

A Franciscan Way of Life

Brother Ramon's quest for holiness

ARTHUR HOWELLS

Foreword by David Winter

'Arthur Howells deserves the warmest gratitude for his work.'

Rowan Williams

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Foreword

This book is about an extraordinary man, Raymond Lloyd, best known by his later title as Brother Ramon. It describes his spiritual journey, from eloquent and effective evangelist and Baptist pastor in his native South Wales, to his discovery of Franciscan spirituality and eventually to the life of a hermit. The second half of his life was lived in a sequence of solitary dwellings: first a remote cottage in Wales, then a caravan in the West Country and finally a hut in the grounds of the Franciscan community at Glasshampton.

Some people seem natural 'hermits', but Ramon (the name he adopted as a friar) was certainly not. He loved conversation, laughter and company. He was gregarious and charming. Yet he found in this discipline of solitude and silence a depth of relationship with God that outweighed for him all the apparent social and human deprivation. Those who knew him well were compelled to admit that, although the discipline was hard and he did have days of acute loneliness, he was, as a person and as a Christian, a man who found his whole life utterly fulfilling.

This book tells his story, truthfully and frankly. For those of us whose Christian path has followed other ways, or who cannot understand why a person of his gifts as preacher and evangelist should spend his life in a remote shelter, the story is a revelation of the miracle of the ways of God with people. From that hut came book after book of the most profound but accessible spiritual wisdom, an opening of the Bible's deepest truths and a message for those who find the road hard and steep. A chapter or two of Ramon could be a transforming experience.

Although I 'knew' him, I never met him. After all, he was a hermit! But a couple of times a year he permitted himself the liberty of a

visit to Swansea to spend time with his sister – and there was a telephone. The hermit and I would chat away, and also wrestle sometimes with issues that were troubling us. Then Ramon would return to his hermitage (always travelling by thumbing lifts, to the occasional great blessing of the drivers). His was a remarkable life, and this book – both the story and the extracts from his writings – is a splendid celebration of it.

David Winter



LIFE

By way of introduction

I doubt whether it had ever happened before, or since. There within the walls of Canterbury Cathedral at a traditional choral evensong on a summer's Sunday evening, a Franciscan friar ascended the pulpit and announced the text for his sermon by singing with gusto 'Love Divine, all loves excelling'. His voice echoed around those ancient walls, soaring up to the roof and, when the singing was over and there was a pause for breath, the congregation waited in hushed expectancy for what was to follow. The preacher was Brother Ramon of the Anglican Society of St Francis, and this was his introduction to a sermon on the feast of John and Charles Wesley. What better way to begin than by singing one of Charles Wesley's famous hymns? From then on, without so much as a note in front of him, our preacher challenged us, taught us, stimulated us and entertained us with a vigorous sermon sprinkled liberally with anecdotes. It was delivered with a conviction that demanded our attention and left us in no doubt that we needed men and women of the calibre and evangelistic zeal of these founders of Methodism to proclaim the gospel today.

I believe that every member of that congregation was inspired by what they heard that Sunday evening. I had no opportunity of speaking to Ramon after that service, but later I met him and over the years we became close friends. Indeed, it was only when we gathered for his requiem at Worcester Cathedral that my wife and I discovered that we were among many hundreds who had a similar relationship with him. And they came from all walks of life as well as from differing Christian traditions. A few were members of other faiths, among them a Hindu nurse who had cared for him in his last days.

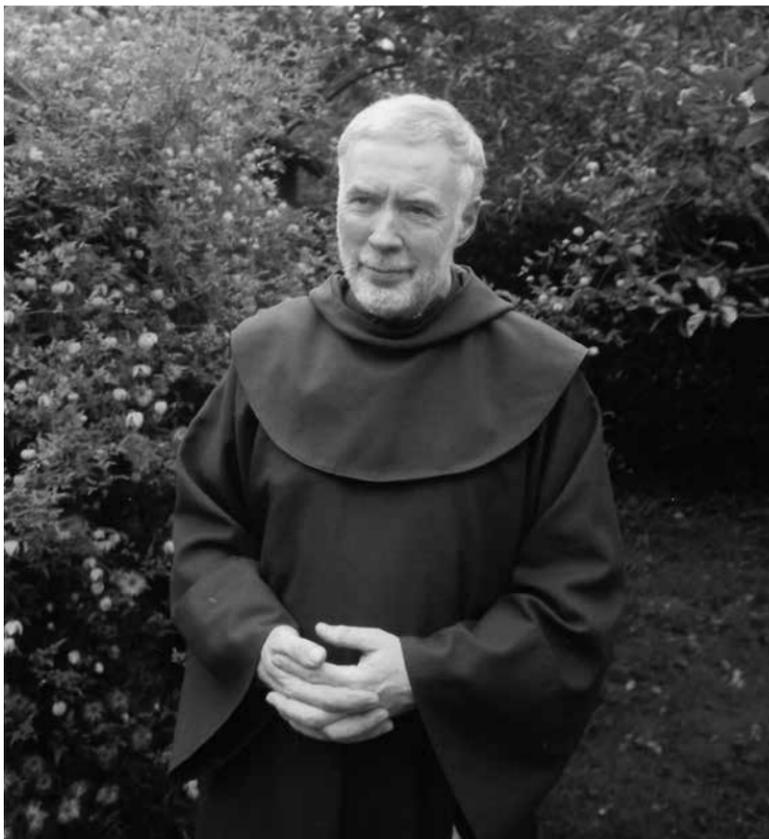
In this short book, I attempt to introduce Ramon to those who did not know him, while reminding those who did know him of his

