

About Svenska Franciskus-hjälpen as it has grown from the Swedish Third Order of St. Francis.

“For the love of Christ constrains us”

2 Cor 5:14

“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 start Svenska Franciskushjälpen. In Pope Benedict XVI’s Encyclical *God is Love* they gained 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.” 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.”

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. 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.

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



“If I have no contact whatsoever with God in my life, then I cannot see in the other anything more than the other, and I am incapable of seeing in him the image of God. But if in my life I fail completely to heed others, solely out of a desire to be “devout” and to perform my “religious duties”, then my relationship with God will also grow arid. It becomes merely “proper”, but loveless.”

Excerpt from Pope Benedict XVI’s Encyclical “God is love”

replied that we only wanted to ask for his blessing. He was extremely 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.

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.

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.

“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.”

For the love of Christ constrains us. Just do it!
We can follow Franciskus-hjälpens volunteers in ‘diary format’ over a two-day period of working in the field.

2006- Day One

“At eight o’clock I wake up to the sound of the telephone ringing. I find out that a Polish couple, Aleksander and Maria, are waiting outside the Catholic church and need help to get back to their home country. During this call the mobile phone starts ringing as well. I then learn that a woman, Jeanette, is waiting with her two-year-old child at the Red Cross and wants help finding a place to live. She has run away from her husband who she lived with in Skåne.”

Karin, who serves at Svenska Franciskushjälpen, tells us what a few days’ work is like. In Gothenburg, where Svenska Franciskushjälpen was started, there is a network of different organisations all working with vulnerable people. It is people from this network who are calling Karin this morning asking for help.



Homeless man from Belarus. Served in the war in Afghanistan, is still traumatised by the war and ‘does not want to be found’.

“Jeanette has tried to get help from Social Services in the part of the city where she spent the previous night but is directed instead to go to the town she has run away from. We agree that I should accompany her to Emergency Social Services. First, however, I call Bengt, one of the volunteers, to help Aleksander and Maria. He arrives after having picked up Johannes – a recovering substance-abuser who has lived on the streets for a period of six years – from a Franciscan monastery. Johannes has been turned away from most hostels but living in the monastery has worked well for him. We are accompanying him later on to find a referral unit – a type of protected shelter. Bengt picks me up with Aleksander and Maria who tell us that they have been robbed. They have been in Sweden for a month and have been looking for work. They are tired and want to go back to Poland where they have a child.”

We drive them to Emergency Social Services. Here we are told by a Securitas guard that as they were robbed we have to fill in a police report first, before seeing a social worker. We file a police report and then return to Social Services. The social worker there directs them to the consulate in Malmö, and Maria, who speaks English, repeats her story at least one more time. At this time they have probably been allowed to return to Poland but we are not sure.

“Johannes has now been waiting in the car for two hours, patient as he is. We go to meet the staff of the referral unit and to wait for his social worker. We are told that we can see a flat for him later that day. It turns out that it’s 92 square meters in size. Since it’s so big he gets worried that the loneliness will be too palpable and that he will therefore suffer a relapse. We drive him back to the monastery.”

“Later we go to Hammarkullen where Jeanette and the child are waiting. They are on the street with everything they have managed to salvage packed in plastic bags. Since she ran away from her husband she has been moving from the home of one acquaintance to another. She has sought help previously but only been offered a place to live in her home municipality – only one block from the man who has abused her. When we introduce ourselves we notice that she is slightly scared and distant. We go to Emergency Social Services and are met by a Securitas guard. We are asked to wait in a nearly empty room protected by armoured glass. The child is upset and crying. After a while we meet two wonderful social workers. Jeanette was worried about going to the Social Services since they had been less friendly to her earlier that day at another office. And then we come to this...”



This is where a father lived with his mentally handicapped son. He gave up at the age of 70 when he wasn’t able to get help with his son’s illness. The Franciscan monastery in Jonsered was the first proper accommodation they had had after 8 years in tents in summer and winter alike.

“The social workers talk about where she can live. The only thing they can offer her is money for a hotel. We tell them that she can live in Franciskushjälpen’s room at the Catholic church, where there is a toilet, shower and small kitchen. Since we don’t have a contract with Social Services they can’t place the mother there without the director’s consent as she has a child. The director knows that I have worked with children for many years within Social Services and therefore agrees to the arrangement. We have to agree to a rate. We agree to 450 compared to the municipality which would ask for 4000. Had we not done that, Jeanette would have probably been forgotten. She gets 70 Swedish kronor in food money and has a new appointment with Social Services the following day.

