

RITE EXPIATIS ENCYCLICAL OF POPE PIUS XI ON ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Pius XI

1. To the great Jubilee which was celebrated in Rome and is now extended to the whole world for the period of this year, which served to purify souls and called so many to a more perfect way of life, is now to be added, as a fulfillment of the fruits received or expected from the Holy Year, the solemn commemoration which Catholics everywhere are preparing to celebrate, the Seventh Centenary of the blessed passage of St. Francis of Assisi from his exile on earth to his heavenly home. Since Our immediate Predecessor has assigned this Saint, who was sent by Divine Providence for the reformation not only of the turbulent age in which he lived but of Christian society of all times, as the patron of "Catholic Action," it is only right that Our children who labor in this field according to Our commands should in union with the numerous Franciscan brotherhood call to mind and praise the works, the virtues, and the spirit of the Seraphic Patriarch. While doing this, they must reject that purely imaginary figure of the Saint conjured up by the defenders of modern error or by the followers of luxury and worldly comforts, and seek to bring Christians to the faithful imitation of the ideal of sanctity which he exemplified in himself and which he learned from the purity and simplicity of the doctrines of the Gospels.

2. It is Our desire that the religious and civic festivals to be held during this Centenary, as well as the conferences and sermons to be given, should aim at celebrating this anniversary with expressions of true devotion, without making the Seraphic Patriarch either totally different from other men or unlike the historical figure he actually was, but showing him a man gifted by nature and grace which admirably assisted him in reaching himself and in rendering easy for his neighbors the highest possible perfection. If some dare to compare one with another the heavenly heroes of sanctity destined by the Holy Ghost each to his own special mission among men - these comparisons, the fruit for the most part of party passions, are valueless and are at the same time an insult to God, the author of sanctity - it seems necessary for Us to affirm that there has never been anyone in whom the image of Jesus Christ and the evangelical manner of life shone forth more lifelike and strikingly than in St. Francis. He who called himself the "Herald of the Great King" was also rightly spoken of as "another Jesus Christ," appearing to his contemporaries and to future generations almost as if he were the Risen Christ. He has always lived as such in the eyes of men and so will continue to live for all future time. Nor is it marvelous that his early biographers, contemporaries of the Saint, in their accounts of his life and works, judged him to be of a nobility almost superior to human nature itself. Our Predecessors who dealt personally with Francis did not hesitate to recognize in him a providential help sent by God for the welfare of Christian peoples and of the Church.

3. Notwithstanding the long time that has elapsed since the death of the Seraphic Father, the admiration for him, not only of Catholics but even of non-Catholics, continues amazingly to increase for the reason that his greatness appears to the minds of men with no less splendor today than it did long ago. We, too, most ardently pray for the strength of his virtues which have been so powerful, even at the present hour, in remedying the ills of society. In fact, his work of reform has permeated so deeply Christian peoples that besides re-establishing purity of faith and of morals it has resulted in this, that even the laws of justice and of evangelical charity now more profoundly inspire and guide social life itself.

4. The nearness of so great and happy an event as this Centenary carries with it the counsel that We avail Ourselves of your services, Venerable Brothers, as the messengers and interpreters of Our words to arouse in Christian peoples that Franciscan spirit which differs no wise from evangelical ideals and practices, to help in recalling to memory on such a timely occasion the teachings and example of the life of the Patriarch of Assisi. It is a pleasure for Us to compete, as it were, in devotion towards the Saint with Our Predecessors, who never permitted any centenary of the principal events of his life to pass by without exhorting the faithful to celebrate it, confirming their exhortations by the teaching authority of the Apostles which they possessed.

5. In this regard We recall with pleasure - and many others who are now well on in years will remember the same facts -

what love for St. Francis and his work was begotten among the faithful, and throughout the whole world, by the encyclical *Auspicato* written by Leo XIII forty-four years ago, on the recurrence of the Seventh Centenary of the Saint's birth; and how, at that time, the love thus born was manifested in a multitude of demonstrations of piety and in a happy renaissance of the spiritual life. We do not see why the selfsame results should not crown the coming celebrations which are equally as important as the preceding ones. The present condition of the Christian peoples should give us much more hope that such will be the case. On the one hand, no one is unaware of the fact that today spiritual values are much better appreciated by the masses than formerly; also that the people, taught by the experience of the past not to expect peace and security if they do not return to God, look to the Catholic Church as the one source of salvation. On the other hand, the extension to the whole world of the Jubilee Indulgences happily coincides with this centennial commemoration which itself cannot be separated from the spirit of penance and love.

6. The terrible conditions existing in the times when St. Francis lived are well known to you, Venerable Brothers. It is quite true that then the faith was more deeply rooted in the people, as is proven by the holy enthusiasm with which not only professional soldiers but even citizens of every class bore arms in Palestine to free the Holy Sepulcher. However, heresies gradually arose and grew in the vineyard of the Lord, propagated either by open heretics or by sly deceivers who, because they professed a certain austerity of life and gave a false appearance of virtue and piety, easily led weak and simple souls astray. They went about, too, amid the multitudes spreading the destructive flames of rebellion. If some of these men, in their pride, believed themselves called by God to reform the Church to which they imputed the faults of private persons, even going to the length of rebelling against the teachings and authority of the Holy See, later they openly manifested the real intention by which they were inspired. It is a notorious fact that before long the greater part of these heretics ended their careers in licentiousness and vice, and succeeded in embroiling the state in difficulties and in undermining the foundations of religion, of property, of the family, and of society. In a word, what happened then is precisely what we see recurring so often in the course of the centuries; rebellions leveled against the Church are followed or accompanied by rebellions against the state, the one receiving aid and comfort from the other.

