

Fraternity of the Immaculate Heart of Mary
Circular Letter For the Month of March
Year of Our Lord 2009
Lent

Dear Brothers and Sisters of Penance, Dominus det vobis pacem!

The Third Order of St. Francis has suffered a terrible crisis, change after change to its Rule have brought it very far from its pristine days of the ancient observance. What has happened to the Order may be compared to a building suffering a collapse, and edifice whose walls are crumbling.

The Very Rev. Fr. Emidius Commissary General of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin in England and Ireland, in his marvelous manual of the Third Order states clearly what the Third Order is: *“The Third Order holds a middle place between the world and the cloister. Without compelling its members to abandon their home-duties, it nevertheless places them in a totally different position from that of ordinary Christians. It enrolls them in a society which has the closest relations with the first two Orders of St. Francis. They must share in their spirit, if not in all their austerities.”* (1.)

The Third Order is not an organization on the level with a confraternity, but it is a true Order and this may be misunderstood by souls ignorant of its nature. Very clearly, St. Francis wished those who could not leave their duties in the world, to share in the religious state without having to leave their own homes. The Rev. Fr. Emidius continues: *“The organization of the Third Order is so thoroughly impregnated with the religious spirit as to afford a sensible consolation to those souls whose fervent desires would lead them to prefer the more perfect life of the cloister, if sacred and imperious duties did not enchain them to the world. Placed as we have said before, in an intermediate state between the one and the other, (that is the cloister and the world) they obtain strength and inspiration from the religious element in their lives; while their social condition gives them endless occasions of trial and consequent merit.”* (2)

St. Francis upon founding his first Order, traveling through the hills of Italy was approached by men, women, single and married who longed for a state of perfection. Joannes Jorgensen in his stunning work on our holy Father Francis explains that they cried out: *“We have wives from whom we cannot separate! Teach us how to live!”*(3) They wished to leave their families and enter his Order! Francis, seeing that they too had desires of perfection, and that they too wished to serve Almighty God in a perfect manner, wished to aid them. He devised, through the grace and Will of God, a manner of life to bring the cloister to the home of those called to this unique way of living. The first Tertiaries on record are Blessed Luchesio and Buonadonna his wife. They were given the Rule of life and the ash grey habit of the Third Order. They lived the life of religious in their own homes by the observance of the Holy Rule and thus were sanctified.

Much has changed in the Order of Penance since these days dear brethren. It seems that one of the unhappy changes that first occurred was the laying aside of the holy habit which was always worn by Tertiaries even in public. Concerning this, it seems most fitting to include what our very own Statutes contain. In Chapter III, we read: **“St. Francis of Assisi understood thoroughly the effect of external influences on the human mind; and, remembering the words of our Lord, who rebuked the pride of the Pharisees by His praise of the austerity of the Precursor, gave to his postulants a simple dress of course serge, with a knotted cord for a girdle. He wished his Tertiaries to wear a dress by which its severe simplicity should be an eloquent condemnation of the luxury and softness of the gay world in which they lived.**

D’Ozieri, in his commentary on this statute, says, **“That the disuse of wearing the habit is a sign of the weakening of the Christian and Catholic spirit amongst us; and although by the declaration of one or two of the later Pontiffs, the only thing absolutely necessary is the wearing of the scapular and cord under their ordinary clothes, it would be advisable for Tertiaries to wear the habit whenever possible.”** (4) Further on he relates: **“in any place where the assemblies are held, or in any chapel or convent of the Order, both Brothers and Sisters, if professed, should wear the complete habit.”**(5) It is a normal thing, though it may seem abnormal for our dark times, to see those dedicated to God, which the Franciscan Tertiary certainly is, (in living in the spirit of the three vows of religion,) to be covered in the habit of Penance. The Tertiary, when he or she has pronounced the words of profession, is no longer the same. They are not entitled to enjoy even some of

the licit pleasures of the world which they could enjoy before without scruple. The habit was a strong reminder of this. However the reality is the same, the Tertiary who would profess with their lips the words of holy profession and continue to live a worldly life not fitting his or her new state; who would dare to put on the habit of Penance, cloaking a body pampered with delicacies and of soft living, that Tertiary would be a true hypocrite in every sense of the word. A hypocrite who would clothe themselves with the garment of religion but who would be in fact nothing more than a child of the world forfeiting the graces of the Order.

