

SACRA PROPEDIEM

On the Third Order of St. Francis
Pope Benedict XV - 1921

On the Third Order of St. Francis

To the Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, and other Ordinaries in Peace and Communion with the Apostolic See.

Venerable Brothers, Health and Apostolic Benediction.

1. We regard as most opportune that solemn festivities will be held for the seventh Centenary of the Third Order of Penance. Many motives prompt Us to exalt the occasion in the eyes of the Catholic world, in virtue of Our Apostolic authority, but before all is the hope of the incontestable advantages which the Christian people will draw therefrom.
2. In the next place there is the personal remembrance which they evoke for Us. We love to recall that in 1882, when the centenary of his birth spread amongst the mass of the Faithful the fervent cultus of Francis of Assisi, We wished to range Ourselves amongst the disciples of that great Patriarch, and received regularly the habit of the Tertiaries in the celebrated Church of Ara Coeli, served by the Friars Minors. Today, placed by Providence on the chair of the Prince of the Apostles, We are particularly happy to seize this occasion to testify Our devotion to St. Francis in exhorting the Catholics of the entire world to affiliate themselves with eagerness or to remain faithfully attached to this Franciscan institution, which today responds marvelously to the needs of society.
3. That which matters now is to replace before all eyes the true moral physiognomy of St. Francis. The St. Francis of Assisi whom certain moderns present to us, and who springs from the imagination of the Modernists, this man, guarded in his obedience to the Apostolic See, a specimen of a vague and vain religiosity, is assuredly neither Francis of Assisi nor a saint.
4. The striking and immortal services rendered by Francis to the Christian cause, which have shown in him the defender whom God in such troubled times reserved for the Church, found, as it were, their coronation in the Third Order. Is there anything which proves more clearly the greatness and violence of the burning desire which consumed his soul to spread throughout the whole earth the glory of Jesus Christ?
5. Profoundly saddened by the misfortunes which the Church was then passing through, Francis conceived the incredible design of renewing everything conformably to the principles of the Christian law. After having founded a double religious family, one of Brothers, the other of Sisters, who pledged themselves by solemn vows to imitate the humility of the Cross, Francis, in the impossibility of opening the cloister to all whom the desire of being formed in his school drew to him, resolved to procure, even for souls living in the whirlpool of the world, the means to tend to Christian perfection. He founded, then, an Order properly called Tertiaries, differing from the two other Orders in that it would not bear the bond of the religious vows, but would be characterized by the same simplicity of life and the same spirit of penance. Thus the project which no founder of a regular Order had yet imagined, to cause the religious life to be practised by all, Francis first conceived the idea of and the grace of God gave him to realize it with the greatest success. We have no other proof of it than this beautiful homage of Thomas de Celano: "Marvelous workman, whose example, direction, and teachings have this admirable result, to renew in both

sexes the Church of Christ and to lead to triumph a triple phalanx of souls preoccupied with their salvation.” (I Cel. xv. 40).

6. We shall confine Ourselves to this testimony of so authoritative a contemporary; of itself it suffices amply to show to what a depth and to what an extent this initiative of Francis of Assisi shook the popular masses, what notable and salutary reparations it worked therein.

7. Uncontested founder of the Third Order, as he was of the two first, Francis was for it, further, without doubt, the most wise legislator. We know that for this work he had the precious aid of Cardinal Ugolino, who later, under the name of Gregory IX, was to make illustrious this Apostolic See, and who, after having whilst he lived, maintained the closest relations with the Patriarch of Assisi, elevated later on his tomb a magnificent and sumptuous basilica. As to the rule of the Tertiaries, no one is ignorant that it was regularly approved by Our predecessor, Nicholas IV.

8. But We shall not, Venerable Brothers, delay Ourselves too long on these questions; Our object is here, before all, to bring to light the character, and, as one says the particular spirit of the third Order, for the Church expects from it special advantages for the Christian people in this age, as hostile to virtue and to faith as was the epoch of Francis of Assisi. With his profound sense of situations and times Our predecessor,

Leo XIII, of happy memory, desirous to adapt better the regulation of life of the Tertiaries to the social level of each of the faithful, brought, by the Constitution “*Misericors Dei Filius*” (1883) to, their statutes or rule most wise motivations which should put them in accord with the actual state of society; he modified it in some secondary points responding but imperfectly to our customs of today.

9. “Let none believe,” said he, “that these changes take away anything whatsoever from the essential principles of that Order. We wish absolutely that they remain in their integrity, and secure from any branch.” The rule of the Third Order has then undergone only retouchings of detail; its range and spirit have been respected, which remain what their holy founder willed them. Now it is Our conviction that the spirit of the Third Order, altogether impregnated with the wisdom of the Gospel, would be a powerful element for the making healthy of private and public morals if it were spread anew as in the times in which by his word and example Francis preached everywhere the Kingdom of God.

