CONVENTUAL FRANCISCAN LIFE IN GHANA:
TODAY AND TOMORROW

Preamble
The Franciscan Order arrived in Ghana at the invitation of the St. Anthony’s Guild, a society in the Catholic Church with strong devotion to St. Anthony of Padua. In 1975 a delegation from Ghana who had attended the Jubilee Year approached the Minister General to solicit for Franciscan presence in Ghana to cater for the spiritual needs of the devotees to saint Anthony, knowing very well that the wonder saint of Padua was also a Franciscan.
In 1977 two missionary Conventual Franciscan groups arrived in Ghana; incidentally both came from Provinces that have St. Anthony as their patron. They were the St. Anthony Province, Padova, and St. Anthony Province, USA. In the beginning both missions operated as separate jurisdictions until in 1991 when the two were unified under the tutelage of the St. Anthony of Padua Province, Padova. In 1994, on the feast of the Stigmata, the Ghanaian mission was elevated to the status of Custody, with Fr. Vincent Marcoli as its first Custos.

Present reality
The Conventual Franciscan Friars are located today in four dioceses in Ghana; they have five convents including a novitiate. There are ten Ghanaians in Solemn Vows and eight missionaries. There are fourteen postulants, four novices, and seventeen clerics at different levels of seminary formation. Our pastoral activities include Parish work, Printing Press and publication, care for the poor and marginalized, formation and teaching; retreats, spiritual direction and counseling.

Methodology
We often make mistake when we presume that what is obvious is known and understood by everybody. Does the modern day friar understand exactly what Franciscan life is all about? Doesn’t he think that most of the values Francis espoused are outmoded and incompatible with his life situation today? Franciscan values should be distinguished from Christian Values. The two are not contrary; rather the second supplement the first and spell out the uniqueness of the Franciscan Charism. When this is not seen and felt, Franciscan life loses its saltiness of the earth. Interestingly St. Francis and St. Anthony of Padua are very much known and admired in Ghana. The people of God know about their gospel life and their personal spirituality; and these are what they are made to believe that the Conventual Franciscan Friar portrays. To help me describe Franciscan life in Ghana I made this short enquiry among some of our parish members in a form of questionnaire. There are ten people from each of our three parishes chosen at random to answer nine questions anonymously. Because of time and space the data have not been very much processed. The data is appended to the reflection. They are quite raw as summarized below. This work is a personal reflection; hence I have tried to avoid any scholarly citations and quotations of sources. Time did not permit me to translate it into Italian; in any case, I believe there are competent people to do that for me.

What concrete Conventual Franciscan life do the friars live today in Ghana?

a. What is Conventual life?
By history and tradition, Conventual Franciscan life has been characterized by common life in a convent or friary, common apostolate, and they are situated at the periphery of towns and cities. Conventual friars have had churches or parishes where they administer the sacraments with one friar responsible as a rector or pastor. The peculiarity of the personalities of Joseph of Cupertino, Maximillian Kolbe and the like, depicts that the Conventual Charism tolerates and accepts diverse but compatible individual charisms within the larger traditional Conventual charism. It is also
characteristic of Conventual charism to discover the particular need of the people of God in time and space and to respond to it: Conventual charism is dynamic.

**Concrete Conventual Life in Ghana**
The Franciscan Order is a universal family; Francis intended this. The family is an important social value in all cultures, especially here in Ghana. The Conventual Franciscans live together as a family. Their family life transcends the family in all Ghanaian cultures. The Ghanaian family is made up of people connected by blood descent or by affinity. The Franciscan family is both international and intra-national. That is to say it involves people from different nationalities outside Ghana and people from different languages within Ghana. This indeed is possible only by the power of the gospel.

Following the pattern of the big medieval convents, some of which still do exist in places like Padova and Assisi, where there are over fifty friars in a convent, the Conventual friaries in Ghana do not satisfy the mere requisite of three friars. In each of our Convents there are over five solemnly professed friars. Although almost all the bishops of Ghana have invited us, we are very cautious not to accept any apostolate without being able to establish a community with sufficient number of friars. In fact, apart from Fr. Arcadio who has special permission, yet assigned to a community, to experiment his special charism to the poor of the poor, all the friars in Ghana live regularly in friaries.

The experience of Fr. Arcadio is like that of Maximillian Kolbe. It is something fascinating and disgusting at the same time. Nevertheless, this is the prophetic nature of a charism like this. As the Conventual friars tolerated and accepted the Cupertinos and the Kolbes, so the Franciscan Custody of Ghana encourages Arcadio to continue with his experience, hoping that one day it would be part of the Conventual spiritual heritages.

