

Speech of Pope Pius XII

July 1, 1956

 Keys of St Peter

In bidding you affectionate welcome, beloved children,-directors, friars, brothers and sisters of the Third Order in Italy - We wish above all to express to you Our joy at the happy revival of your individual and collective activity as well as at the spirit of concord that reigns among you. Reading your history one is astounded by the number and variety of the blossoms of holiness, of the fruits of apostolic work that have budded and matured on the three branches of the thriving and vigorous tree of the Franciscan Order. From the time of Blessed Luchesio right down to the countless numbers of lay people in every walk of life, to priests, to Bishops, to Popes,-a veritable multitude of souls has attributed to the Third Order a great part of that spirit which spurred them on to walk in the way of perfection. And no less wonderful is the story of the work done by them towards the religious, moral, social and political reorganization of society.

After its providential founding the Third Order, pervaded through and through by the spirit and the teaching of its Seraphic Founder, became immediately the surety of holiness for very many hearts. There were, it is true, during the course of the long years periods of crisis and of less fervor; despite that, however, the activity of the Order was always noteworthy and efficacious. In time of strife and fear the Tertiaries became the promoters of concord and peace; with a prudent fearlessness they worked against the abuses of the feudal lords for the betterment and the defense of the humbler classes; in order to reduce, and, in so far as possible, destroy the effects of heresies and schisms they practiced and preached absolute fidelity to the Church and to its visible Head; to stem the spreading tide of injustice, oppression, and plunder they gave an example of detachment from riches, vanities and honors. It may well be said that whenever the Church called her children together for any work of profound internal renewal, she found the Tertiaries ready to cooperate in ensuring the success of the common effort. For that reason you have had the support and blessing of the Roman Pontiffs: from Honorius III, who, tradition has it, gave verbal approval to the Rule of your Order, to Gregory IX, the great friend of your Holy Patriarch; down to Leo XIII, who by the Apostolic Constitution *Misericors Dei Filius* of 30 May 1883 reformed your Rule, taking care, however, that the intimate nature of the Order was in no way modified; to St. Pius X who proclaimed himself confident of the efficacious contribution of the Tertiaries towards the restoring of all things in Christ (Apostolic Letter, 5 May 1909); to Benedict XV and Pius XI who reaffirmed the perennial modernity of the Third Order. We also have on various occasions willingly praised your spirit and encouraged your work; and today we are glad to meet you once again and to offer you anew Our congratulations, Our good wishes, and Our paternal exhortation. And we, like you, ask of the Lord that the splendor of your many glories may never in any way be dimmed, that the confidence which the Church places in you may never be in vain. For you, of course, as for other Institutes, the recent war may have caused in the beginning a period of organic standstill and perhaps of spiritual lukewarmness; but now, as witness this magnificent congress of yours, you have recovered your primitive fervor, to make of the Third Order a school of Christian perfection, -of genuine Franciscan spirit,-and of fearless and prompt action for the building up of the Body of Christ.

1. You must be, above all, a school of integral Christian perfection

The Third Order was born in the mind of your Seraphic Father the day that a group of souls, moved and urged on by his words, asked him to be allowed to accompany him on the path he was traveling, following in the footsteps of Christ, in Whose name he was constantly repeating the words "Be ye perfect " (Matt. 5, 48). But since it was not possible for everyone to follow the Gospel counsels, Francis remembered that all, as long as they wished it, could tend to the perfection of their own state of life and reach it without embracing the state of perfection. By denying themselves, all could be docile instruments in the hands of Christ: prompt to answer His every desire, His every suggestion. And that complete and continual clinging to the will of God, that affectionate yet strong dedication to Him and to His wishes, that fullness and perfection of life in the light of the Gospel, can belong to all Christians, and in fact has been the

treasure of so many in every age.

The Third Order of St. Francis was born to satisfy this thirst for heroism among those who though having to remain in the world did not wish to be of the world. The Third Order, then, seeks souls who long for Perfection in their own state.

You are an Order: a lay Order, but truly an Order, "an Order in the true sense of the word" as our Predecessor Benedict XV of holy memory called it (Encycl. Letter *Sacra prope diem*, 6 Jan. 1921). You will not be - this should be obvious - an assembly of the perfect; but you must be a school of Christian perfection. Without that resolute resolve it is impossible to be a suitable member of so chosen and so glorious an army.

2. You must be a school of the true Franciscan spirit

While no one harbors any doubts about the importance of the Franciscan Third Order in the modern world, well-known, nevertheless, are the anxieties which the most zealous Franciscans feel about the effective vitality of the Third Order, both in Italy and in other countries: there are some who fear that the Third Orders today do not give the hosts of saints and apostles that once placed themselves at the complete service of the Church.