7. Although the Catholic faith still lived in the hearts of men, in some cases intact and in others a bit obscured, however lacking they might have been in the spirit of the gospels, the charity of Christ had become so weakened in human society as to appear to be almost extinct. To say nothing of the constant warfare carried on by the partisans of the Empire, on the one hand, and by those of the Church on the other, the cities of Italy were torn by internecine wars because one party desired to rule, refusing to recognize the rights of the barons to govern, or because the strong wished to force the weak to submit to them, or because of the struggles for supremacy between political parties in the same city. Horrible massacres, conflagrations, devastation and pillage, exile, confiscation of property and estates were the bitter fruits of these struggles.

8. Sad indeed was the fate of the common people, while between lords and vassals, between the greater and the lesser, as they were called, between the owners of land and the peasants existed relations in every sense of the world foreign to the spirit of humanity. Peace-loving people were harassed and oppressed with impunity by the powerful. Those who did not belong to that most unfortunate class of human beings, the proletariat, allowed themselves to be overcome by egotism and greed for possessions and were driven by an insatiable desire for riches. These men, regardless of the laws which had been promulgated in many places against vice, ostentatiously paraded their riches in a wild orgy of clothes, banquets, and feasts of every kind. They looked on poverty and the poor as something vile. They abhorred from the depths of their souls the lepers - leprosy was then very widespread - and neglected these outcasts completely in their segregation from society. What is worse, this greed for wealth and pleasure was not even absent, though many of the clergy are to be commended for the austerity of their lives, from those who should have most scrupulously guarded themselves from such sin. The custom, too, was prevalent of monopolizing wealth and piling up large fortunes. These fortunes were often acquired in divers and sinful manners, sometimes by the violent extortion of money and other times by usury. Many increased and swelled their patrimony by an illicit trade in public office and emoluments, in the administration of justice, and even by the procuring of immunity from punishment for persons convicted of crime.

9. The Church was not silent under these circumstances; neither did it spare its edicts of punishment; but of what use

was all this when even the Emperors drew down on themselves the anathemas of the Holy See, and, to the great scandal of all, contumaciously despised these decrees? Even the monastic life, which had brought so many spiritual fruits to maturity, tarnished now by the dirt of this world, possessed no longer the strength to resist and to defend itself. If the founding of new religious orders brought some small help and strength to the maintenance of ecclesiastical discipline, certainly a much stronger flame of light and love was necessary to reform human society which had been so profoundly disturbed.

10. To bring light to the people of this world which We have described, and to lead them back to the pure ideals of the wisdom of the Gospels, there appeared, in the Providence of God, St. Francis of Assisi who, as Dante sang, "shone as the sun" (*Paradiso*, Canto XI), or as Thomas of Celano had already written of a similar figure, "he shone forth as a resplendent star on a dark night, like the morning which spreads itself over the darkness." (*Legenda I*, No. 37)

11. As a youth, St. Francis was expansive and highstrung, a lover of luxurious dress. He was accustomed to invite to magnificent banquets the friends he had chosen from among the fashionable and pleasure-loving young men of the town. He walked through the streets with them, singing gaily. But even at that time in his life he became known for the integrity of his moral life, his correctness in conversation, and his utter disdain of wealth. After his imprisonment in Perugia, which was followed by a long illness, he felt himself, not without a certain sense of astonishment, completely transformed. However, as if he desired to flee from the hands of God, he went to Puglia on a military mission. On this journey he felt himself commanded by God in unmistakable terms to return to Assisi and learn there what he must do. After much wavering and many doubts, through divine inspiration and through having heard at solemn Mass that passage from the Gospels which speaks of the apostolic life, he understood at last that he, too, must live and serve Christ "according to the very words of the Holy Gospels." From that time on he undertook to unite himself to Christ alone and to make himself like unto Him in all things. In "all his efforts, public as well as private, he turned to the Cross of Our Lord, and from the moment he began to live as a soldier of Christ, the divers mysteries of the Cross shone round about him." (Thomas of Celano, *Treatise on Miracles*, No. 2) Truly he was a brave soldier and knight of Christ because of the nobility and generosity of his heart; wherefore to prove that neither he nor his disciples were ever to be separated from Our Lord, he always had recourse to the Gospels as to an oracle whenever he had to make a decision on any matter. The rules of the Orders founded by him were made to agree most scrupulously with the Gospels, and the religious life of his followers with the life of the Apostles. For this reason at the very beginning of his Rule, he wrote: "This is the life and rule of the Friars Minor, to observe the holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ." (*Beginning of Rule of the Friars Minor*)

12. In order not to prolong this subject unduly, let us see now with what exercise of perfect virtue Francis prepared himself to follow the counsels of divine mercy and to make himself a capable instrument for the reformation of society.