Of paramount significance to our charism is the apostolate to the lepers spearheaded by Fr. George Abram. One cannot finish the story of St. Francis without touching on his special affection and sympathy for lepers. By the help of the anti-leprosy campaign, the disease is almost something of the past in Ghana. Many cured lepers have been helped to rehabilitate themselves. In the same direction of skin diseases, the new turn is towards Buruli Ulcer, another virulent skin disease equally disfiguring as leprosy.

The friars in Ghana have two big parishes in perpetuity. These Conventual parishes are distinguished from the others by the dedication of the friars, effective catechetical programmes, training of the youth, and meticulous celebration of the Eucharist. At our last Custodial chapter we discussed how we could enrich our parishes further with our Conventual praying of the Divine Office with the lay faithful. Each of these two parishes has outstations and we try as much as possible to celebrate Mass with them every Sunday. Most often the priests in these pastoral communities celebrate two Masses on Sundays.

The friars in Ghana pray together. Their common prayer life includes the divine office especially Morning and Evening Prayers, Annual Retreats, Recollections, the House Chapter, and the Conventual Mass.

The Lectio Divina is being introduced but not very popular now. At our just ended Custodial Chapter concerns were raised about the maintenance and profitable use of silence in our communities, and how to sustain reading habit about friars.

**Education**
In the tradition of Anthony and Bonaventure, Conventual Franciscans have promoted education in their Churches and Convents and in the Universities. The Conventual Friars in Ghana too have build Schools for the Communities in which they work. Now they own one private school. The schools whether supervised by us or owned by us are agents for authentic Catholic teaching and propagation of the Franciscan charism. With the help of the education fund we are able to sponsor needy students to also acquire basic and secondary education.
The Spiritual Apostolate
The Conventual spiritual apostolate include spiritual direction, retreats, monthly recollection for priests/religious, Confessions and counseling. This apostolate has a humble beginning of providing a hermitage experience for the friars and responding to their need for spiritual recuperations. Today it responds to a greater spiritual need of both priest/religious and the laity. Many Catholics from different diocese come to have a hermitage experience with the friars. During their stay they pray the Divine offices with us and attend the Conventual Mass. They see the friars working with their hands and taking care of the environment. They observe the animals and birds and all different creatures in the environment, hence they get a vivid experience of the universal family preached by St. Francis.

In recent years the Franciscan Valley of Prayer and Silence has become a pilgrimage centre for Catholics all over the country, thanks to the Archbishop of Cape Coast who, in the year 2000 declared it a place of pilgrimage for his whole Archdiocese. Pilgrims come here to pray in parish groups, societal groups and even family groups. This is reversing the trend of many Catholics flocking to Protestant Prayer Centres in times of spiritual difficulties.

The friars in Ghana are generally seen to be simple; they are penitential and they work with their hands. The friars love nature, and are men of prayer. However, the maximum score in all these essential Franciscan values is “quite good”. The Catholic faithful know what Franciscan life is about, and if we ourselves know it, then we need to improve upon these values. I think the Constitution should take into consideration how to inculcate our values into friars, not only when they are under initial formation but how to interiorize our values and live them throughout one’s life. Sometimes there is the feeling that too much room is given for the individual friar’s convenient interpretation when it comes to our characteristic Franciscan spiritual values.

STRENGTH OF OUR FRANCISCAN WITNESS
1. When community life is very cohesive our witness to gospel love is very practical.
2. There is always somebody to carry on the apostolate even when the one at the helm of affairs is indisposed.
3. Our life in common facilitates the formation of younger friars; by observation they are able to see what they are taught in class.
4. The distance between the parishes and the friaries/convents gives privacy to the friars.
5. The diversity of individual friar’s charism/personal gifts enriches our testimony.
6. There is always, at least, somebody whose lifestyle is close to the ideals of the Franciscan life.
7. Community life facilitates the observance of the Evangelical Counsels.
8. There is external support in terms of personnel and finances.
9. We are able to take up challenging apostolate which others will not dare; our charism does not exclude new untraditional experiences.
10. Our rich spiritual heritage provides a point of reference, a model to take inspiration from.