loveable character and personality. He had a tremendous influence on so many people; he radiated the love of Christ, not only by what he said and wrote but by who he was. He possessed that rare quality of complete trustfulness. You knew that you could depend on him to give you sound advice, and that when he promised to pray for you he would indeed keep that promise. He was truly interested in you and your family, your work and all with which you were involved. He had a phenomenal memory for names and out of the blue would recall an incident or something you had shared with him many years ago.

His exuberant personality, his uninhibited joy and his breathless energy were infectious. His humour was almost childlike and, wherever he was, there was laughter and fun. He could mimic and tease. He had a fund of stories for every occasion and he shared his life openly and generously with all with whom he came into contact – with old and new friends, children, the young and the old, the lorry driver, the university student, the shop assistant or the office clerk. A casual acquaintance in a short time became a friend. A lorry driver giving him a lift would soon pour out his difficulties and problems, for the brown habit was no barrier as the jovial wearer frequently laughed at himself and the newly found friend warmed to him. He had this extraordinary quality of listening intently and discerning precisely what needed to be said, and of encouraging people to share their fears and, above all, to know that God loved them.

There was a boyishness about him as he excitedly immersed himself in the God-created world. Like Francis, he recognised God in the natural world around him and gave him praise from his heart. He always left you with the impression that he discovered God everywhere. He loved the Gower coast, which he had explored as a young boy. On one occasion, we visited the isolated little parish church of Llandewi where, after a while, a bird flew in and was trapped. Despite our efforts to free it, we failed and had to leave it behind locked doors. Ramon was quite upset by this incident and the following day was anxious to know if it had escaped.

This is by no means a complete biography. Unfortunately, I have been unable to discover many of his unpublished works or his journal. We know that he destroyed most of the letters he had written when he entered the hermit life, but I am grateful to Ron Powell, a very close friend of his from college days, for allowing me to reproduce here some of the correspondence that he had with Ramon. These letters, together with extracts from some of his books, give us a picture of this gentle, saintly priest and friar whose life was one long search for holiness. I hope also that the extracts from his books will give readers an appetite to read them in their entirety.



ANTHOLOGY

The following extracts from Ramon's books are arranged in themes. Questions for discussion or reflection for groups or individuals have been added at the end of each section.

Journeying in faith: the pilgrimage

The altar of my heart

from *The Flame of Sacred Love*

‘The mean altar of my heart’ is the place where real conversion begins. In every human being this altar exists. It is ‘mean’ not in the sense of narrow, spiteful and skinflint, but in the sense of simple, humble and low. Of course, the human heart may stray from the love and generosity of God, and then it does become mean in the negative sense. Because we live in a fallen world, it is common experience to find that human hearts are often closed to compassion, self-centred in orientation and narrow and exclusive in attitude. This is why conversion is essential and central in any approach to the spiritual life. We all need to be converted, and have an ongoing experience of daily conversion, not just some emotional ‘high’ that is divorced from the hard disciplines of daily life.

This means that conversion *may* be a ‘moment’ of dazzling enlightenment, when the sinner is turned from his or her selfish or evil life to the glory of the Sun of Righteousness. This was the case with Saul of Tarsus, and with many great sinners in the story of the church. But it may also be a process of illumination along the way in which formal or dutiful religion is transformed by the light of God’s grace when the human heart is touched by the Holy Spirit. Then the religion which was formerly merely a duty or a burden becomes an inexpressible joy which irradiates the whole of life, beginning a pilgrimage which is altogether new.

[*The ‘mean altar of my heart’ comes from Charles Wesley’s hymn ‘O thou who camest from above.’*]

Fulfilling the vocation

from Forty Days and Forty Nights

I didn't know where it would all lead when I began. The exciting and thrilling love of the Lord was the sprat to catch a mackerel! Indeed, I sometimes feel I would not have begun if I had known then what I know now. But the Lord leads us on in gently ascending paths until our feet begin to tread the higher places. I must admit now that I am afraid, and that perhaps if I knew where it may lead I might again fight shy and draw back. But these feelings coexist with the joy and with the enthusiasm and vision which I have glimpsed in scripture, in the Fathers of the desert, the Celtic monks and the early Franciscan friars. All these, with many others, are part of this wonderful way of prayer and solitude which it is my privilege to share.

