

# ST. FRANCIS'S IDEALS OF SOCIAL REFORM

Extracts from a Lecture by the Rt. Rev. Edw. J. Hanna, D. D.

**I**N studying the spirit of St. Francis, and how it avails for our needs in the twentieth century, we must study the man, we must study his ideals of reform. What were Francis' ideals of reform?

I think it is clear that Francis' success as a reformer was due in large measure to personal qualities. His kindly heart, his great enthusiasm for his ideal, his holiness, patriotism—he was verily an Italian, his power of making religion popular. But all this would have been as naught had the truths he preached not been adapted to the needs of his hearers, not acceptable to them; for no true reform can rest on enthusiasm alone. This was the story of the reforms in Francis' time: this has been the story of all reforms from the beginning; and because Francis brought to his reform a something that not only satisfied the needs, but also the aspirations of the multitude, did his reform impress not only Italy but the world.

## Reform of the Individual

Did Francis have an elaborate social program for the betterment of men and conditions? Like Christ, he aimed directly at a spiritual ideal; like Christ, he aimed first and foremost at the moral betterment of the individual, and in doing this he accomplished a marvelous change.

The reform of the individual ever includes purging out the dross of sin and building the new edifice of virtue. For Francis sin was the only real evil, the parent evil of all else that was wrong in human life. If sin could be pardoned, and the disorder left by sin in the faculties and soul of man remedied, and the likeness of Christ gradually

brought into relief, Francis felt that all would be well.

Surely this was wisdom, for permanent reform must come from the reform of the individual, and law and institutions begotten of law rarely rise beyond the aspirations of the individual. Francis, therefore, revealed God to the sinner, God's mercy and love and pardon. Francis taught man his greatness in Christ and in God and in so doing he gave man a new viewpoint and this new viewpoint became the real potent factor in the reform that was moral, social and political.

## The Right Beginning

This position of Francis made his reform indeed unique, for the social reformers of Francis' time, and indeed of all times, have ever begun by attacking principles and institutions. Francis indeed saw the abuses which existed in society, the shortcomings of the men who had consecrated themselves to God in religion; but he attacked neither Church nor State. To the Church he showed himself as a child, and to the existing conditions between the classes in society he opposed his ideals of life as exemplified in the lives of the brothers of the First and Third Order.

Francis turned the hearts of his brethren to the lowly, suffering Christ.

He taught them the great value of purity, of self-renunciation, of charity. He taught them the dignity of labor, the priceless value of poverty, the independence which must come to the man of lowly heart, who has given up all things; and his wondrous doctrine, drew after him so many followers that the world stared in amazement, and they in turn, filled with his spirit

and the spirit of Christ, literally regenerated the people around them.

### The Third Order

The wisdom of St. Francis shines out still more in the creating of the so-called "Third Order." All men are not called to the highest perfection, all men cannot literally leave all things for Christ's sake, and still all men must follow in the Master's footsteps.

One can imagine how the rule of the Third Order, which brought together Christians of every walk of life, gave men a new vision; one can imagine how Francis became indeed the darling of the poor, into whose lives he entered by his compelling love. Did Francis really understand the feelings of the poor, ground to the earth by the rich and the powerful? Did he see how the higher classes abused their privileges? Verily, and by bringing rich and poor, noble and serf, king and peasant into his wondrous Third Order he did more to reform society, and to create a veritable social revolution than all the proclaimed reformers of his age.

The saint loved above all things peace, "the peace of God that passeth understanding." Loving peace and wishing it to be the heart of his crusade, he saw that the mightiest obstacle was the feudal system, which made baron, yea and bishop, war-lords which led men into perpetual struggle for petty ascendancy, which brought in its wake tyranny and injustice. Strange as it may seem, St. Francis' Third Order helped powerfully to sound the death knell of the feudal system.

### Rich vs. Poor

The unjust and unequal distribution of wealth has been the cause of much social evil in the past, yea in our own time. Francis, filled with the spirit of Christ, re-

cognized in riches a danger, yea even an evil, and he had ever ringing in his ears the words "How hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God"; had ever before him the Christ who, born on the wayside, living the life of the poor, had not "whereon to lay his head." To those who were rich he gave the invitation to sell all and to follow Christ, and to them he promised real independence, the peace which the world cannot give. When he found that only a few could reach his ideal, then he enrolled them into the Third Order with the hope that living in union with the poor, taking a part in their common life, realizing the ideals of religion, they would help their needy brethren and put less store on the things that must pass away.

Unlike the modern reformer who seeks to breed discontent among the poor, Francis taught them that poverty rightly assumed was indeed the better part, that true happiness consisted in having the things which were really worth while, and he taught them that the things of real worth were within the reach of the poor, even more than within the grasp of the wealthy; for happiness, in Francis' code, consists in union with God through humble prayer, in power over self, which comes largely from self-renunciation, in freedom of soul, which riches bring not, and in power to enjoy the best things of nature and life, the beautiful earth, the sky, the air, the peace and the love of a humble home.