WEAKNESSES OF OUR FRANCISCAN WITNESS
1. The rationale behind our charity is hardly understood in our Ghanaian contest. We share the little we have because the gospel teaches us so and not because we have in excess.
2. Our international support can create dependence and lack of growth on the part of the missions.
3. Just as one good thing deserves another so does one bad thing deserves another. Friars with difficult personality dent the image of the friars.
4. The distance between our parishes and the convents make it difficult for the people to reach us; on the other hand it is uneconomical for the pastor to be moving to the parish ground, so many times a day. Besides this create disturbing absence at prayers and other significant fraternal gatherings.
5. Paradoxically the efficiency with which the friars work puts them among the richest social class.
AN EVALUATION ON OUR FRANCISCAN WITNESS
Positively how have we witnessed well?
Franciscan Life has existed in Ghana for over thirty years now. Franciscans have the trade mark of dedication and excellence. These are very visible in our parish work, the schools and the Printing Press. Our Churches are kept neat. Our relationship with the local Church is also very positive. Our priests are respected among the diocesan presbytery. Our friars are often invited to direct diocesan retreats and recollections as well as those of the Major Seminaries. The Friars in Ghana have a credit for helping to provide for the basic needs of the people with whom they work. These assistances take the form of provision of water, clinics and schools as stated above. Like the Master, after preaching to the people they try not to disperse them hungry.

Negatively how have we not witnessed well?
The location of the friaries/convents makes the friars detached from the ordinary life of the faithful. Interestingly the level of socio-economic development in Ghana compels the friars to live a lifestyle characteristic of high income earners: we have good cars, our houses are well built and fenced, we use modern technology, etc. Although these are no luxuries today, but necessary tools, for the people they contradict poverty. Our fraternal charism is often overshadowed by the nature of our apostolate. A case in mind is the parish set up in Ghana. In general the main parish Church is surrounded by smaller churches far distant from the main parish. Hence it makes no sense in Ghana to have two or more priests concelebrating on a Sunday for the sake of Conventual fraternity whilst there are churches without priests on Sundays. As a result the pastoral community can be very scattered on Sundays, the day we rather are to be together to celebrate the Lord’s Resurrection.
The city dwellers in Ghana are generally considered to be rich, although this is not the case. Those who live in the countryside feel are of the strong view that the city dwellers look down upon them. City and Urban dwellers have the best of social amenities. For these reasons many a youth flocks to the cities to live there. Unfortunately all our convents are situated in the cities in Ghana, and in the more developed parts of the country. Considering the efficiency of Franciscan apostolate, our ministry in the cities enlarges the wide gap already existing between the rural and the urban centres. To some extent we have become sharers in the pride of the city dwellers and have consequently attracted the criticism of the village dwellers.

THE EVANGELICAL AND PROPHETIC SIGNIFICANCE OF OUR COMMUNITIES
By evangelical significance I understand the gospel reasons and importance for living together as Franciscan communities in Ghana today. If people should ask “why do you do what you are doing, or why do you live the way you do?” our answer should come from the gospel of Christ. Consequently our Conventual Communities bear the following evangelical significance:
1. Our communities are the presence of the Kingdom of God among men. It is the Kingdom present and not yet. In them people from different background live together and work together. When Jesus says that those to be found worthy of the Kingdom of God shall neither marry nor be given to marry, our evangelical counsels, especially chastity testifies to the faithful that this is possible even on earth. Our Vow of Poverty shows to the people that the source of any true joy is not material property but God. With the Vow of Obedience we demonstrate that when one loves God he can obey human authority.
2. The gospels are full of teachings on forgiveness and reconciliation. In our world of conflicts, litigations, hatred and vengeance, our communities become good testimonies to these gospel values. It is impossible to have people of diverse background living together without offending one another. There are moments of misunderstanding, malice, detractions and even open quarrels, nevertheless, we learn to forgive and reconcile with one another.
3. Our communities are witnesses to gospel charity and the providence of God. Franciscan charity proves that when we give we also receive; it also proves that our concern for tomorrow is best borne by God.

4. Our communities bear witness to Christian leadership. In the friary everyone does something for the up-keeping of the community. Our Guardians in fact are servants, just as the Lord Jesus teaches. Many a times the faithful find friars painting or digging or sweeping in the Church and/or in the convents.

5. Our communities bear witness to the apostolic community. Like all other religious men, we live among the people as messengers sent by the Lord Jesus. We convey our message by our style of living and the apostolate we do.

