

# THE THIRD ORDER AND SOCIAL REFORM

*By Fr. F. H., O.F.M.*

**M**ANY and quite contradictory are the opinions we hear of the Third Order, its value, and its purpose. That the frivolous, amusement-mad world should find but words of contempt and ridicule for this venerable institution should not excite our wonder; on the contrary, were the Third Order to find approval in the ranks of the worldly-minded, we should have just cause to fear that its dissolution is at hand. From Catholics, however, at least from those worthy of the name, we have a right to expect a high and settled opinion of that institution which since its founding, in 1221, by St. Francis, has won the admiration and approval not only of the rulers of the Church, but also of countless rulers and statesmen. But there are many, even otherwise well-meaning Catholics who, when the subject of the Third Order is broached, are ever ready with the equally false and trite observation: "The Third Order is a thing of the past. It is no longer able to cope with modern circumstances. It has outlived its usefulness." To such as these, we can only say with the Apostle St. Jude: "These men blaspheme whatever things they know not." (Jude 1, 10) If in a spirit of fair-mindedness, they would put aside their preconceived ideas, and study the Third Order, its history and success, its scope and purpose, they would soon change their ideas, and "having come to scoff, would remain to revere". No, kind reader, the Third Order, far from being out of date and useless, is still the one great means advocated by the Popes for social reform. In the following series of articles, we will try to illustrate the powerful influence which the Third Order can wield in modern society.

## 1. The Third Order and Faith

The Third Order of St. Francis is not a mere society or confraternity, such as the confraternity of the Living Rosary, or of Mount Carmel. It is a real order, and its members are religious, though living in the world. This has been expressly declared by various Popes. It was chiefly to enkindle again the dying embers of faith among the people, that God inspired St. Francis to found this Order; and history vouches for the success of his undertaking. But, as Pope Leo XIII says in his encyclical, "The conditions of the thirteenth century obtain again to-day, and therefore my plan of social reform (and of the renewal of faith) is the Rule of the Third Order of St. Francis."

That the Third Order is concerned with the safe-keeping and spread of our holy faith, follows from the very first chapter of the Rule: "It is forbidden to receive any persons as members unless they be . . . above all exact in the practice of the Catholic religion, and of tried obedience to the Roman Church and the Apostolic See". This Rule is especially necessary in our godless and religiously indifferent days. "The real and true cause of the present sad state of affairs is to be sought in the lack of faith. When the mind has once lost sight of heaven, it becomes engrossed in the perishable things of this world." (Leo XIII, *Auspicato Concessum*, 1882) St. Francis understood this full well, and therefore desired the Tertiaries to bear aloft fearlessly the banner of faith, and to be guided by faith in all their actions. And in all justice; for, as the tree springs from the root, and the plant from the seed, so do all works of piety begin and find their prop-

er strength in faith. "Without faith it is impossible to please God."

In order to cultivate and increase faith in the hearts of its members, the Third Order recommends instruction, prayer, and the reception of the Sacraments—in other words, the constant exercise of faith.

A house, although built of the strongest materials and according to the most approved methods, will in the course of time need repairs, without which it will begin to weaken, until it finally crumbles to ruin. Thus it is with our holy faith. We may have received the most thorough religious instruction,—it will not suffice, if we do not add to it now and then, if we do not perfect ourselves in matters of faith.

Hence the members of the Third Order are admonished to attend the monthly meetings, the Tertiary congresses, and to read good books and publications. In this manner faith—religious fervor—will not only be kept alive, but also increased and strengthened; and the children of St. Francis will fulfill the two-fold purpose of their Order: their own sanctification, and the salvation, of their fellow men.

