

THE SPIRIT OF THE THIRD ORDER

By Fr. Ferdinand, O.F.M.

THE Church lives by the spirit, and all outward institutions are of value, and have a right to exist only in so far as they are quickened by the spirit. Without it they are useless, they are dead, they cumber the earth, and corrupt the atmosphere. St. Francis was well aware of this. Hence, in founding the Third Order, he took care to breathe into it its proper spirit that it might live and energize and become to all Christendom a source of blessings a thousandfold. The spirit of the Third Order is no other than the spirit of St. Francis himself, and it consists in the virtues which he specially practiced, and which may be, therefore, regarded as peculiarly his own.

This spirit of St. Francis and of his Order may be characterized, in the first place, as a spirit of *obedience* and devotedness to the Catholic Church. St. Francis himself was enthusiastically devoted and strongly attached to the Holy See. In the Rule of the First Order, he says, "Brother Francis promises obedience and reverence to the Lord Pope Honorius III and his successors canonically elected and to the Roman Church." He petitioned the Pope for a Cardinal to act as protector of his Order, that it might always be "subject and prostrate at the feet of the same holy Church, steadfast in the Catholic faith." With child-like simplicity, he submitted in all things to the decrees of the Sovereign Pontiff. Obedience and reverence toward the visible head of the Church were the two things which, in his last moments, he recommended to his brethren. So remarkable was his devotedness to the Vicar of Christ that he was styled by Gregory IX "the catholic and apostolic man, Francis."

Obedience to the Church has ever been regarded as a characteristic trait and a precious heirloom of the Third Order. Only those are to be received as members who are "of tried obedience to the Roman Catholic and Apostolic See." Hence, it is the duty as well as the privilege of the Tertiaries ever to defend the rights of the Holy See, in all things to think, feel, and act in union with the Church, and religiously to fulfill the least of her commands and the slightest of her wishes.

Poverty and *detachment* from earthly goods was another of St. Francis's favorite virtues. The poverty of the Son of God in his birth, his life, his passion, and his death made so profound an impression on St. Francis that he espoused poverty as his bride. He regarded poverty as the pearl of great price to acquire which the merchant sacrifices all his goods. No miser ever loved his gold so madly or guarded his treasure so carefully as St. Francis loved and guarded the priceless pearl of poverty. No lover was ever so jealous of his ladylove as St. Francis of his "Lady Poverty."

The Third Order is an order of poverty. The provisions of the Rule regarding the wearing of plain apparel, the observing of frugality, the making of one's last will, all tend to imbue the members with a love of poverty. And how luminously does not this love of poverty and this spirit of detachment shine forth in the lives of so many Saints and Blessed who lived according to the Rule of the Third Order. Theirs is now the kingdom of Heaven because they lived poor in spirit.

Poverty and *penance* are sister virtues, and it is not surprising that St. Francis loved the one as much as the other. How he practiced pen-

ance, is related by his biographer, St. Bonaventure: "Considering those words of the Apostle, 'Those who are Christ's have crucified their flesh with its concupiscences,' to clothe his body in the strong armor of the Cross, he began to exercise such severe discipline over all his sensual appetites that he hardly took such food as was necessary for the support of nature; and even when he attained the summit of perfection, he still endeavored, as if only a beginner, to punish, by fresh macerations, the rebellion of the flesh. The hard earth was the ordinary bed of his wearied body, and he often slept sitting leaning his head against a stone or a block of wood, and being covered only with one poor tunic."

This love of penance it was his first care to instil into his followers. When preaching in Tuscany on the necessity of penance, his burning words so inflamed the hearts of his hearers that they flocked to him in great numbers, and asked to be admitted into the one or the other of his religious Orders. It was to satisfy the desire of these good people for a life of penance that he founded the Third Order or Order of Penance. So distinctive of the Third Order is this virtue that it spells the very name and nature of the institution.

No spiritual edifice can exist, however, without the foundation of *humility*. A soul so enlightened as St. Francis's could not but know the value of this virtue. Indeed, so assiduous was he in practicing humility that it is inseparably linked with his name, for he is known as the humble St. Francis. He considered himself in very deed the greatest of sinners, and accounted himself happy to suffer humiliations and reproaches. Overwhelmed with the sense of his nothingness, he used to exclaim, "O my God, who art thou, and who am I?"