10. What Francis wished to shine out, above all, in his Tertiaries, and which ought to be as their characteristic mark, is fraternal charity, most watchful guardian of peace and concord. Knowing that charity is the special commandment brought by Jesus Christ and the synthesis of the whole Christian law, St. Francis was careful to make of it the spiritual rule of his children; and he attained this result, that the Third Order rendered naturally the greatest service to the entire human family.

11. Further, Francis was powerless to contain in the recesses of his heart the seraphic love which consumed him for God and his brothers; he was compelled to permit it to overflow on all the souls which he could reach. Thus it was that he set himself to reform the individual and family life of his disciples in forming them to the practise of the Christian virtues with such ardor as would make one believe that it was all his program. But he did not dream that he ought to limit himself to this; individual conversion was but an instrument of which he availed himself to reawaken in the bosom of society love of Christian wisdom, and to gain all men for Christ.

12. The preoccupation which had moved Francis of Assisi to make of the members of the Third Order messengers and apostles of peace in the midst of the bitter discords and civil wars of his time was ours in the days wherein the conflagration of a horrible war was kindled in almost the entire world; it has not ceased to be so at a moment in which, here and there, the smoking hearth of this ill-extinguished conflagration still shoots out flames.

13. To this scourge had been added the interior crisis which the nations are going through, first of the forgetfulness and prolonged disdain of Christian principles. We wish to say that this fight for the sharing of goods which sets in conflict the different classes of society is so relentless that it threatens already to lead to a universal catastrophe.

14. In this so vast field, wherein, as representative of the pacific King, We have lavished Our especially attentive cares, We make an appeal for the zealous help of all those who claim for themselves Christian peace, but especially for the collaboration of the Tertiaries. They will exert a marvelous influence in restoring concord in spirit the day wherein their number and their efforts will be developed. It is, then, desirable that in every city, town, and even in each village, the Third Order count henceforth a sufficient group of members, not of inactive adherents satisfied with the mere title of Tertiaries, but instead, of those who spend themselves with zeal for their own salvation and the salvation of their brothers. Why even should not the various Catholic associations which multiply everywhere, associations of youth, of workmen, of women, not affiliate themselves to the Third Order to continue to work for the glory of Jesus Christ and the triumph of the Church with the same zeal that Francis had for peace and charity?

15. The peace for which humanity cries out is not that which the laborious treaty-making of human prudence can decree, but that which Christ brought by its message: "My peace I bring you; I do not give it as the world gives it." (John xiv: 27). The accords between State and State or between class and class which men have been able to shadow forth will not be durable, and will not have the force of true peace except on condition that they are founded on the pacification of hearts; and that itself is only possible if duty has bridled the passions whence all conflicts spring. "Whence comes," asks the Apostle James, "wars and quarrels amongst you? Is it not from your passions, which combat in your members?" (James iv: 1.) Now to regulate wisely all the movements inherent to nature in such a way as to make man the master, not the slave, of his passions, submissive himself, and docile to the divine will, the hierarchy, which is at the base of universal peace, that belongs to Christ, and its action manifests a marvelous efficacy in the family of Franciscan Tertiaries.

16. This Order, having for its object, as We have said to form its members in Christian perfection, even whilst they may be plunged in the embarrassments of the age, so true is it that no state of life is incompatible with sanctity, it happens, as it were, necessarily, where the Tertiaries in numbers observe faithfully their rule, that they are for all about them a source of encouragement in fulfilling their duties, and even to tending towards a perfection of life superior to the exigencies of the common law. The testimony rendered by the Divine Master to those who attached themselves closely to Him: "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (John xvii:16) may justly be applied to the sons of Francis who, if they observe the evangelical counsels of mind and heart as far as possible in the world, may lawfully put to their account the words of the Apostle: "As for us, we have received not the spirit of this world, but the Spirit which comes from God" (1 Cor., 11:12).

17. They will seek, then-completely strangers themselves to the spirit of the world-to introduce the Spirit of Jesus Christ in the current of social life on every side to which they have access.

18. Now there are two passions today dominant in the profound lawlessness of morals-an unlimited desire of riches and an insatiable thirst for pleasures. It is this which marks with a shameful stigma our epoch; whilst it goes ceaselessly from progress to progress in the order of all which touches the well-being and convenience of life, it seems that in the superior order of honesty and of moral rectitude a lamentable retrogression leads it back to the ignominies of ancient paganism. In that measure, in truth, wherein men lose sight of eternal goods which Heaven reserved for them, they permit themselves to be more taken in by the deceitful mirage of the ephemeral goods here below, and once their souls are turned down towards the earth, an easy descent leads them insensibly to relax themselves in virtue, to experience repugnance for spiritual things, and to relish nothing outside the seductions of pleasure. Hence the general situation which we note: with some the desire to acquire riches or to increase their patrimony knows no bounds; others no longer know, as formerly, how to bear the trials which are the usual result of want or poverty; and at the very hour in which the rivalries we have pointed out set by the ears the rich and the proletariat a great number seem to wish to further excite the hatred of the poor by an unbridled luxury which accompanies the most revolting corruption.

