

## THIRD ORDER VS. TIME SPIRIT

By Fr. Giles, O.F.M.

HIS Holiness, Pope Leo XIII, declared on various occasions his firm conviction that the Third Order is the most efficacious remedy against the evils of our day and the best means of bringing the world back to the zealous practice of the Gospel. He even went so far as to say, that he awaited the rebirth of the world and the solution of the social question from the activity of the Third Order.

That these expressions and hopes of the great Tertiary Pontiff are no mere rhetorical exaggerations but are based on facts, the following brief comparison of the principal evils of the times with the remedies offered by the Third Order will prove conclusively.

One of the chief characteristics of our age is the spirit of insubordination or the lack of proper respect for authority, be it civil or religious, especially the antagonism toward the supreme authority of the Vicar of Christ, the Pope. Individuals and nations have joined in the cry "Away from Rome!" and the result of this unhappy rebellion against the authority of Christ's Vicar is a world-wide revolt against all authority; so that the very rulers who sowed the wind of rebellion against Rome, now reap the storm of revolt against their own authority.

To counteract this spirit of insubordination, the Third Order insists that its members exhibit the most loyal devotion to the Holy See and

to authority in general. This spirit of loyalty to the Pope is characteristic of the Franciscan Orders, and Pope Pius X declares in his letter, *Tertium Franciscanum Ordinem*, that "care must be taken not to admit persons into the Third Order unless they be of sincere faith and devoted to the Roman Church and the Apostolic See." In the same letter he ordains that Tertiaries "at the opening of their conventions give solemn expression of their devoted obedience, first to the Roman Pontiff, and then to the Ministers General of the Franciscan Order."

It is evident from this, that if the great mass of Tertiaries are imbued with this truly Franciscan spirit of obedience and submission to authority, they will exercise a most salutary and powerful influence on their fellow men with whom they come in contact, and in this manner will gradually restore to authority the throne and scepter of which it has been despoiled.

Another evil, and one that arises from the foregoing, is the inordinate desire to possess and to enjoy the goods and pleasures of this world. Look about and you will see how men strive madly to enjoy the passing pleasures of the present moment; how they seek to crown themselves, as it were, with roses, quite forgetful that these will soon wither leaving their possessors poor and dissatisfied.

"Life is short," they say, "and will

soon vanish like a cloud in the bright firmament without leaving a trace behind; hence let us enjoy it to the full while we can." To eat, to drink, to satisfy every animal passion of the human heart—this is what many seek, this they long for, this they consider the sole purpose of their existence on earth.

To this degrading spirit of inordinate enjoyment, the spirit of penance of the Third Order is diametrically opposed. The Third Order, true to its name,—the Third Order of Penance—while not forbidding its members to enjoy in a reasonable manner the goods and pleasures of the world, nevertheless, vigorously counsels the virtue of self-denial and prudent moderation in the enjoyment of even lawful pleasures, the better to overcome the inborn longing of the human heart for the forbidden fruit of sinful pleasures.

Thus the Rule says: "Members will refrain from excessive cost and elegance in adornment and dress and will observe—each according to his state—the rule of moderation. They will refrain with the utmost caution from dances, and from dangerous stage-plays, and from all revelry. They will be frugal in eating and drinking. Each will fast on the eve of the feast of the Immaculate Virgin Mary and of their Father Francis; those will merit great praise who, in addition, either fast on Fridays or abstain from flesh meat on Wednesdays."

If the Tertiaries are filled with this spirit of penance, their example will cause the votaries of the world to pause in their wild

orgies, and to reflect on the emptiness of earthly pleasures and on the true peace of the soul that follows in the wake of Christian mortification; and many a poor sinner, sated with vice and crime, will, like St. Augustine, take heart on seeing weak human beings like himself despising the passing pleasures for those that are eternal, and will leave the paths of sin to accompany Christ crucified on the thorny way to Calvary, and thence to heaven.

Insubordination and the inordinate desire for worldly enjoyments naturally beget a very baneful indifference in matters of religion, which is a third evil of our times. This indifference in regard to religious practices has invaded not only the ranks of our separated brethren, but unhappily it is found even among such as call themselves good Catholics.

Daily prayer, attendance at Mass on week-days, frequent reception of the sacraments, daily examen of conscience, reading of books on religion, pious practices at home—all this and much more they consider good enough for children and old persons, but deem it altogether unnecessary for or, perhaps, even unbecoming in a young man or young woman or in one who can boast of enjoying the dignity of mature manhood or womanhood. "To be sure," they say, "this is all very good, but it is not necessary; so why should we bother ourselves about it?" In this way, they soon go from bad to worse in their indifference, until at last they become quite lax in the exercise of their holy

religion.

This pernicious indifference in matters of religion is likewise stemmed by the Third Order. For, the Rule expressly insists on the faithful performance of just such so-called unimportant religious practices mentioned above, well aware of the truth of the words of Holy Writ that "he that contemneth small things, shall fall by little and little" (Eccle. xix, 1).

When the heart is filled with a spirit of disobedience and an excessive desire for worldly amusements coupled with a spirit of religious indifference, it is not surprising that it should likewise be given to an inordinate love of self. True, we hear much about "brotherly love", "humanity", "philanthropy", and about the necessity of forgetting oneself in the interests of one's fellow men. But, if we examine the motives underlying this charitable activity of the world, we find in most cases that selfishness is at the bottom of it all. People expect either personal emolument, or at least the praise of men for the good deeds they perform.

How different from this selfish charity and egoism is the wholly disinterested and true Christian charity that is diffused in the hearts of the Tertiaries by the Rule of their Order. Tertiaries are strictly

commanded to perform not only one or the other charitable work, but "it is a law for them to strive to perform all the works of mercy" (Pius X).

Nor are they to expect any other reward for this unbounded charity than that promised by Him, when he said: "When thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: that thy alms may be in secret, and thy Father, who seeth in secret will repay thee" (Matt. v, 3, 4).

Thus the Third Order does not trumpet to the four corners of the globe empty platitudes about humanity, brotherly love, and philanthropy; but, resting on the firm foundation of the Gospel and filled with the Seraphic spirit of love and penance, it goes practically to work to infuse this same spirit into the hearts of all men. For it knows that it is this spirit alone that can hope successfully to cope with and crush the time spirit that holds so many captive in the chains of its slavery.

It was the knowledge of this power of the Third Order to counteract the evil tendencies of our day that induced the great reform Pontiff, Pope Leo XIII, to exclaim, "Oh, that all Christian people would again so zealously enroll themselves in the Third Order, as did the nations of old once flock to St. Francis!"

