

About Svenska Franciskushjälpen as it has grown from the Swedish Third Order of St. Francis!

The beginning

“For the love of Christ constrains us”. These words that Paul wrote to the Corinthians were an important source of inspiration for Robert Somfai and Dick Fäldt when they were planning to gain start Svenska Franciskushjälpen. In Pope Benedict XVI’s Encyclical God is Love they a deeper understanding of these words. But, if only it had been left at those first few words... Robert says that Catholics easily become too intellectual and that St Francis is obviously a far more important role model with his motto of: “Just do it.”

“St Francis embraced much of that approach.” says Robert. “For him the distance between thought and action was minimal.”

A Catholic charitable organization in its own

Robert and Dick were introduced to each other by their former parish priest Göran Degen. That was a little over a year ago. Räddningsmissionen, an organisation dedicated to social work in a Free Church context, wanted to expand their collaboration with the Catholic Church.

“But our relationship moved away from that,” says Robert. “However, as Catholics we didn’t want to drop the increased dedication to social work. Svenska Franciskushjälpen has become a Catholic charitable organization in its own right where freedom acquired central importance.”

“Because in freedom,” Dick adds, “one can be generous and faithful without having to compromise.”

Only volunteers

The work is therefore entirely run by volunteers. In this way they can also minimize the risk of the organization being filled with people who want to make careers. A so-called guardian should ensure that its values are preserved so that the organization stays the way it was meant to be.

Svenska Franciskushjälpen admittedly relies on the Catholic Church – to which it shows reverence and obedience – but it is at the same time legally and organizationally independent of the church, the bishops and even the Franciscan Order. It is committed solely to Jesus and St Francis.

In its conception – as an independent Catholic organisation run by volunteers – it was inspired by Fransiskushjelpen in Oslo. With its fifty years of experience, its Norwegian predecessor has provided the expertise used to start the organisation in Gothenburg.

Started in March 2006

Svenska Franciskushjälpen was started in March 2006. By the end of the year the first volunteers had undergone their training and begun work in the field and at the Night Shelter.

The work is needed. Gothenburg is the Swedish city with the greatest number of homeless people per head of the population and the number is growing. There is admittedly sound collaboration in place to remedy the need but so far it has been focused on the centre of Gothenburg. The municipality and Christian organisations like Räddningsmissionen and Stadsmissionen run their fieldwork here. Franciskushjälpen obviously wants to contribute to this work but also wants to direct its help to the city’s suburbs.

The bishops blessing

When Dick and Robert began to envisage the form that Franciskushjälpen was to take as an organization, they wanted, in the spirit of obedience – and before the work had begun – to ask for the bishops' blessing. They succeeded in getting an hour's audience with Archbishop Giovanni Tonucci.

"We got there feeling very nervous, with sweat stains as big as CDs under our armpits, and presented our project", says Somfai. "After 45 minutes the Archbishop asked: What do you want? We replied that we only wanted to ask for his blessing. He was perplexed and surprised. Since then we have been providing him with information about how the work is going."

At the beginning of October the Archbishop gave Franciskushjälpen his blessing and two months later, Pope Benedict XVI gave his blessing as well.

Good structure

Today the structure of the organisation is beginning to take shape. Apart from the field workers, there are also prayer groups that pray daily for the organisation. For those who want to become involved in the work, there is a prayer card with the St Francis Prayer and a special prayer for the Intercessors of Franciskushjälpen. Another important job is given to the so-called future group. People with previous experience of work with the homeless and substance-abusers have been recruited. The hope is that, as quickly as possible, they will recognize new forms of need and try to resolve them.

Trafficking

With this desire to reach out further and intervene earlier, Franciskushjälpen has also become involved in the campaigns against trafficking in human beings. They are therefore in contact with the groups working against trafficking in humans and prostitution with the Gothenburg Social Services. In our fieldwork we also reach out to homeless mothers and children. Dick tells us that there are approximately 17,800 homeless people in Sweden. These figures do not include homeless children and immigrants because statistically speaking "they don't exist". But even if they do not know the number of street children in Gothenburg they do believe that they exist and that they are mainly to be found on the outskirts of the city.

The love of this organization is strong!

"Therefore I believe that the work in these areas will grow quickly and become Franciskushjälpen's second leg", says Somfai. With the Church's blessing and prayers, Franciskushjälpen's volunteers can now begin their work. What started to a great extent with Dick and Robert has now begun to bear fruit, which is reason to rejoice.

"The love for this organization is so strong, so solid", says Robert. "We have succeeded in navigating the rocks and have come out of it in one piece. It feels like we are on the right path."



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