God's call into new and unknown dimensions can be scary, but such a call indicates his special love for us, and with the call comes the ability to fulfil the vocation, if we are willing. We must let go of the old ways and venture in faith as he leads us.

Our transient pilgrimage

from A Month with St Francis

All the physical beauty and attraction of our mortal frames will one day end in death and dissolution. This was especially true of those early pilgrims who travelled across Europe and slept around those pilgrim arches in Assisi. Life was shorter and more brutal in the 13th century, and the magnificence of the noble buildings in Assisi must have seemed eternal. Yet human mortality and natural catastrophe are part of our transient pilgrimage, and as pilgrim sisters and brothers of St Francis we must seek a more durable and eternal habitation beyond the confines of our earthly lives. We do not, nevertheless, despise earthly beauty, but treasure it more – remembering to seek that city with eternal foundations, whose architect and builder is God (Hebrews 11:10).

The call of Christ

from A Month with St Francis

As Francis knelt before the crucifix, he heard a tender and compassionate voice speaking to him: 'Francis, do you not see that my house is falling into ruin? Go and repair it for me.' Trembling and amazed, Francis replied, 'Gladly I will do so, O Lord.' And as he began to obey, he realised that a work which began with building stones and manual labour led to the building up of the lives of men, women and children into the living temple of God, inhabited by the Holy Spirit.

There was a long journey ahead, and this moment of call was only the beginning of his conversion. His true conversion continued throughout his life and into eternity. So it is with us. We may experience a dramatic moment of conversion or an initiating call of the Holy Spirit, but that is only the beginning.

Returning home

from A Month with St Francis

The most wonderful thing about a pilgrimage is to return home and find that God was there all the time – hidden in the depths of our heart and among our neighbours. Yet the pilgrimage has been necessary for us to perceive that truth. When I made a pilgrimage to Assisi in 1976, I stayed for the first few days in an ecumenical institute, but it was so full of clacking typewriters and ringing telephones that it was a great relief to put on my backpack, and climb to the Darmstadt site halfway up Mount Subasio. It was there I pitched my tent, and with the pilgrims I found stillness, darkness, gentle camaraderie and a genuine Franciscan warmth around the open fire and under an open sky.

Assisi, and all holy places, are to be cherished in the heart, and if they do carry the heavy sense of the numinous presence of God they will also affirm the more profound reality, which is the Spirit's indwelling in the human heart.

Doorways in and gateways out. But the entrance to genuine spiritual life is Christ himself.

God the Father

from The Hidden Fire

I come from a loving and emotionally satisfying home, and the close bonds with both parents continue to this day. But it wasn't a specifically 'religious' home. So up to about ten years of age, my understanding of God was primarily what I felt and knew to be true within myself. During that first formative decade I was often alone, and went wandering and wondering along the coast of the Gower peninsula. I often felt a (sometimes overwhelming) sense of presence, of mystery, what I would later call the 'numinous'. There was a mixture of awe, wonder and yearning in this childhood experience. It was not so much a 'heavenly Father image,' in the sense of my own father's relationship to me. I did appreciate that analogy, but there was a more 'impersonal' sense of mystery than that. Let me illustrate.

One day my father was taking me across a busy thoroughfare. He said something like: 'Now keep hold of my hand tightly, because if you don't, you are likely to get run over.' I knew he was not serious in his seriousness. Of course, I was to hold tightly to him, but I also knew that whether I held on or not, he would hold me. There was danger, but with him there I was kept from it by his love and strength. The impersonal nature of the mystery I had felt in the created order was not less than that – but more. It was not that my experience was of the sub-personal, but of the supra-personal...

So it was, in my pilgrimage of prayer, that my early childhood was filled with the sense of the presence of God the Father.



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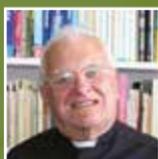
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Be inspired by one man's unflinching faith in God.

Brother Ramon was a much-loved writer and speaker who died in 2000 – a man who delighted in life and people, and who chose solitude to practise the presence of God. This first biography, written by his friend, has warmth and spiritual insight. It tells of his life's pilgrimage; his quest for holiness as a Franciscan friar; his inner journey of discovery and transformation; his love of God; and his influence on others. The selection from his writings which concludes the book illustrates his spiritual journey. This book will be an inspiration to readers to live lives fully for Jesus Christ.



Arthur Howells is an ordained priest and the author of four anthologies. He has been the Chancellor of Brecon Cathedral and a Canon Missioner.

'Brother Ramon was a much-loved and sought-after teacher, guide and priest, always pointing others, not to himself, but to Christ. I take huge pleasure in commending this book.'

John D.E. Davies, Archbishop of Wales and Bishop of Swansea and Brecon

'This book makes Brother Ramon's example and message clear... God inhabits your daily life and is available to be recognised at every turn.' **Chris Powell, Group Analyst and friend of Brother Ramon**

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