### Duty of Cooperation

Another blessing that came with the Third Order was the duty of co-operation, the duty of solidarity. The guilds were indeed powerful in the days of Francis, but they brought together only men of the same trade and co-operation. Between the different guilds rivalries

were sharp and often harmful to the best interest of the laborers. The Third Order united all men, rich and poor, not only the members of one trade, but of all trades. Not only the members of one city, or of one province, but it banded together whole nations and from this great union of men of every kind and of every clime there went forth a spirit not only united against wrong, oppression and cruelty, but a point of view that made many of the social evils that vexed men impossible. Christ had said "Love one another as I have loved you," and Francis and his friars sent to all men this message: "Love one another—if you love one another there can be no social conflict. Love one another and the world will be reformed. It will again become the world of God, in which charity reigns, and with charity harmony and order."

#### Francis and We

Was Francis for his own day alone, or has he a message for our day and our generation? I think his message is for us. I think his compelling personality charms us. I think his viewpoint ought to be ours, and I feel that the so-called Franciscan revival has prepared the hearts, yea and the minds of men for the acceptance of Francis' message to the world. True we have a different environment than that of Italy in the thirteenth century; true we have vexatious problems unknown in the days of Francis; true finally, of faith and supernatural insight, which are necessary for an understanding of Francis, we have only a small measure; and still in how many ways are the burning questions we seek to solve the very questions that confronted the Saint of Assisi.

#### The Problems

Really after all there is very lit-

tle new in the world. In the Middle Ages there was indeed a sharp distinction between the classes, between king and peasant, baron and serf, but are we not living in a sort of benevolent feudalism, in which the great capitalist is the over-lord, with his many retainers, and the workingman almost wholly in his power? Is there not oppression in many places today, oppression as wicked as ever exercised by master over slave? Are we less democratic than the burghers who rose in their might in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries? Are we more free from social vice than were the men of the thirteenth century—yea was not their very immorality more healthy than ours?

#### The Remedies

What then seemingly would be Francis' attitude toward the world of today with its momentous struggle, with its problems so hard for solution? Francis first of all would consider our whole problem a religious problem, and consequently would look for solution to the doctrine of Christ as taught by the living Church.

Not only was the problem to Francis a religious problem, but he looked first to the reform of the individual. He wanted first of all men, men with vision, men with virtue, men of faith, men of strength, men of peace, men of kindly love, men of justice, men with a high standard of values, men, in a word, of high moral type; and through the inspiration caught of Christ, and through the established means of grace, he prepared men to do their work in the world, and in reforming the individual he did more to reform the injustice of his times than all the social re-ers of his own or other centuries.

Francis would not try to break down the present order of things or create a social revolution. As

Christ passed through the world of business not without sympathy, so did Francis. He felt that the evil lay largely in the individuals who misused their wealth and their power, and to them he brought the new viewpoint of peace through love. He united the struggling poor in a powerful association, and the union brought strength against the evil under which they were living.

#### The Ideal

Have we exhausted all the ways of reform in our social and economic system? If our men could be trained to higher ideals of justice, if they could be touched by Christ and right, if they could get Francis' standard of values, what a power they would be in their labor societies against all kinds of injustice! And if the unions of labor men could be made national, yea even worldwide, after the ideal of the great Third Order, this would be in accord with the spirit of Francis, and if, still more marvellous, master and man, laborer and employer could be joined in a great federation for the common good, the scheme would be perfect, complete. The social problem, as we view it, is largely both with capitalists and laborers one of selfishness, greed, cupidity, and until the individual is touched by a kindlier light

and feels the pulses of higher sentiment, programs will accomplish only a small part of the good they strive to perpetuate. This, too, is the sentiment of the greatest of modern social leaders, Leo XIII.

#### Contrasts and Conclusion

Is the idea of Francis merely a historical memory, and does it still have power to stimulate our age? Human he was, democratic, brother of men; but our democracy strives only for the things Francis thought not even worth consideration. Yearning he was to stop social injustice, but our sociology aims at destroying one order and upbuilding another, while Francis aspiring to no revolution sought the perfection of the individual, and made his crusade fundamentally a religious, a spiritual one. Joy and peace were ever in his soul; sadness and unrest mark our days. I fear we are of the world and Francis of the world was not; and yet the world loved and does love him in its strange, blundering way, but while the world blunders and seeks after things of little worth, there are some, yea many, who love and understand. And under the guidance of our gentle Mother they may yet influence our society, and show unto men that Francis still lives and conquers!