That the spirit of the Third Order is one of humility may be gathered from its precepts, customs institutes, and ceremonies, all of which tend to foster humility in the members, to make them humble followers of the humble Francis.

All virtues culminate in *charity*. Charity is at once the secret and the essence of sanctity, the queen of all virtues. Hence, we are prepared to believe that this virtue was nearer and dearer to the heart of St. Francis than all others. So great was his love of God that he is styled the Seraphic Saint. St. Bonaventure says of him: "He seemed to be absorbed in the flame of divine love, as a live coal in a furnace. As soon as he heard the love of God spoken of, he was moved, excited, inflamed, as if the chords of his heart within vibrated to the sound without." He beheld in all things created only manifestations of the divine love, and he loved them because they were God's. His heart went out particularly to poor and suffering humanity. His first care was ever for the lepers and the outcast; he chose to make himself their friend and companion because they were the most friendless and woe-begone in the whole Christian family; and he left it as a heritage to his disciples that they should ever minister to the poor.

Charity pervades the whole Rule and fabric of the Third Order. The fourteen precepts concerning the rule of life are nothing but an amplification of the divine command, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God—thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Indeed, the Third Order was expressly founded to re-ignite in the hearts of men the love of God and of their fellow men. Hence, the members of this order, besides attending to their personal sanctification, have ever considered themselves especially commissioned by God to oppose "man's inhumanity

to man." How they succeeded in reforming medieval society by setting themselves against the hatreds and injustices, the feuds and civic rivalries, the selfishness and oppression of the time, is a matter of history

Such, then, is the spirit of the Third Order. If carefully examined into, this spirit will be found to be no other than the spirit of the Gospel. "The Franciscan Institutes," says Pope Leo XIII, in his Encyclical *Auspicato*, "are based wholly on the observance of the precepts of Jesus Christ, for the Holy Founder had no other aim than that the Christian life should be exercised in those precepts—as in a gymnasium—with greater diligence." It is the duty of Tertiaries, therefore, to be models of vigorous Christian life

in the world. To be worthy of their name and calling, Franciscan Tertiaries, must follow in the footsteps of St. Francis: they must acquire his spirit, and practice his virtues. Let them, therefore, be followers of St. Francis, as he was of Christ, and they will without doubt exert the same powerful and beneficial influence on modern society that the members of the Third Order exercised over the minds and hearts of men in the middle ages. For, to use the words of the great Tertiary Pope Leo XIII, "We assure you that the action of the Third Order will be really powerful and efficacious, if its members, each at his post and faithful to the spirit of the Rule, all work at giving the example of great edification."

THE TEST OF RELIGIOUS PERSUASIONS

During the Civil War, there was a general in the northern army who was noted for bravery, but, sad to say, also for infidelity. He seemed to take a special delight in scouting everything religious. His wife, however, was just the reverse, a patient, pious Catholic. They had an only daughter, whom they both loved dearly. The good mother tried to instil into her young heart a love of God and religion, but her efforts were hampered by the frequent blasphemous remarks of the unbelieving father. In the course of time, the child took sick, and the malady soon developed into the dread of happy homes, consumption. Although nothing was spared to effect a cure, the disease made rapid headway, and soon brought the poor child to the brink of the grave. The stern old warrior was standing one day at the bedside of his dying child, his heart ready to break with sorrow, when the child said in a low, soft voice, "Papa, dear papa, in a few hours I must die; now tell me, should I believe what you say, or should I believe what mama tells me, of God and Heaven?" The general was unnerved, and in a broken, sobbing voice he said, "Child, darling, believe what your good mother has taught you." Casting a tender glance towards her father, she took his hand, and said, "Papa, then you also must believe in God; when I am in heaven, I shall pray that you and mama may also come there." With these words she fell back upon the pillows, and her innocent soul stood before her Judge. The father never forgot this prayer of his little girl. He lost his child, but through her he found his God and his religion. He returned again to the Church which he had shunned so long, to find in it a happiness never experienced before.