THE PROPHETIC WITNESS OF OUR COMMUNITIES
The prophet assures others of the presence and power of God even in times of apparent doubts and fears. He points God to others. When people want to hear about God, they come to him not so much as to know the future, but to know the will of God for their life. The prophet is a man of faith and action.

1. Our communities stand out conspicuously as houses of prayer. They tell the people about consecration; that we are people set apart for God. Our hermitages are now on popular demand. Many people would like to come and breathe the spiritual freshness they offer.

2. Our communities further point to the people about the power of the love of God. That if we allow God in our lives his love can do the impossible. Only the love of God and the love for God can bring men from different background to live together under the same roof.

3. Although in our Ghanaian setup our houses do not portray simplicity, nevertheless, the people know that we could build whatever style we want, yet we choose to be modest.

Dreams, aspirations, desires, projects for the future to make the Franciscan experience more significant Formation towards a Ghanaian Franciscan identity.

What I consider first and foremost important for the future is the formation of a Ghanaian Franciscan identity. We have to answer the question “what does it mean to be a Franciscan in the Ghanaian contemporary milieu? What spiritual contribution and heritage can Franciscan life give to the Catholic Church in Ghana? St. Francis filled a spiritual vacuum in the Italy of his time; he satisfied a spiritual hunger at his time; so have the Franciscan stalwarts contributed at their time; and friars in Ghana today have to discover this vacuum in order to make their unique contribution.

Forming the Ghanaian Franciscan identity will first and foremost demand that those who exercise authority in the Custody must be men of moral authority and integrity. It will also need well seasoned Formators who believe in this project of life; Formators whose lifestyle embodies the gospel and Franciscan spiritual values. This project has to be discussed and shared at Custodial fraternal assemblies to convince and convert all friars to espouse this project. This does not mean making the friars have a homogeneous personality, rather to have a common vision of life as Franciscans.

It is also very difficult to strike the balance in dealing with the human person. If in the past formation stressed too much on the heart leaving the head, it is also true that today formation is stressing too much on the head at the expense of the heart. The result is that we have very intelligent friars but who have the Franciscan life very little at heart. I am of the opinion that initial formation, especially in the Postulancy should be based solely on the acquisition of gospel and Franciscan values. This is imperative because most of the young vocations come from homes with very little faith formation if any at all; some are so much influenced by Protestantism, Pentecostalism and the secular clergy. The novitiate will consolidate what has been imbibed in the Postulancy. Academic formation should be left for the years of philosophy and theology, Franciscan Apostolate.

The undertaking of any apostolate should take into consideration our Conventual significance. That is, it should be an apostolate involving at least three friars to give witness to our fraternal life. New
apostolates should be studied well before we begin them. Where exemptions are given care must be taken that exemptions do not become normalcy. Within the shortest possible time other friars should be trained or co-opted into the new apostolate.

In this regard the Press/Media and the Spiritual apostolate appear to be the most favourable for the future Franciscan life in Ghana. In the press the friars involve will be able to observe our regular Conventual life and work together. Their dedication to work and devotion will become good example to the secular workers.

From its humble beginning the Franciscan Valley of Prayer and Silence has gradually become a spiritual oasis where people from far and near pause to have spiritual refreshment. If well developed it could become a type of Assisi or Padua for Ghana. The apostolate has so many diversities to absolve friars of different charisms and talents. Like Assisi or Padua, the Prayer Valley at Saltpond can never have too many friars. Presently the activities in the Valley include the following:

- Retreat
- Pilgrimage
- Re-orientation to priests and religious
- Monthly Recollection
- Counseling
- Eucharistic Adoration and healing service
- Stations of the Cross
- Christmas Carol Service

OPPORTUNITIES

- Pope Paul VI has described the Shrines and Sanctuaries as spiritual theatres of the soul. The Custody has the opportunity to improve this place in terms of physical facilities and personnel to show the many seekers of God His smiling face.
- We also have the opportunity of making here a laboratory of faith formation. The inputs we give are more or less catechesis to deepen the Catholic faith in pilgrims. Interestingly some non-Catholics mingle up and come, and in the course of programmes we have had some converts.
- Some young men after encountering the friars in a pilgrimage have expressed the desire for becoming Franciscans. Some of these have already been directed to the Vocations Promoter. Thus, the Valley could also serve as catchment zone for Franciscan vocation.
- We cannot overlook the great financial opportunity the Valley could offer to the Custody. The few projects completed in the last three years have mainly been sponsored by income from pilgrimage programmes and local benefactors. We have more financial grounds to plough such as a bookshop, hostels for pilgrims, etc. The Custodial Statutes recognize the Spiritual Apostolate as a custodial priority. The previous Custodial Chapters earmarked the Press and the Media apostolate as a Custodial priority. The Custody acknowledges the inherent Franciscan values in these apostolates and the opportunities they offer for the development and expression of a concrete Franciscan life in Ghana.