“I go and clean the room so that it can be lived in and pick up toys and clothes from my grandchild. Then I buy food and nappies. When I come home at night I wash their clothes. I worry about the following day and am concerned about the fact that they have no shoes. Then someone calls from Gatljus (Gatljus is a Swedish religious charity home for men). When I tell them about Jeanette they offer me both shoes and toys.”

Franciskushjälpen’s laminated prayercard in A5 size is available in Swedish, Polish, English and Italian. you can order them from the website: Bönegrupp.



“The next day I am on my way to see her at the Catholic church, but only 100 meters from home I come across a man who is having an epileptic fit. He has been homeless for many years and we know each other well. We take the tram to Östra Hospital’s emergency department since he does not want me to call an ambulance. I leave him at the hospital and on the tram on the way to the Catholic church I meet two other homeless men. One of them has vomited on himself so I stop at a help

station so that he can shower and get new clothes.

“Then I go and pick up Jeanette. We go to Social Services and meet two other social workers. They don’t want to allow further nights at Franciskushjälpen. Instead they offer emergency accommodation for Jeanette and her child where they will be constantly supervised. Jeanette thinks that this means they will end up in an orphanage. She gets upset and cries because she believes her child will be taken away from her. I explain the situation to her and she calms down. In the car on the way back to the Catholic church she faints and throws up. When we arrive I start packing their things. We wait for the social worker who is meant to come pick them up and go with them to the emergency accommodation. Jeanette goes outside to have a smoke and then I call Social Services. I tell them I don’t believe it’s right to do this. The child has become calm and relaxed after only one night. This will alarm the child again and I don’t want to contribute to that so they have to come and pack their things themselves. They quickly change their minds. Jeanette is allowed to stay for longer in the Franciskushjälpen room.”



Man taken to hospital with suspected epileptic fit and a large wound to the head.

Shortly afterwards I meet Oskar and Britt, a couple who haven’t got anywhere to live. Oskar is drunk and has hit Britt. I try to get him to speak to me while I give Britt the address of a refuge for women where she can find shelter. She gratefully accepts the address. Oskar does not even notice when she leaves in a taxi. I notice that he has a badly infected wound on his hand and ask him to come along to Sahlgrenska hospital. He agrees but when we are there he is provocative and disruptive. I try to calm him down and then I leave him there. In town I meet Bert, a homeless man who usually lives in public toilets. He wants help with sobering up and detoxing. I call the detox unit (TNE) and ask if there is room for him. There is, so we take the tram there.

“After that the phone rings. This time it concerns a young woman who has fallen victim to trafficking and is pregnant. I decide to meet her and get her to a midwife who can meet her in secret. Since her pimp knows where she is we change cars twice on the way. Luckily the child is healthy and developing as it should. I go home and throw myself, exhausted, onto my bed.”



Father pointing to the daughter who is next in line to be sold into slavery. He has already sold one child.

2006- Day Two

“The next morning the phone rings again. A Romanian woman, Cornelia, and her three-year-old son have come to the Catholic church looking for help. She only speaks Romanian so we arrange for an interpreter who arrives within the hour. We try to work out what has happened. Since she tells us that she has a daughter who is being held ransom in Romania, we suspect that she has fallen victim to trafficking. She wants help with getting a job and a place to live but there’s nothing we can do to help. We recommend instead that she contacts the Immigra-

tion Services to seek asylum and tell her that we will help her with this. She gets very frightened and worried and runs away. We catch up with her and calm her down. She understands that we are not a threat. We promise to help her get to a woman that she can live with in one of the outer regions of Gothenburg. We buy food and nappies as they have not brought anything with them. Later that day we see her begging in town but do not approach her. Instead we ask a few of the homeless with whom we have good relationships to keep an eye on her. Sometimes we ask them for help since they know and hear about things much earlier than the authorities do.



This is the home of a father of five who often asks for our help. When asked how he copes he points to heaven and says: “I only have God now.”

“Later that night, when I return home, one of the homeless calls to tell me that Cornelia has been caught stealing and in the process hit someone. She has been taken away by the police and they are planning to send her back to Romania. She and the child are at the police station, even though you cannot keep women with children there. I call the station and thanks to my call the social workers are once again brought in. When a child that lives on the streets is involved, Emergency Social Services have to be notified. I tell the police that she has a child who is being held to ransom in Romania and that they should be careful. When they find out that she has probably been a victim of trafficking in human beings they decide not to send her back – otherwise they could have done so that same day. Instead the child and mother are given a place in a home.

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The prayer card costs 20 SEK (2.5 Euro), all of which will go to our work for the homeless of Göteborg.

Prayer cards are available in the following languages:
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