Where is the Tertiary habit today my dear brethren? The garment of Penance would have been a common sight in the earlier days of our beloved Order, and now it is a rare sight indeed! How sad, as the Father-General of the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin of past days Father d' Ozieri states above, how sad to see the weakening of the Catholic spirit and to see the habit almost abandoned! The S.F.O., has in some places substituted the habit for a simple necklace with a Tau Cross attached to it!

What is to be said about these changes? We see that the nature of the Third Order is that of a state between the cloister and the world. We see that in the past, although many of the Secular Tertiaries lived in their own homes, they still cherished and nourished a life that resembled profoundly the life of a religious. That is, the spirit of those Tertiaries was one which was very close to the spirit of the First and Second Order though one not of enclosure nor of perfect poverty.

Now if we judge the present by the past, it seems in my humble opinion that through the ages, the Order of Penance slipped closer and closer to the side of the world, away from that of the cloister. That is, not that the Pontiffs wished to effect the original spirit of the Order, but in effect, by the radical mitigations to the Holy Rule which evidently began in the Pontificate of Leo XIIIth the Order could be seen to change. In practice, the Third Order was opened to more and more souls, which was the intent of the Pontiff, but again in my opinion and that of others in Seraphic Order of Penance, it slid more and more away from the original ideal of our holy Founder St. Francis which was an ideal predominantly penitential, and of an obvious living of the religious life in the midst of the world through the practice of a Rule modeled similarly to that of the Friars and Clares. The intent of the Supreme Pontiff was to leave the spirit of the Order untouched while mitigating its penances to a large degree and thus allowing for many to enter. This newer Rule however cannot be compared to the Rule of the Friars and Clares, nor can its practices compare to what was asked of Tertiaries from the time of St. Francis to that of the time before the changes made by the Pontiff Leo XIII. But it cannot be ignored that the vast majority of Third Order Saints have in fact been those living the Rule of Nicholas IV which was almost identical to the primitive Rule, just put into the legal language of Church documents.

Fr. Emidius in our manual beautifully reminds us: ***“We must therefore be very careful not to look upon this Third Order as simply a pious congregation; and to prove this we will quote the actual words of the Bull (Paterna Sedii,&c.) of Pope Benedict XII., renewed by Pope Pius IX.: “Following in the steps of our predecessors, who have not only approved and confirmed, but likewise bestowed the highest commendations on, this manner of life, we hereby declare that this Third Order is and always has been holy, meritorious, and conformable to Christian perfection. Moreover, that is really and actually an Order, uniting in one the seculars scattered over the earth with the regulars and those who live in enclosure; and that it is entirely distinct from all the confraternities mentioned in the Bull of Pope Clement VIII of happy memory, inasmuch as it has its special Rule, approved by the Holy See, its novitiate, its profession, and its clothing in a habit of specified form, material, and colour, as is practiced in other religious orders.” (6)***

The ancient Rule of Nicholas IV, provides the Penitent with the opportunity to imitate in their own little way their holy Father St. Francis, in that through the year they are to fast and abstain on many days and they must according to this observance mortify themselves with corporal penances every day of the year. Even in the times St. Clare there were contentions with the Order and the Holy See, as Joannes Jorgensen explains in his book St. Francis of Assisi, the austerity of the poverty of the Clares was questioned “because of the changing times.” Francis and Clare both fought with all their hearts to keep to the first fervor of the Order especially with regards to holy Poverty.