APPENDIX

A SIMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE

Have you heard of St. Francis of Assisi? If yes mention three gospel values he had:

Answers: Life according to the pattern of the gospel, self dedication to the mother church, constant prayer and meditation, love and care for nature, a believer, a messenger, a preacher of gospel; spirituality, compassion, prayer, endurance, joy to the sorrowful, pardon and forgiveness; evangelical counsels; he left his home because of Christ, he was committed to people; love and care for the poor, faith, peace, true joy; charity, shared what he had with the poor and needy, simplicity, primacy of God and selfless.
What comes to your mind when you hear of St. Francis of Assisi?

Answers: A servant of Christ, a model of faithful Christians, a man of penance, humility and miracles, stigmata, friend of lepers, disobeyed his father to serve God; founder of Franciscans, servant of God, a true saint to be emulated, simplicity, interior harmony, peace maker; sincerity; friendliness to all especially poor, prayer and devotion, he embraced poverty despite his great inheritance; love for nature; he loved all, he was prayerful, dedicated; Franciscan friars in Sunyani, The Catholic Messenger; self denial, humility, simple life style; love for animals, one who never insisted on his own, the Habit, the peace prayer.

Mention one popular Franciscan Saint you know apart from St. Francis

Answers: St. Anthony of Padua =19, Maxmillian Kolbe= 1

What three things come to your mind when you hear of the Franciscan Friars in Ghana?

Answers: To spread the gospel, to establish mission of charity, enhance living standard of people, Churches, Press, school and anti-leprosy, missionaries, Priest/Brothers, witnesses to the gospel; concern for growth of community, love and care for the poor, love of nature, simplicity; patience, kindness, gentleness; Care for the needs of the community in which they operate, works of charity; put up structures, they are sent to preach the good news, consider the poor; Sacred Heart Parish, Ankaful leprosy hospital, education, Catholic Messenger; family life in common, kindness, poverty; they lead simple lives and counsel people, they work even in the remote areas to save lives, they help in making projects like schools and churches; Spiritual exercise, family life together.

What gospel value could you identify with them?

Answers: Care for poor and marginalize, love for Christ and Mary, strong faith in Eucharist, poverty, obedience, chastity; witness to the gospel, messenger of the gospel, very religious with the Liturgy; pastors, good Samaritans, mentors, prayer, penance, simplicity; good leadership qualities; approachable and sympathetic; good preachers; life without property, chastity, charity towards the poor and needy; time for the church, they make sure we live in good church buildings; education sponsorship, provision of social amenities; they love people like their own children, they proclaim the gospel everywhere in their area, they are prayerful and lead exemplary lives.

What aspects of the life of the Friars (any one or more without mentioning their names) do you find contrary to their gospel witness?

Answers: Poor human relations, less effective prayer and Bible knowledge, monopoly, corporate riches, disregard for under privilege, favoritism, not live in peace as St. Francis, some do not work in the villages, some think the church is their property; insufficient societies in parish; intolerance, impatience, partial, no perfect brotherly love among them; dictatorship; authoritative, disrespect, abusive words; anger, discrimination, pride, misunderstanding among some of them.

Below are some Franciscan values friars should portray. Do the friars you know, in general have them? Please underline your opinion.

- Simplicity …………………..(Little)……………………(quite good) …………..(v. good)
- Manual work ……… ……… (Little) …………… ……(quite good) …………….(v. good)
- Love of nature ……… …….. (Little) ……… ……..…..(quite good) ……...……..(v. good)
- Love and Care for the poor .. (Little) ………….. (Little) …………..(v. good)
- Penance ..………………….. (Little) …………… …....(quite good) …..………...(v. good)
- Prayer………………….. (Little) …………… (Little) ……………(v. good) …………….(v. good)

Summarized results:

- Simplicity: Little = 1; Quite Good =5, Very Good = 11;
- Manual Work: Little = 1; Quite Good = 8; Very Good =8;
- Love of nature: Little = 0; Quite Good= 13; Very Good = 4;
- Penance: Little = 0; Quite Good =11, Very Good = 6
- Prayer: Little =3; Quite Good =7, Very Good =7