13. It is not hard to imagine, although We know it is a very difficult task fitly to describe, the love of evangelical poverty which burned within him. Everyone knows how he, because of the noble character bestowed on him by nature, loved to befriend the poor, and how, as St. Bonaventure has said, he was so filled with kindness that being "no mere hearer of the Gospel" he had decided never to deny help to the poor, especially if they in asking for assistance did so with the plea "for the love of God." (*Legenda Maior*, Chap. I, No. 1) Divine grace completed in him the work of nature and brought him to the highest perfection. Having on one occasion refused alms to a poor man, he forthwith repented and felt impelled to go and seek him out so that by the very abundance of his charity he might succor this man in his poverty.

14. On another occasion he was with a party of young men, singing in the streets after a gay banquet, when he stopped suddenly and, as if lifted outside himself by a wonderful vision, turned to his companions who had asked him if he was thinking of getting married and quickly replied, with some warmth, that they had guessed rightly because he proposed to take a spouse, and no one more noble, more rich, more beautiful than she could possibly be found, meaning by these words Poverty or the religious state which is founded on the profession of poverty. In fact, he had learned from Our Lord Jesus Christ Who, "although he was rich made Himself poor for us" (II Corinthians viii, 9) that we, too, should become rich by His poverty, which is, in truth, divine wisdom; a wisdom which cannot be overthrown by the sophistries of human wisdom, a wisdom which alone can renew and restore all things. For Christ has said: "Blessed are the poor in spirit; if thou wilt be perfect, go, sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and

come follow me." (Matt. v, 3, and Matt. xix, 21)

15. Poverty, which consists in the voluntary renunciation of every possession for reasons of love and through divine inspiration and which is quite the opposite of that forced and unlovable poverty preached by some ancient philosophers, was embraced by Francis with so much affection that he called her in loving accents, Lady, Mother, Spouse. In this regard, St. Bonaventure writes: "No one was ever so eager for gold as he was for poverty, nor more jealous in the custody of a treasure than he was of this pearl of the Gospel." (*Legenda Maior*, Chap. VII) Francis himself, recommending and prescribing for his followers in the rule of his Order the exercise of this virtue in a very special manner, manifested the high esteem he had for poverty when he wrote these expressive words: "This is the sublimeness of the highest poverty which made you, my dearest brothers, heirs and kings of the Kingdom of heaven, which made you poor in things of this world but enriched you with all virtue. This should be your heritage; to which, giving yourselves up entirely in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, nothing else will you desire forever under heaven." (*Rule of Friars Minor*, Chap. VI)

16. The reason why Francis particularly loved poverty was because he considered it a special virtue of the Blessed Virgin, and because Jesus Christ on the Cross, even more especially chose poverty for His spouse. Since then poverty has been forgotten by men and has appeared to the world both irksome and foreign to the spirit of the age.

17. Often when thinking of these things, St. Francis used to break down and shed bitter tears. Who would not be moved at this spectacle of a man who was so much in love with poverty that he appeared to his former boon companions and, to many others besides, bereft of his senses? What are we to say then of the generations following him which, even if they are very far from an understanding and practice of evangelical perfection, yet are filled with admiration for so ardent a lover of poverty, an admiration that is continually on the increase and which is particularly noteworthy in the men of our own day? Dante anticipated this admiration of posterity in his poem "The Nuptials of St. Francis and Poverty," in which poem one finds it difficult which to admire more, the remarkable sublimity of the ideas expressed or the beauty and elegance of the style. (*Paradiso*, Canto XI.)

18. The high ideals and generous love of poverty which possessed the mind and heart of Francis could not be satisfied by a mere renunciation of external wealth. Could one ever succeed in acquiring true poverty, following the footsteps of Jesus Christ, if he did not make himself also poor in spirit by means of the virtue of humility? Francis well understood this truth; he never separated one virtue from the other and greeted them both warmly: "Holy Lady Poverty, may the Lord save you and your sister, Holy Humility.... Holy Poverty destroys all cupidity and avarice and anxiety for the things of this world. Holy Humility destroys pride, all men who are of the world, and all the things which are in the world." (*Opusculum, Salutatio Virtutum*, p. 20 et seq., edition 1904)

19. The author of that golden book *The Imitation of Christ* describes St. Francis in a word when he calls him "humble." "For how much so ever each one is in thine eyes, O Lord, so much is he and no more, saith the humble St. Francis." (*Imitation of Christ*, Book III, Chap. 50) In fact, it was the supreme wish of his heart to carry himself always with humility, as the least and last among men. Therefore, from the very beginning of his conversion, he ardently desired to be looked down upon and to be despised by all. Later on, although he became the Founder, the writer of their Rule, and the Father of the Friars Minor, he insisted that one of his followers should become the superior and master on whom even he was to depend. At the earliest possible moment, steeling himself against the prayers and wishes of his disciples, he desired to give up the supreme government of his Order "in order to practice the virtue of holy humility" and to remain "with her till death, living more humbly than any other friar." (Thomas of Celano, *Legenda*, Chap. II, No. 143)

20. Cardinals and great lords often offered him hospitality but he abruptly refused all such invitations. Though he exhibited the greatest esteem for all men and rendered each man every possible deference, he looked upon himself as a sinner, considering himself as only one among many sinners. In fact, he believed himself the greatest of all sinners. He was accustomed to say that if the mercy shown him by God had been given to any other sinner, the latter would have become ten times holier than he, and that to God alone must be attributed whatever was found in him of goodness and beauty, for from God only was it derived. For this reason he tried in every possible way to hide those privileges and graces, especially the stigmata of Our Lord imprinted on his body, which might have gained for him the esteem and

praise of men. When at times he was praised, either in public or in private, he not only refused to accept such praise but protested that he was worthy only of contempt and abuse and was really saddened thereby. Finally, what must we say about the fact that he thought so humbly of himself that he did not consider himself worthy to be ordained a priest?

