of their *capuche*, or hood – emerged in Italy in the 1520s.

The reform was canonically approved in 1528 by Pope Clement VII in the papal bull *Religionis Zelus*. The Capuchins responded to calls for renewal and reform from within the Church around the time of the Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century. They gained a reputation as effective preachers against Protestantism and as a force for the renewal of the Catholic faith across Europe. Throughout the penal period in Britain and Ireland, native Capuchins, as well as friars from France, Italy, and Spain, contributed to the survival of the Catholic community and engaged in various attempts to restore full and open Catholic worship in the archipelago.

In the nineteenth century, the Capuchins would again heed the command Christ gave to St Francis to rebuild and revive the Church. Across Europe their numbers had been decimated by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, as many European governments had entirely suppressed the religious orders. In France the 12 Capuchin provinces that had slowly developed over the previous 200 years vanished entirely.

PHOTO: CAPUCHIN ARCHIVES

CATHOLIC
HOP PICKERS
HOLY MASS

Friars supported hop-picking families

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the Capuchins began to rebuild their provinces, starting almost entirely from scratch in many countries. This Franciscan spirit of renewal generated opportunities to extend their reach into countries where their presence had not been truly felt before. Like many religious orders, they would answer the call to help revive and rebuild the Church in England and Wales after Catholic Emancipation was passed in 1829, and especially after the restoration of the Hierarchy in 1850. Urbanisation and immigration boosted communities of English and Irish Catholics in newly growing towns and cities, bringing with it new challenges. It was in these cities, where overcrowding, poor living conditions, and poverty were commonplace, that the Capuchins found a new opportunity to fulfil the command of St Francis to live among the poor and provide for their physical and spiritual needs.

ON 1 AUGUST 1873, almost exactly 150 years ago, the English Province of the Capuchin Franciscans was established. But it was in 1851 that one of the founders of the province arrived in London. Louis of Lavagna, Italy, had spent almost a decade in France, working to rebuild the Capuchin Province of Lyon. He was ultimately destined for Canada, initially only stopping in England to improve his English language skills. After seeing the needs of poor Catholics in London, especially those of Irish immigrants, he delayed his journey to establish a more substantial Capuchin mission.

The first permanent presence the Capuchins established was at Pantasaph in north Wales. They went there at the request of Viscount Feilding, later the eighth Earl of Denbigh, who recently had converted to Catholicism. The church they were to serve at had been intended for Anglican worship until Feilding's conversion in 1850. The preacher at the ceremony for the laying of the cornerstone of the Anglican church in 1849 was Henry Edward Manning, who would convert to Catholicism in 1851 and later become the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster. The church was modified for Catholic use by Augustus Welby Pugin and became the Capuchins' mother house in 1852. From Pantasaph a small band of Italian and Belgian Capuchins spread out to Chester, Flint, Mold, Holyhead and Pontypool. For much of its history Pantasaph also served as the novitiate house for the province, later also featuring a retreat centre and St Padre Pio peace centre.

The Capuchins were invited to establish a friary in Peckham, south London. The growing needs of the Catholic community far outpaced the expansion of the church, with the Capuchins initially renting a large stable that they transformed into a chapel (described in *The Tablet* in 1855 as "little better than a hovel"). The chapel was known as "The Hole in the Wall" because the entrance was literally an opening created in one of the walls of the stable. In 1859 the foundation stone of Our Lady of Seven Dolours church was laid, and the church was solemnly opened in 1866 in the presence of the now-Archbishop Manning. The long delay was typical of the struggle for funds that faced the expanding Catholic Church in the period. The church – designed by Edward Welby Pugin – survives today on "Friary Road" in Peckham, and was served by the Capuchins until 1999.

In keeping with their mendicant values, the Capuchins often undertook vital work expanding the Catholic Church through their missions, then moving on once a parish had been established. As a result, the province has almost always been "in motion", responsive to new opportunities and unafraid to relinquish those better served by others. In the nineteenth century their footprint can be found in Northfleet, Pontypool, Greenhithe, Dartford, Bedworth, Dulwich and Nuneaton, while in more recent years their presence extended to Thirsk, Walsingham, Preston, and Penmaenmawr, as well as foundations in Scotland in Dumfries and Uddingston. Alongside all of this was a more permanent presence in Olton and Crawley, which the Capuchins served for 91 and 119 years respectively. The present friaries of Oxford, Erith and Chester all have long and rich histories, while a new friary at Durham, established in 2022, reflects the responsiveness of the friars to new opportunities.

Their work among the poor has been wide-ranging. One early twentieth-century example was their mission in Kent, where the friars would support impoverished Catholics from London who moved to the area for seasonal work picking hops. Away from their parishes and networks, these Catholic families relied on the Capuchins for their Sunday Mass, as well as for the administration of other sacraments as needed. This work continued for almost 60 years until 1963, when the mechanisation of hop-picking made the seasonal work redundant.