The reasons for such a phenomenon may be sought seemingly - among other things - in a lessening of the efficiency of the Franciscan spirit in not a few Tertiaries and at times in some Directors. That is to say, some complain that matters frequently remain too much in the field of theory, when, in fact, it is not sufficient to know the life of the Holy Patriarch and to tell it to others, in order to be sure of forming oneself, and especially others, according to the Franciscan outlook and method. If this complaint were true it would be necessary to find a prompt remedy for it: remember that your Third Order cannot blossom and give fruit, as it did in the eras of its glory, if it is not fully imbued with the true and genuine Franciscan spirituality.

You know that the spirituality of any saint is his particular way of picturing God to himself, of speaking of Him, of approaching Him, of dealing with Him. Every Saint sees the attributes of God in the light of what he ponders most, of what he penetrates most deeply, of what attracts him most and of what conquers him. For every Saint one particular virtue of Christ is the ideal towards which he must tend; yet all the Saints - indeed the whole Church - strive to imitate the whole Christ. In fact it is because of this that the Church is, so to speak, the total Christ and the individual Christians - the individual Saints - are His members, each more or less perfect. There is, then, a Franciscan doctrine in accordance with which God is Holy, is great, but above all is good, indeed the supreme Good. For in this doctrine God is love: he lives by love, creates for love, becomes flesh and redeems, that is, He saves and sanctifies, for love.

There is also a Franciscan way of contemplating Jesus: the meeting of uncreated Love with created love. Similarly, there is a method of loving Him and of imitating Him: in reality it sees the Man-God, and prefers to consider Him in His holy Humanity, because this reveals Him more clearly and, as it were, allows Him to be touched. From this arises a burning devotion to the Incarnation and the Passion of Jesus, because these (mysteries) allow us to see Him, not so much in His glory, in His omnipotent grandeur, or in His eternal triumph, as rather in His human love - so tender in the manger, so sorrowful on the cross.

There is, finally, a Franciscan way of imitating Jesus. Your Seraphic Father searched for and found in the Gospel, seemingly opened at random, three sayings of the divine Master. The first said: "If thou hast a mind to be perfect, go home and sell all that belong to thee; give it to the poor, and so the treasure thou hast shall be in heaven" (Matt. 19, 21). The second gave warning: "If any man has a mind to come my way, let him renounce self, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matt. 10, 24). The third, finally: "You are not to carry purse, or wallet, or shoes" (Luke 10, 4). At that the Holy Patriarch said: "This shall be our Rule" (Anonym. Perus. c. 10 & 11).

From this arises Franciscan poverty which flees from luxury and which loves especially the things that give less pleasure to the eye and to vanity; from this is born Franciscan simplicity which brings the soul to search for God directly, following the short way, the simple way, that is to say, paying less head to its own disfigurement and more to the infinite beauty of God; from this springs Franciscan renunciation, total and continual, but without shocks, without violence, without regrets - a sweet renunciation, made for the love of Jesus. From this surges that candid Franciscan

joy, which is not the same as noisy gaiety or unseemly laughter, but is rather the tranquil smile, full of amiable serenity.

From this, above all, comes that universal charity which, because it sees everyone and everything in God, leaves everyone and everything in Him and for Him, and which takes delight in everyone and everything because it takes delight in God. Deus meus et omnia! My God and my All!

The world has need of that Franciscan spirit, of that Franciscan vision of life. It is your duty, beloved children, to know it thoroughly, to love it with enthusiasm, and above all to live it with the perfection that your state of life allows.

3. You must be a school of fearless and prompt action for the building up the body of Christ

Your Third Order will be able to form a select detachment in the peaceful army of lay-people which today, as never before, is arrayed in the field for the defense and the spread of the kingdom of Christ in the world.

In the church of San Damiano your Seraphic Father heard the voice of the Crucified which exhorted him to rebuild His house, threatened by ruin. To defend the Church, to support the Church - that was the yearning of Francis of Assisi. Do you desire, beloved children, to be worthy of your Father and Master?

Look at the times we live in. They are not different, under some aspects, from the times that saw the birth of the Franciscan Order. We have repeatedly warned the world to stop in time at the edge of the precipice; We have invited men to reflect that there is no genuine and lasting salvation save in Jesus; again and again We have made appeals to all true Christians - leaving aside those points that separate us - to work fearlessly and in concord for the reinvigoration and the spread of the Church. Many have answered the call, and many more, we are firmly confident, will yet answer it. Men are becoming aware that for those who stand aloof from Christ there is nothing but distress and woe. In very many parts of the world intense work is being done under the guidance of holy Pastors.

To work, then, you too, beloved children! Jesus tells you so through the mouth of His Vicar, however unworthy. Press forward, all! bring aid to the world. Support the Church, where, though error and evil are not wanting - alas - in some of its members, there is nevertheless so much heroism, so much holiness.

With these sentiments, and thanking you for the many charitable gifts which have attended your coming here, in pledge of the most abundant heavenly favors. We impart to you all, to your families and to all your work Our Apostolic Blessing.



[OFS Home](#)



[Top of page](#)



[Youfra Home](#)