

*Report compiled
by the
Commission
with regards to
the meeting
held at the
Stratford Friary
London
21 – 28 April*

A few days
experience with
the Franciscan
Friars at Stratford
Friary London.

P. Charles Michael Grech ofm
P. Stephen Magro ofm

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Introduction

This experience came about after discussions held between the Provincial, Fr. Richard S. Grech ofm and the English Custodian Fr. Patrick Lonsdale during the Order's English Speaking Conference. The discussions focused on how the two sides can work together during the present times as per the Order's wish.

The Provincial invited Fr. Patrick to visit Malta to speak with the Provincial Council about the situation in England. The English Province has dwindled from a 200 strong province to 30 friars, who in their vast majority are old.

Thus a commission was formed between the two sides in order to propose a way forward for further collaboration. The members of this commission are as follows: Fr Michael Copps ofm and Fr. Anthony Baya ofm on the English side and Fr. Charles M. Grech ofm and Fr. Stephen Magro ofm for the Maltese Province.

The visit took place between the 21st April and the 28th April 2016

The Friary and the Community

As soon as we arrived at Stratford Station in London we were met by Bro. Michael O'Grady ofm who accompanied us to the Friary. The Friary is located in the commercial centre of London, 5 minutes away from the train station, in an area revamped for the London Olympics in 2012. The zone is very much a multi-ethnic one.

The community is made up of three friars. The Friar Guardian, Fr. Michael Copps ofm, who is almost 70 years old. He is also the Parish Priest and is greatly committed towards the parish. Fr. Francis Conway ofm is 82 years old. He is very active on both community and parochial level. He knows many Maltese priest and spoke fondly about them. Bro. Michael O'Grady is 51 years old. He is still studying for the priesthood and should be ordained in three years' time. All members of the community welcomed us with open arms and made us feel at home.

The Friary is large and welcoming, well-kept and clean. The last refurbishment took place 10 years ago.

As soon as we arrived we celebrated the Eucharist. There is one daily mass at 12:15pm. An active and participatory community was present for mass. The Church is simple in design and the community takes an active part during mass. After mass we said the mid-day prayers and before lunch we had some community time. Helpers and an employee prepare lunch regularly while the community help themselves for dinner or as we were told, 'raid the fridge'.

Later, during the day we had the opportunity to speak with Fr. Michael, the Friar Guardian. Fr. Michael was very open with us. He shared the difficulties they are facing with regards to the parish and the friary due to the lack of friars.

In the evening, after having a snack, we participated in community time. Community time is held daily at 8:00pm. This we found beneficial since our communities rarely experience community time.

On Saturday we went out for lunch. We had a full English breakfast. This is done every Saturday. It is another opportunity to be together and to rest.

The Parish

The Parish is dedicated to our founder, St. Francis. A good number of lay people give valuable service to the Parish. These include the Parish Council, the Knights of Columbus, which is a support group for families and widows, the St. Vincent de Paule Society helping out the poor and offering sandwiches and tea or coffee to the homeless, the Choir, an Altar Children's Group and a Prayer Group. The Parish Priest also helps out in a nearby hospital when a member of the Parish is hospitalized.

The friars are also involved with the St. Francis School as spiritual directors. Approximately 250 children attend the school. Most of the children there come from different ethnic backgrounds.

On Sundays two masses are celebrated, one at 10 and another at noon. In this holy Easter period, mass was truly a celebration with the Church full of people coming together from different ethnic groups. We had the opportunity to celebrate in the mass at noon and helped out during confession time.

Woodford Green

On Sunday we went to visit the friary at Woodford Green. Woodford Green is the Mother House for the province. At Woodford Green we met Fr. Patrick.

The Friary at Woodford Green is huge. It is a beautiful place with huge lands surrounding the Friary. These lands are used to organise activities for large groups, especially scouts. Woodford Green is another active Parish. There are nine friars, most of whom are of mature age. The Parish Church is also big.

Pastoral Work

On Monday morning we had the opportunity to witness the work of the members of the Society of St Vincent de Paule distributing sandwiches and tea or coffee to homeless people. Afterwards Fr. Michael accompanied us to the Parish School 'St. Francis Primary School'.

At the school we were welcomed by the children and members of staff. We were shown around the school and also visited some classes. We could notice that the school is well organised. The Friars and the staff pass on to the children the Franciscan spirit.

Meetings

On Monday evening we met Fr. Antoine Baya and Fr. Michael Copps for a Commission meeting. The aim of this meeting was to clarify what they are expecting of us. The meeting was extremely cordial and a number of proposals were made. Their main request is for manpower especially for Stratford Parish, which, as described is very active with a number of pastoral work opportunities. There is also the possibility of helping out in Woodford Green which is very close to Stratford and where a number of youth groups meet.

At the beginning of the meeting we explained the history of the Maltese Mission in London, how it started in the early 1950s until its end in 2014. We also informed them about the pastoral service that a number of friars gave on behalf of the province in some parishes. It is a pity that we were so close and yet were not aware of their needs. We explained that we knew about Forest Gate, but, this Friary had closed down.

According to the strategy established by the Order, wherever possible, different provinces should work and help each other. This is the starting point of our discussion for this three year pilot project.

We explained that as a province we have a long history of pastoral work in London. Our history speaks for itself.

Before the visit we had done our research about the localities where the friaries are situated. We immediately eliminated the ones on Scotland, Glasgow and Edinburgh, and also the one in Clevedon. With regards to the one in Scotland, smilingly they said that there might be a language barrier! With regards to Clevedon, this is about three hours away from central London in a rural area. Canterbury was not even suggested.

Thus we passed the buck on to them and asked directly what type of help do they need and where.

The choice fell between Stratford and Woodford Green. The latter is the Mother House, thus was eliminated.

Thus Stratford was chosen. Fr. Michael Copps explained that at Stratford they need another friar or two due to the extensive work.

We asked Fr. Michael to elaborate on the work to be carried out by the Friar/s. His reply, unsatisfactory to us, was anything which is needed and assisting the Parish Priest.

It seemed that Fr. Michael did not understand what we had asked him so we clarified our question. We explained that his role is mandated by the Chapter, thus, in a parallel way, the work to be carried out by the Maltese

Friar/s need to be mandated in order for the person to know what is expected.

From what we have seen and experienced, it is clear that they need help in carrying out their mission.

Fr. Antoine Baya, another member of the Commission, residing at Woodford Green, mentioned that there is also scope for work with young people in his Friary. We do not exclude, and not bothered at all, with the possibility of working there also keeping in mind that the distance is just five miles from Stratford.

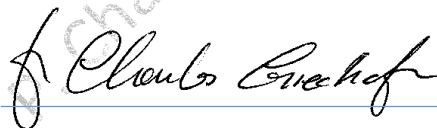
On Wednesday evening, Fr. Patrick and Fr. Michael invited us for dinner as a sign of appreciation and to conclude our visit there.

Fr Patrick is very optimistic. At this point we again extended our Provincial's invitation for Fr. Antoine Baya and Fr. Michael Copps to visit Malta to speak to the Provincial and his Council and to continue the commission's work. They gladly accepted.

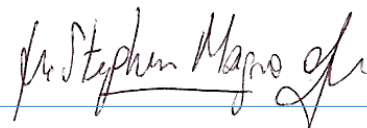
Thus our visit to London came to an end.

Conclusion

We need to emphasise once again that it is a real pity that we were not aware of their work before when we were so close. But now we need to look forward, to explore ways of collaboration as a Commission and Franciscans.



Fr. Charles M. Grech ofm



Fr. Stephen Magro ofm