LIKE MANY Capuchins, the friars of the British province have been receptive to the call for international missionary work found in the *Rule* of Saint Francis. For many years the friars had missions in India, including Simla, Delhi and Jalandhar. One of the brothers, Fr Anselm Keneally, became the first Archbishop of Simla in 1910. Many also travelled to the United States, where their presence was felt in Franklin, California, Rhode Island and Massachusetts. In 1952 the friars gave up their houses in the latter two states to the newly formed St Mary’s Province of New York and New England, ending their presence in the US by ensuring a solid foundation for the fledgling province.

Their international nature is reflected in the current Capuchin communities in England, many of which include friars from Poland and India, while their presence in Oxford has allowed friars from around the world to stay with them while they study at the university.

As the Capuchins celebrate the 150th anniversary of the British Province and their rich historical contribution to the revival and rebuilding of the Catholic faith in England, it is clear that their Franciscan values are still central to the Church. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio’s choosing of the name Francis upon his election to the papacy in 2013. As we approach more anniversary celebrations, including the eighth centenary of the first arrival of the Franciscans in England in 1224, it is vital that the historical legacy of the Franciscans is not forgotten.

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CLARE CARLISLE

The phrase ‘Our Father’ hovers ambiguously between the second and third person

In his presidential address to the Church of England’s General Synod on 7 July the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, caused some controversy with a comment about the Lord’s Prayer. Saying “Our Father” might, he observed mildly, be “problematic for those whose experience of earthly fathers has been destructive and abusive, and for all of us who have laboured rather too much from an oppressively patriarchal grip on life”. Even *The Guardian* joined the media storm, informing readers that the archbishop’s remark followed calls from some Anglican clergy for “more inclusive language” in church services.

The questions Cottrell referred to will not be quickly or easily resolved. But I am glad that he put his authority behind them. They should be taken seriously and discussed thoughtfully. They concern the divine nature, the meaning of religious language and liturgy, the impact of patriarchal oppression and the trauma of childhood abuse.

It is more appropriate, I think, to talk *to* God in the second person than to talk *about* God in the third person. The Lord’s Prayer is such a direct address. But the phrase “Our Father” hovers ambiguously between the second and third person. It certainly can be used as a description of God. But, like many theologians across different traditions, I understand God to be beyond gender and beyond concepts. So our relationship to God must be mediated by our imaginations, which are shaped by our collective culture and by our individual experiences.

Words such as “father” and “mother” come heavy-laden with complex, often ambivalent associations. They produce emotional and psychological resonances rooted in specific experiences and feel very different to different people. I am happy to say “Our Father”, being fortunate to have had good-enough parents and to have grown up with many more opportunities than my foremothers. Yet some worshippers for whom “father” evokes memories of abuse cannot help hearing something very different from the loving, trusting relationship Jesus conveyed when he taught his followers to pray “Our Father”. The use of these words may push them further away instead of closer to God. Of course, “Mother” could be just as “problematic”.

A few days after Cottrell addressed the Synod, Radio 4’s *Sunday* programme asked me to record a brief contribution to a discussion of his remarks. I thought it worth defending Cottrell from some accusations of “woke” lunacy. So I sent the producer a two-minute voice note, making a couple of the philosophical points I’ve set out here. In the broadcast these points were cut, leaving only the tentative conclusion I’d drawn from these premises. I’d suggested that Christians who could not comfortably pray “Our Father” might instead use other words that feel, to them, truer to the spirit of Jesus’s teaching that God is (or is like) a loving parent. Even this thought was chopped into a crass soundbite, to the effect that the Lord’s Prayer should simply be rewritten.

It was bad enough – as I told the show’s producer on the Monday morning – to have my words so distorted. Far worse, though, was the producer’s response. He apologised sincerely, explaining that he’d had to cut the item on “Our Father” from 10 to seven minutes at the last minute. The idea that such a deep theological question could be addressed in seven hastily compiled minutes is so absurd that it would be laughable, were the Lord’s Prayer not sacred to countless people, and were the issues raised by the Archbishop’s remarks not so serious.

In our divisive cultural climate, with religious literacy at a low ebb, the national broadcaster might consider if it is devoting enough time and thought to questions of faith. “Our Father” is a tricky and fascinating issue, not least because it is an explicitly communal address. How can the Church find words that preserve the meaning of Jesus’ Gospel for an entire community, when its individual members’ imaginations are configured so differently? Given these unavoidable differences, can language ever be truly inclusive? Precisely because the Lord’s Prayer poses such a deep challenge, it ought to be handled with great care and compassion. As Cottrell told the Synod, “It is all there in the very first word. God is ‘our God’. Therefore, we who say this prayer belong to each other.”

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