21. On this selfsame foundation of humility he desired that his Order of Friars Minor should be founded and built. He repeatedly taught his followers, in exhortations begotten of a truly marvelous wisdom, that they should glory in nothing, and above all not in their acquisition of virtues or in the possession of divine grace. He admonished them too, and even, on occasion, reproved those friars who because of their duties as preachers, men of letters, philosophers, superiors of convents and provinces, were exposed to the dangers of vain glory. It would take too long to go into details; this is enough to prove our point that St. Francis, following the example and words of Christ (Matt. xx, 26, 28; Luke xxii, 26), considered humility in his followers as the distinctive mark of his Order - namely, "he insisted that his disciples be called 'Minors,' and the superiors of his Order 'Ministers.' He did this in order both to make use of the very language of the Gospels which he had promised to observe and to make his disciples understand by the name which they bore that they must go to the school of the humble Christ in order to learn humility." (St. Bonaventure, *Legenda Maior*, Chap. VI, No. 5)

22. We have seen how the Seraphic Father, motivated by the idea of perfect poverty which had taken complete possession of his soul, made himself so small and humble as to obey others (it would be better to say almost everyone) with the very simplicity of a child, for the reason that he who does not deny himself and give up his own will, certainly cannot be said to have renounced all things or to have become humble of heart. St. Francis by his vow of obedience consecrated gladly and submitted fully his will, the greatest gift which God has bestowed on human nature, to the will of the Vicar of Jesus Christ.

23. What evil they do and how far from a true appreciation of the Man of Assisi are they who, in order to bolster up their fantastic and erroneous ideas about him, imagine such an incredible thing as that Francis was an opponent of the discipline of the Church, that he did not accept the dogmas of the Faith, that he was the precursor and prophet of that false liberty which began to manifest itself at the beginning of modern times and which has caused so many disturbances both in the Church and in civil society! That he was in a special manner obedient and faithful in all things to the hierarchy of the Church, to this Apostolic See, and to the teachings of Christ, the Herald of the Great King proved both to Catholics and nonCatholics by the admirable example of obedience which he always gave. It is a fact proven by contemporary documents, which are worthy of all credence, "that he held in veneration the clergy, and loved with a great affection all who were in holy orders." (Thomas of Celano, *Legenda*, Chap. I, No. 62) "As a man who was truly Catholic and apostolic, he insisted above all things in his sermons that the faith of the Holy Roman Church should always be preserved and inviolably, and that the priests who by their ministry bring into being the sublime Sacrament of the Lord, should therefore be held in the highest reverence. He also taught that the doctors of the law of God and all the orders of clergy should be shown the utmost respect at all times." (Julian a Spira, *Life of St. Francis*, No. 28) That which he taught to the people from the pulpit he insisted on much more strongly among his friars. We may read of this in his famous last testament and, again, at the very point of death he admonished them about this with great insistence, namely, that in the exercise of the sacred ministry they should always obey the bishops and the clergy and should live together with them as it behooves children of peace.

24. The most important side of his obedience, however, is shown by the fact that as soon as the Seraphic Patriarch had drawn up and written out the rules of his Order, he delayed not even an instant in presenting himself personally, together with his first eleven disciples, to Innocent III, in order to gain the Pope's approval of his Rules. That Pontiff of immortal memory, moved deeply by the words and presence of the humble Poverello, embraced Francis with great affection and, divinely inspired, sanctioned the Rules presented to him. He also gave to Francis and to his co-laborers the faculty to preach penance. History attests that Honorius III added a new confirmation to this Rule, after it had been somewhat modified, in answer to the prayers of St. Francis.

25. The Seraphic Father commanded that the Rule and the Life of the Friars Minor should be the following: to observe the "holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ" living in obedience, without possessing any property, and in all chastity, and

this not according to one's own whims or individual interpretation of the Rule, but according to the commands of the Roman Pontiffs, canonically elected. For those who eagerly longed "to follow this manner of life. . . they had to be, first, diligently examined by the Father Ministers concerning their Catholic Faith and their reception of the sacraments of the Church; whether they believed all these things and were firm in their intention to profess them until death." Those who had already become members of the Order must for no reason leave except it be "by order of Our Lord, the Pope." To the clerics of the Order it is prescribed that they celebrate "the divine office according to the calendar of the Roman Church"; to the friars in general it was commanded that they should not preach in the territory of a bishop without his permission, and that they should not enter, not even for reasons of their ministry, the convents of sisters without a special faculty from the Apostolic See. No less reverence and docility towards the Apostolic See is shown by the words which St. Francis uses in commanding that a Cardinal Protector should be appointed for the Order: "In obedience, I enjoin the Ministers to ask the Lord Pope for one of the Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church to be the guide, protector and corrector of this Brotherhood; so that subordinate at all times and submissive, at the feet of the same Holy Roman Church, and thus firm in the Catholic Faith, . . . we shall observe, as we have faithfully promised to do, the holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ." (Rule of Friars Minor, *passim*)

26. We must speak also of the "beauty and cleanliness of purity" which the Seraphic Father "loved singularly," of that chastity of soul and body which he kept and defended even to the maceration of his own flesh. We have already seen that as a young man, although gay and fashionable, he abhorred everything sinful, even in word. When later on he cast aside the vain pleasures of this world, he began to repress the demands of his senses with great severity. Thus at times when he found himself moved or likely to be influenced by sensual feeling, he did not hesitate to throw himself into a bush of thorns or, in the very depths of winter, to plunge into the icy waters of a stream.