19. From this point of view one cannot sufficiently deplore the blindness of so many women of every age and condition; made foolish by desire to please, they do not see to what a degree the indecency of their clothing shocks every honest man, and offends God. Most of them would formerly have blushed for those toilettes as for a grave fault against Christian modesty; now it does not suffice for them to exhibit them on the public thoroughfares; they do not fear to cross the threshold of the churches, to assist at the Holy sacrifice of the Mass, and even to bear the seducing food of shameful passions to the Eucharistic Table where one receives the heavenly Author of purity. And we speak not of those exotic and barbarous dances recently imported into fashionable circles, one more shocking than the other; one cannot imagine anything more suitable for banishing all the remains of modesty.

20. In considering attentively this state of things, the Tertiaries will understand what it is that our epoch expects from the disciples of St. Francis. If they bring their gaze back to the life of their Father, they will see what perfect and living resemblance to Jesus Christ, above all in His flight from satisfactions and his love of trials in this life, had he whom they call the Poverello, and who had received in his flesh the stigmata of the Crucified. It is for them to show that they remain worthy of him by embracing poverty, at least in spirit, in renouncing themselves, and in bearing each one his cross.

21. In what concerns specially the Tertiary Sisters, we ask of them by their dress and manner of wearing it, to be models of holy modesty for other ladies and young girls; that they be thoroughly convinced that the best way for them to be of use to the Church and to Society is to labor for the improvement of morals.

22. Moreover, after having created divers charitable works for the solace of the indigent in their wants of every kind, the members of this Order would wish, further, we are sure, to cause those of their brothers who are deprived of goods more precious than those of earth, to benefit by their charity.

23. Here comes back to us the memory of the counsel of the Apostle Peter, asking Christians to be, by the holiness of their lives, models for the Gentiles, and this in order that, "remarking your good works, they glorify God in the day of His visitation" (Peter II.: 12). Like them, the Franciscan Tertiaries ought, by the integrity of their faith, the holiness of their lives, and the ardor of their zeal, spread abroad the good words

of Christ, to warn those of their brethren who have gone out from the road, and to press them to reenter upon it. Behold that which the Church asks, that which she expects from them.

24. As to Us, we cherish the hope that the coming celebration will mark for the Third Order a new development, and We doubt not that you yourselves, Venerable Brothers, as well as the other pastors of souls, will make great efforts to cause to flourish again the groups of tertiaries where they vegetate, and to create others everywhere possible, and to render all flourishing, as much by the observation of the rule as by the number of their members.

25. In truth what is in hand definitely is, by imitation of Francis of Assisi to open to the greatest possible number of souls the way which will lead them back to Christ; it in this return that resides the firmest hope of salvation for society. The word of St. Paul, "Be my imitators, as I myself am of Christ" (I Cor. xi.; i), we can with good right put upon the lips of Francis, who, in imitating the Apostle, has become the most faithful image and copy of Jesus Christ.

26. Thus, in order that these celebrations bear still more fruit, upon the instances of the Ministers General of the three Franciscan families of the First Order, we accord the following favors drawn from the treasury of the Holy Church:

I. In all Churches wherein the Third Order is canonically erected, and wherein will be celebrated by a Triduum the solemnities of the Centenary in the year to run from April 16, next: the Tertiaries each day of the Triduum, the other Faithful once only, may gain a plenary indulgence from their sins. All the Faithful who, with contrite hearts, will visit the Blessed Sacrament in one of these churches may gain at each visit (toties quoties) an indulgence of seven years.

II. All the altars of these churches will be deemed for those three days privileged altars; during the course of the Triduum every priest may celebrate there the Mass of St. Francis, following the rite of the Mass "pro re gravi et simul publice de causa" according to the general rubrics of the Roman Missal inserted in the last Vatican edition.

III. All the priests who serve these churches may, during these same days, bless beads, medals, and other objects of piety, enrich them with Apostolic indulgences, and apply to beads the Crozier and Bridgettine indulgences.

As pledge of Divine favors, and in testimony of Our paternal benevolence, We accord with all Our heart, to you, Venerable Brothers, and to all the members of the Third Order, the Apostolic Benediction.

Given at Rome, near St. Peter's, the Feast of the Epiphany of the year 1921, in the seventh year of Our Pontificate.