

THE THIRD ORDER AND SOCIAL REFORM

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III. THE APOSTOLATE OF THE THIRD ORDER

2. INFLUENCE OF THE THIRD ORDER ON MORAL LIFE

And old Franciscan historian writes: "St. Francis of Assisi and his followers have by their good example and heroic virtues, in the midst of a depraved and luxurious society, awakened in millions of souls a love for poverty, simplicity, and unselfishness, thereby conferring invaluable services on the moral life of the nations."

Fr. Cuthbert, O.S.F.C., in his work, *Catholic Ideals in Social Life*, describes the influence of the Third Order on the moral life of the nations very graphically. "The Franciscan movement", he says, "was a great social reformation; it led men forward to heaven by making the way on earth straighter and more like unto heaven. It dealt not with abstract principles, but with the actual facts of the world. It did not preach the Gospel from monastic stalls, nor with the aloofness of one looking on from afar off, but it dwelt amongst the people and grappled with the evils of the system under which the people lived, the civic feuds, the intense selfishness, the luxuriousness, the effeminacy of the Thirteenth Century. . . . To the hatreds, injustices and luxury of the time it opposed a body of men and women animated by the spirit of Christian Brotherhood and Christian simplicity. This was the real significance of the Third Order; it was a social reform founded upon an awakening of the people's conscience to the evils of the age in which they lived." Our present age has its own wrongs and injustices, and against these the Tertiaries of today must battle if they are to be of any real value to the Church. They

must put on the mantle of Blessed Luchesius, the first Tertiary, and like him preach to all the worth and necessity of the moral virtues.

The very first paragraph of the Rule demands of the candidates that they be of a peace-loving disposition. To be so, they must be humble, and humility is a moral virtue, necessary for the peace of the community and the world at large. It need not surprise us, therefore, that Saint Francis demands of his followers the practice of true humility and forbearance.

Also obedience and submission to lawful authority are taught to the world, and put into practice by the Third Order. Without this virtue, peace, contentment, and progress are an impossibility, and the history of the great Franciscan movement tells us that as soon as Saint Francis began to preach his doctrine of obedience and submissiveness, so soon did many wars and feuds then rampant cease, and a period of peace and contentment set in.

Speaking of the justice demanded of the Tertiaries in their dealings with their neighbors, Father Cuthbert, O.S.F.C., again writes: "Saint Francis in his day did not find it impossible to supplant the civic feud by Christian fellowship; why should it be impossible in these days to supplant commercial selfishness by the self-same spirit of Christian fellowship? Is it too much to ask Franciscan Tertiaries to pledge themselves to strive after justice in dealing with their neighbor's weakness or necessity, to consider before they demand cheap goods, whether such goods can be sold cheaply without decreasing the fair

wage of the laborer, to pay a human wage * when they hire labor and give a just return in labor for wages received? If Franciscan Tertiaries would set themselves to oppose by their example the commercial sin of the age, truly they would show themselves the standard-bearers of that Christian Brotherhood of which Saint Francis dreamed, and for which he prayed."

The Tertiaries are commanded by their Rule to make use of temporal goods only in so far as it is necessary for the attainment of those which are eternal. "Members of the Third Order will refrain from excessive cost and elegance in adornment and dress, and will observe—each according to his state of life—the rule of moderation. They will refrain with the utmost caution from dangerous stage-plays and dances, and from all revelry. They will be frugal in eating and drinking." What a blow does this paragraph of the Rule give to the present craze for shameful fashions, for insane dancing and degrading intemperance and gluttony. Well could Dr. Lang, therefore, say at the Second Austrian Tertiary Congress: "The Order is not, as is so often said, an attempt at the solution of the social question, the Third Order is the solution."

There is one more moral virtue that the Third Order inculcates up-

on the world, namely the heavenly virtue of purity. The Third Order fosters this angelic virtue by removing from its members the occasions of this sin, by holding up to the eyes of the young the noble example of so many youths and maidens, who renounced all to follow the spotless Lamb; by reminding the married members of the saintly example of Saint Louis, who described the triple devotion of his life as "God, France and Margaret", and of the dear Saint Elizabeth, whose affection for her husband was no less romantic than inspiring. The many Saints of the Third Order are conclusive proof of the influence of the Third Order on chastity and conjugal fidelity.

This, then, is the influence of the Third Order on moral life, to teach humility, obedience, justice, temperance and purity. The work is, indeed, great but imperative. No Tertiary can remain asleep at his post. The least that can be expected of him is to mold his life upon the principles of the Gospel and to resist the world when it preaches another doctrine. Only when the members of the Third Order, each in his sphere, try to raise the moral standard of their parish, will the wish of the Popes be fulfilled, namely to renew the world in Christ and through Christ by the Third Order.

* Pope Leo XIII describes a "human wage" as that which allows a man and his family to live in reasonable comfort.