27. It is also well known that our Saint, desiring to call back men so that they would conform their lives to the teachings of the Gospel, used to exhort them "to love and fear God and to do penance for their sins." (Legend of the Three Companions, No. 33 et seq) Moreover, he preached and invited all to penance by his own example. He wore a hair shirt, he was clothed in a poor rough tunic, went about barefoot, he slept resting his head on a stone or on the trunk of a tree, ate so little that it was barely sufficient to keep him from dying of starvation. He even mixed ashes and water with his food in order to destroy its taste. He passed the greater part of the year in fasting. Besides all this, no matter whether he was well or ill, he treated his body with the greatest severity; he used to call his body "my brother the ass"; nor could he be induced to give himself any relief or rest, not even when, as during the last years of his life, he was suffering greatly, the sufferings of one nailed to a cross, for he had become like unto Christ because of the stigmata which he bore. Neither did he neglect to inculcate austerity of life in his disciples, and, in this only did "the teachings of the Holy Patriarch differ from his own actions," (Thomas of Celano, *Legenda II*, No. 129) he advised them to moderate a too excessive abstinence or punishment of the body.

28. Is there anyone who cannot see that all these virtues proceeded from the one and same fountain of divine love? In truth, as Thomas of Celano writes, "he was ever afire with divine love and longed to perform deeds of great heroism; walking with a strong heart in the way of the divine commandments, he eagerly desired to reach the highest perfection"; and St. Bonaventure testifies that "he seemed like a burning coal alive with the fire of God's love." (*Legenda Maior*, Chap. IX, No. 1) Wherefore there were those who "seeing him raised so rapidly to a state of intoxication of divine love" burst into tears. (Legend of the Three Companions, No. 21) This love of God he poured out in love for his neighbor, and conquering himself loved with a special tenderness the poor and, among the poor, the most miserable of all, the lepers, whom as a youth he had so abhorred; he dedicated completely both himself and his disciples to their care and service. He also wished that a brotherly love similar to his own should reign among his disciples; because of this his wish, the Franciscan Brotherhood grew to be "a noble edifice of charity, from the living stones of which, gathered from every part of the world, there was built a dwelling for the Holy Ghost." (Thomas of Celano, *Legenda I*, No. 38 et seq)

29. It is Our pleasure, Venerable Brothers, to detain you somewhat more at length in a study of these his sublime virtues, for the reason that, in our times, many infected by the false spirit of secularism, habitually attempt to strip our saintly heroes of the true light and glory of their sanctity. These writers view the saint merely as models of human excellence or

as professors of an empty spirit of religion, praising and magnifying them exclusively because of what they have done for the progress of arts and sciences, or because of certain works of mercy which they have accomplished and which have proven helpful to the fatherland and to mankind. We do not cease to wonder how an admiration of this kind for St. Francis, so false and even contradictory in itself, can in any way help his modern admirers who devote their lives to the search for riches and pleasure or who decked out in finery frequent public places, dances and theaters, or who roll in the very mud of voluptuousness, who ignore and cast aside the laws of Christ and His Church. In this context the following warning is very significant: "He who pretends to admire the good works of a saint must at the same time admire the homage and love due to God. Therefore either imitate that which you praise or do not permit yourself to praise that which you do not care to imitate. He who admires the good works of the saints must also distinguish himself by the holiness of his own life." (Roman Breviary, 7th of November, Lesson IV)

30. St. Francis, trained in the manly virtues We have written about, was called providentially to a work of reform for the salvation of his contemporaries and to assist in the work of the Church Universal.

31. In the Church of St. Damian where he was accustomed to pray, he heard three times a voice from Heaven saying: "Go Francis, rebuild my house which is falling down." (St. Bonaventure, *Legenda Maior*, Chap. II) But Francis, because of that deep humility which made him think himself incapable of accomplishing any great work whatsoever, did not understand the meaning of these mysterious words. Innocent III, however, discovered their import through the miraculous vision in which Francis was shown in the act of supporting on his shoulders the Church of the Lateran which was falling to the ground. The Pope then understood clearly that the mission of St. Francis was a very special one, given to him by a most merciful God.