Fr. Emidius explains the proper approach of the Tertiary to penance and mortification: ***“We have only to recollect the title given to the Order by its holy Founder, to be convinced that no one can aspire to being a***

Tertiary without being thoroughly imbued with the spirit of penance. The fast and abstinences enjoined by the Rule are an irrefragable proof of St. Francis's intentions on this point. All the Saints in the Order have practiced extraordinary austerities; and St. Margaret of Cortona, although worn out by vigils, fasts, and corporal penances, still lovingly complained to our Lord that she was not permitted by her director to make her whole body a holocaust of penance. It is, in fact, the distinguishing mark of the Third Order; and those who, from delicacy of health or the duties of their state, are compelled to modify this crucifixion of the senses, are equally bound to maintain the spirit of mortification in act, thought, and deed. Many masters of the spiritual life have declared that this sort of mortification is more effective than the other; but both should be generously embraced, unless urgent motives of health should preclude the possibility of the practice of corporal penance."

(7). We as sons and daughters of the Seraphic Patriarch must follow him, who was with Christ, literally crucified. Daily, the ancient observance provides the opportunity to put to death the "old man" in us and to take up our cross and follow Jesus Christ Crucified.

To close my beloved Brothers and Sisters, let us reflect on the time in which we live. Under our traditional Capuchins, under the wonderful auspices of the bishops and priests of St. Pius X, who himself was a Tertiary, we resolve in our own lives to restore what we see is falling into ruins. St. Pius X's motto was instaurare omnia in Christo! If we dare to speak of having a part in the restoration of the Third Order of St. Francis of Assisi. If we dare speak of this lofty ideal, it will begin within each and every one of us. Each of us must take up again the ideals passed down to us by St. Francis and those Friars who have left us such magnificent literature like that quoted above.

If we may dare to speak of following our Seraphic Father in building up our little part of the Church which seems to be the Third Order, then we must build on the strong foundation of the Saints before us. We must build on antiquity. If this Third Order has crumbled, can we not with the mortar of God's holy grace build again, build again this holy institution of the Church each brick at a time? Can we not envisage the building up of this magnificent edifice working humbly and slowly to lay up each brick upon brick? These bricks are souls firmly convinced of the necessity of returning to the ideal of the Third Order as it was first introduced by St. Francis of Assisi! These bricks are souls who with their hearts all on fire with the love of the good God strive even in our times which are not at all Catholic times, to live, with the help of God's grace the ancient and holy observance of the Third Order of St. Francis! Our Lord commands us in the person of our Seraphic Father Francis, "rebuild my Church!" St. Francis perhaps would exclaim with Our Blessed Lady, "do penance my dear children, and return to the paths laid out with so much blood, sweat and tears, with such love and tender care!" "Return, return!" What a gift is this Holy Rule and Franciscan life, a life modeled after the Holy Gospel. Deo gratias.

In this holy season of Lent, with much courage let us fast and pray for the Holy Church, for the Third Order and its restoration, and the triumph of Tradition through the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

Your little servant in the Seraphic Father Francis,

Fra Pio- Francis T.O.S.F. Rector

Fra Pio - Francis T.O.S.F.

Circular Approved By The Rev. Fr. Freddy Mery S.S.P.X.

Albi Freddy Mery p.c.

Footnotes:

1. Manual of the Third Order of St. Francis 1869. Pg.9. Fr. Emidius.
2. Manual of the Third Order of St. Francis 1869. Pg. 13. Fr. Emidius
3. St. Francis of Assisi by Joannes Jorgensen. Pg. 155.
4. Manual of the Third Order of St. Francis 1869. Pg.78 Statutes Fr. Emidius.
5. Manual of the Third Order of St. Francis 1869. Pg.79. Statutes Fr. Emidius.
6. Manual of the Third Order of St. Francis 1869. Pg.10 Fr. Emidius.
7. Manual of the Third Order of St. Francis 1869. pg. 23 Fr. Emidius.