Faith is a grace, a gift of the Holy Ghost. We must, therefore, implore it from him. For this reason, the Third Order binds its members to certain daily prayers. "Tertiaries who are ecclesiastics, inasmuch as they read the Psalms daily, need do no more under this heading. Laymen who neither recite the canonical hours, nor the Office of the Blessed Virgin, commonly known as the "Little Office," must say each day twelve "Our Fathers," "Hail Marys," and "Glories," unless prevented from doing so by ill-health." This prayer is the official prayer, the holy duty, the daily service of the Tertiaries. It is performed day after day in union with the Church

and with the prayers of all persons consecrated to God; it is performed in the name of the Order and of the Church. It is, therefore, a prayer which will surely bring the promised reward: "Again I say to you, that if two of you shall consent upon earth, concerning anything whatsoever they shall ask, it shall be done to them by my Father who is in heaven. For where there are two or three gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them." (Matth. XVIII, 19, 20) This daily prayer, uniting the members so closely with one another, with the Church, and above all with the one true High-priest, Jesus Christ, is without doubt an efficacious means of increasing in their hearts a love and devotion towards their faith and their Church.

Man is not born a saint; on the contrary, we can all say with more or less truth: "I see the good indeed, I approve of it, but nevertheless I pursue the evil." We must all, therefore, train ourselves to the practice and pursuit of the good alone. To accomplish this, the Third Order gives the all-important rule: "Members will confess their sins each month, and will also approach the Holy Table monthly." Through the frequent reception of these two Sacraments, they will learn to know their faults and failings; they will receive the strength and the grace to overcome them; in fine, these Sacraments will strengthen their wills, lessen their evil inclinations, and urge them on to God, to piety, to fidelity in the performance of their daily obligations. They will increase the fear and love of God in their hearts, and where there is love and fear, there is also faith.

If every Christian is obliged to give outward testimony of his faith by the performance of good works, the attendance at holy Mass, and

the reception of the Sacraments, the Tertiary, as a member of a religious Order, has a greater obligation to do so. The Rule says: "In their home life let them (Tertiaries) study to lead others by their example, to promote pious practices and all that is good." And on April 12, 1893, Pope Leo XIII uttered these earnest words before a pilgrim band of over four thousand Tertiaries: "We assure you that the activity of the Third Order will be truly great and efficacious if the members, each one at his post of duty, strive in

the true spirit to edify others by example; because you know full-well the most eloquent and far-reaching sermon of your Seraphic Father was that of his holy example." If the members are faithful to their Rule and strive for perfection, then, as a Tertiary Bishop once said, "They will be souls of living faith who, while humble and modest, let their light shine forth before men, who by their lives manifest to the world the inconceivable joy and blessing of a lively faith."

### METISSA'S DESIRE

Little Matissa had not yet made her First Communion, and she longed to receive the sweet Savior into her heart. With childlike confidence she went to the missionary to plead her cause.

"Father, please let me make my First Communion. I want to receive our Lord."

"But you are too young, my child. You don't understand the greatness of the Holy Eucharist."

Day after day this little lover of the hidden Lord returned with the same request only to meet the same refusal.

One day, on visiting the church, the good priest was arrested by the sound of a child's voice raised in earnest petition to her adorable Friend in the tabernacle.

"Chief," spoke the little maiden, "my father, the priest, says that I do not know you. But I do know you. You are the Son of God; you are the child born in the stable of Bethlehem; you lived in Nazareth; you were lost and found in your Father's house; you died on the cross, and you rose again on the third day. You see that I know you. Well, I ask but one thing now, and you can not refuse me. Open the priest's eyes and let him see that I know you, dear Jesus."

The missionary's eyes were dim with tears as he quietly withdrew. That evening, after the vesper hymn had been sung, he called the child: "Now tell me, Metissa, how many times did you visit our Lord today?"

"Fifteen times, Father"

"What did you say to him?"

The little one hesitated as she glanced timidly at the questioner. "Father, I said bad things about you." And she related the subject of her outpourings before the altar.

The missionary turned to the assembly: "See how the good God listens to prayers well made. I am not in the habit of making a visit at that hour, but to-day the Great Spirit prompted me to enter the church. My child, you did well to pray thus. The Chief above has opened my eyes. I feel that you know Jesus Christ, and you shall receive him in the Holy Sacrament."

"Father," said Metissa, sobbing for happiness, "I am so glad that it seems I must be in heaven already."—*Magnificat.*