32. The Seraphic Father founded two Orders, one for men and the other for women, both made up of aspirants to evangelical perfection. He then began a visit to the cities of Italy announcing, either personally or through the first disciples who had come to him, the foundation of his two Orders, preaching penance to the people in few but fiery words, gathering by this ministry and by his words and example almost unbelievable fruits. In all the places where he went to perform the functions of his apostolic ministry the people and clergy came out in procession to meet Francis, and there was much ringing of bells, singing of popular songs, and waving of olive branches. Persons of every age, sex, and condition flocked to him and, by day or night, surrounded the house where he lived so that they might have a chance of seeing him when he went out, of touching him, speaking to him, or listening to his words. No one, even if he were grown gray in habits of vice and sin, could resist the preaching of the Saint. Very many people, even some of mature age, vied with one another in giving up all their earthly goods for love of the evangelical life. Entire cities of Italy, reborn to a new moral life, placed themselves under the direction of Francis. The number of his sons grew beyond reckoning. Such was the enthusiasm which filled all to follow in his footsteps that the Seraphic Patriarch himself was often obliged to dissuade many and turn aside from the proposal to leave the world both men and women who were willing and ready to give up their conjugal rights and the joys of domestic life.

33. Meanwhile the principal desire which filled these new preachers of penance was to help bring back peace not only to individuals but to families, cities, and even nations, torn by interminable wars and steeped in blood. If at Assisi, Arezzo, Bologna, and in many other cities and towns it was possible to bring about a general era of peace, at times confirmed even by solemn treaties, this was due altogether to the superhuman power of the eloquence of these rough men.

34. In this work of reform and of bringing about a universal peace, the Third Order assisted greatly. The Third Order is indeed a religious Order but an altogether new type of community at that time, for while it possesses the spirit of a religious order, it does not obligate its members to take vows. It offers to both men and women, living in the world, the means not only of observing the laws of God but of attaining Christian perfection. The Rules of this new order may be reduced to the following principal articles. No one was accepted as a member unless he were of an unquestioned Catholic faith and obedient in all things to the Church; the manner of receiving candidates from each of the sexes into the Order; admission to religious profession was permitted after a year of novitiate, subject to the consent of the wife in the case of husbands and of the husband in the case of wives; love of purity and poverty, especially in the use of clothes, and of modesty in feminine attire; that the Tertiaries should abstain from feasting, from immodest shows and balls;

abstinence and fasting; confession and communion three times a year, taking care to make peace with everyone beforehand and to restore the goods rightly belonging to others; not to bear arms except in defense of the Roman Church, of the Christian faith, and of one's own country, or with the consent of one's Minister; the recitation of the canonical hours and other prayers; the duty of making a last will and testament three months after admission into the Order; to restore as soon as possible peace among one's brethren or among those outside the order if any trouble had arisen; what to do in case the rights and privileges of the Order had been violated; not to take an oath except in case of urgent necessity recognized by the Apostolic See. To these rules were added others of no less importance; for example, on the duty of hearing Mass; of attending meetings called on certain fixed days; on the giving of alms by each according to his ability to help the poor and, especially, the sick; on the performing of the last rites for dead members; on the manner of exchanging visits in case of illness; on the manner of bringing back to the ways of virtue those who had fallen or were obstinate in sin; on the duty of not refusing the offices and functions assigned to each and to fulfill these with care; on the manner of settling disputes.

35. We have dwelt on these matters somewhat in detail to show how Francis either by his own apostolate or by that of his disciples and, by the institution of the Third Order, laid the foundations of a new social order built on lines in strict conformity with the very spirit of the Gospels. Omitting everything in these Rules which relates to the liturgy and to spiritual formation, despite the fact that these matters are of primary importance, everyone can understand how from the other prescriptions of the Rules there should result such an order both in public and private life as to bring about a new type of civic intercourse. We will not call this merely a brotherly fellowship based on the practice of Christian perfection, but rather a shield of the rights of the poor and the weak against the abuses of the rich and the powerful, and all this without prejudice to good order and justice. From the association of the Tertiaries with the clergy there necessarily resulted this happy consequence, that new members were permitted to participate in the same exemptions and immunities which the latter already enjoyed. The Tertiaries no longer were called upon to take the so-called solemn oath of vassalage, neither were they conscripted for military service, nor had they to go to war or to bear arms, for in this the Rule of the Third Order was opposed to the feudal law, and by their membership in the Order they achieved a liberty which was otherwise impossible under the conditions of servitude under which they had lived. When they were set on and harassed by those whose every interest it was to cause conditions to return to their former state, they had as defenders and patrons the Popes Honorius III and Gregory IX who overcame every obstacle put in their way and prohibited such attacks by the severest punishments.

36. From this source, therefore, there arose that profound impulse toward a saving reform of human society, toward that vast expansion and growth among Christian nations which had its beginnings in the new Order of which Francis was the Father and Teacher. Innocence of life, too, blossomed forth once more in union with the spirit of penance. From this source arose that ardent zeal which impelled not only pontiffs, cardinals, and bishops to accept the badge of the Third Order, but also kings and princes who imbibed, together with the Franciscan spirit, evangelical wisdom and, from among whom, some rose even to the glory of sainthood. The noblest virtues, too, came back into public esteem and honor. In a word, the "face of the earth itself was changed."

37. St. Francis, "a man who was truly Catholic and apostolic," in the same admirable fashion that he had attended to the reformation of the faithful, so likewise set about personally and commanded his disciples to occupy themselves before everything else with the conversion of the heathen to the Faith and Law of Christ. Nor need We dwell at length on a subject so well known to all. Moved by an ardent desire to spread the Gospel and even to undergo martyrdom, he did not hesitate to go to Egypt and there bravely to appear in the very presence of the Sultan. In the annals of the Church, too, are not the names of those numerous apostles of the Gospel who, from the beginning, that is to say, in the springtime of the Order of Minors, found martyrdom in Syria and Morocco recorded in words of highest praise? With the passing of time this apostolate had been developed with much zeal and often with great shedding of blood by the numerous Franciscan brotherhood, for many lands inhabited by the heathen have been entrusted to their care through the express commands of the Roman Pontiffs.

38. No one will therefore marvel that throughout the whole period of seven hundred years just ending the memory of so

many benefits derived from him has never been lost at any time or in any place. On the contrary we find that his life and work, which as Dante writes can be sung better by those who enjoy the glories of heaven than by human tongue, has raised and exalted him century after century in the devotion and admiration of all so that not only is his greatness increasing in the Catholic world because of a remarkable appreciation of his great sanctity, but he is also surrounded by a certain civic cult and glory by reason of which the very name Assisi has become well known to the peoples of the whole world.

39. Shortly after his death, churches dedicated to the Seraphic Father and admirable for the beauty of their architecture and treasures of art began to rise, due to the wishes of the people to honor him. The most famous artists competed one with another as to who should succeed in portraying with the greatest perfection and beauty the likeness and life of Francis in paintings, in statues, in engravings, and in mosaics. Thus Santa Maria degli Angeli was built on that very plain where Francis "poor and humble entered rich into heaven." Churches, too, were built at the place of his glorious burial as well as on the hills of Assisi, and to these pilgrims flocked from everywhere in small parties or in large groups, in order to recall for the benefit of their souls the memory of so great a saint and to admire these immortal monuments of art. Moreover, there arose to sing the praises of the Man of Assisi, as we have already seen a poet who has no equal, Dante Alighieri. He was followed by others both in Italy and elsewhere who brought glory to literature by exalting the grandeur of the saint.

40. Especially in our days franciscana have been studied more profoundly by the learned and a great number of works printed in various languages have seen the light of day. The talents, too, of artists who have made works of great artistic value have succeeded in arousing an almost limitless admiration for St. Francis among our contemporaries despite the fact that sometimes this admiration is not based on a true understanding of the Saint. Some admired in him the character of the poet by which he so wonderfully expressed the sentiments of his soul, and his famous Canticle became the delight of learned men who recognized in it one of the first great poems of the early Italian language. Others were taken by his love of nature, for he not only seemed fascinated by the majesty of inanimate nature, by the splendor of the stars, by the beauty of his Umbrian mountains and valleys, but, like Adam before his fall in the Garden of Eden, Francis even spoke to the animals themselves. He appears to have been joined to them in a kind of brotherhood and they were obedient to his every wish. Others praised his love of country because in him Our Italy, which boasts the great honor of having given him birth, found a more fruitful source of blessings than any other country. Others, finally, honor him for that truly singular and catholic love with which he embraced all men. All of this is quite admirable but it is the least that is to be praised in our Saint, and it all must be understood in a correct sense. If we stop at these aspects of his life and look upon them as the most important, or change their import so as to justify either our own morbid ideas or excuse our false opinions, or to uphold thereby some of our prejudices, it is certain that we would not possess a genuine picture of the real Francis. As a matter of fact, by his practice of all the virtues in a heroic manner, by the austerity of his life and his preaching of penance, by his manifold and restless activity for the reformation of society, the figure of Francis stands forth in all its completeness, proposed to us not so much for the admiration as for the imitation of Christian peoples. As the Herald of the Great King, his purposes were directed to persuading men to conform their lives to the dictates of evangelical sanctity and to the love of the Cross, not that they should become mere friends or lovers of flowers, birds, lambs, fishes or hares. He seemed filled with a great and tender affection for animals, and "no matter how small they were" he called them all "by the name of brother and sister" - a love which if it is kept within bounds is assuredly not prohibited by any law. This love of animals was due to no other cause than his own love of God, which moved him to love these creatures because he knew that they had the same origin as he (St. Bonaventure, *Legenda Maior*, Chap VIII, No. 6) and in them all he perceived the goodness of God. St. Francis, too, "saw the image of the Beloved imprinted on all things, and made of these things a ladder whereby to reach His throne." (Thomas of Celano, *Legenda*, Chap. II, No. 165)

41. Why then forbid Italians to glory in him who was an Italian, who even in the sacred liturgy is called the "light of the Fatherland"? (*Breviary of Friars Minor*) Why prevent the defenders of the rights of the people preaching the love of Francis toward all men and especially toward the poor? The former admirers of St. Francis, impelled by an excessive love of their own nation, should take care not to boast of him as a mere sign and banner of their newborn love of

country, thus lessening his glorious title of "Catholic Champion." The latter should take care not to hold him up as a precursor and defender of errors, which of course he was very far from being. May it please Heaven that they who, through devotion to the Saint either find pleasure in these lesser praises of the man of Assisi or labor with zeal to promote the success of this Centenary, all worthy of Our praise, may, by the happy recurrence of his feast, draw from his life strong motives to examine more profoundly the true picture of this great imitator of Christ and thus themselves aspire to higher ideals.

42. Meanwhile, Venerable Brothers, We have good reasons for rejoicing because We see how through the united efforts of all good men to celebrate fitly the memory of the Holy Patriarch during this year which marks the Seven Hundredth Anniversary of his death, both religious and civic solemnities are being prepared in every part of the world and especially in that very district which, while living, he honored by his presence, by the light of his sanctity and the glory of his miracles. It is with great pleasure, too, that We see you giving in this an example to your own clergy and people. From this hour onward there is presented to Our soul, or better still We can almost see with Our very eyes, the great throngs of pilgrims who will visit Assisi and the other nearby sanctuaries of verdant Umbria, the rocky crags of Verna, the sacred hills that look out on the valley of the Rieti, all spots where Francis seems to live on teaching even now the lesson of his virtues, from which places the pious pilgrims can scarcely return home without being more and more filled with the Franciscan spirit. To quote Leo XIII: "Concerning the honors that are being prepared for St. Francis, it should be borne in mind that, above all, these honors will be agreeable to him to whom they are given only when they have been made fruitful by the one who actually offers them. In this then alone can We hope for lasting fruits, when those men who admire his great virtues seek to copy in some way this man, and in imitating him make themselves better." (Encyclical *Auspicato*, 17 Sept. 1882) Some will say, perhaps, that to restore Christian society another Francis is needed today. But We say, do what you can to make men take up again with renewed zeal the ancient Francis as their teacher of piety and sanctity; do what you can that they imitate and follow the example which he has left us, that they accept him as a man who was "a mirror of virtue, a path of righteousness, a rule of morals." (Breviary of Friars Minor) If this be done, will it not in itself be enough to heal and even put an end to the corruption of our own times?

43. First of all, then, the many children belonging to the Three Orders must reproduce in their lives the glorious image of their Father and Founder. They begin now "established in all parts of the world" - as Gregory IX wrote to the Blessed Agnes, daughter of the King of Bohemia - "every day the Almighty is in many ways glorified by them." (de *Conditoris Omnium*, 9 May, 1238) On the one hand We sincerely rejoice that the Religious of the First Order, which is called Franciscan, in spite of the many unseemly vexations and spoilations which they have had to suffer like gold which has passed through the crucible, have come to realize each day more and more their pristine splendor. On the other hand, We no less sincerely desire that they, by the example of solid penance and humility which they give, shall become living protests against the concupiscence of the flesh and the pride of life so widespread among us. May it be their peculiar function to call back their fellowmen to the Gospel law of life. With much less difficulty will they attain this holy purpose if they themselves observe strictly the Rule which their Founder has called "the book of life, the hope of holiness, the substance of the Gospel, the way of perfection, the key of paradise, the pledge of an eternal alliance." (Thomas of Celano, *Legenda*, Chap. II, No. 208) The Seraphic Patriarch will not cease to look down from heaven and bless the mystical vine which he with his own hands planted, and to nourish and strengthen its manifold roots with the moisture and sap of brotherly love, so that all may become "one heart and one soul," so that all may give themselves up in all fervor to the restoration of Christian society.

44. The holy virgins of the Second Order who participate "in the angelic life which was made known by St. Clare" by the snow-like whiteness of their souls, should continue to spread abroad, like lilies planted in the Garden of the Lord, a sweet fragrance so pleasing to God. Through their prayers, may sinners in much larger numbers hasten back to the merciful arms of Christ Our Lord, and may Our Holy Mother the Church feel the increasing joy of seeing her children restored to divine grace and to the hope of eternal life.

45. We turn finally to the Tertiaries, both to those who are living together in regular communities and those who live in the world. They, too, should try, with truly apostolic zeal, to promote the spiritual welfare of Christian peoples. Their

apostolate which, at its origins, made them worthy to be called by Gregory IX "soldiers of Christ and new Maccabees," will today also, with no less efficacy, succeed in promoting the common good provided they, although they have grown in numbers all over the world, become like their Father, St. Francis, by giving proof of innocence of life and integrity of morals.

46. What Our Predecessors, Leo XIII in the letter *Auspicato* and Benedict XV in the encyclical *Sacra Propediem*, wrote to all the bishops of the Catholic world and which greatly pleased them, We repeat and recommend to your pastoral zeal. We expect that you will favor in every way within your power the Third Order of St. Francis, either by yourselves or by means of trained priests and eloquent preachers teaching the people the aims of this Order of men and women who live in the world, how worthy it is of popular esteem, how easy it is to enter this Order, to observe its holy rules, and how abundant are the indulgences and privileges which the Tertiaries enjoy. Finally, make known the great blessings which flow from the Third Order to individuals and to the communities where they live. You should urge those who have not yet given their names to this immortal band of soldiers to do so this year. As regards those who cannot, because of their age, join the Third Order, they should be enrolled as "Cordigeri" so that even from childhood they may become accustomed to the holy discipline of this Order.

47. It seems that God in His goodness and mercy has ordained that Our pontificate shall not pass without the happiest fruits for the Catholic Church, judging from the great and holy events in which We have so often been called upon to participate. We, therefore, view with great pleasure the preparations which are being made to celebrate this solemn Centenary of St. Francis who "in his life propped up the house and in his days fortified the temple." (*Ecclesiasticus* i, 1) We take all the more pleasure in this festival since from Our earliest years We have with great devotion venerated St. Francis as Our patron. We have numbered Ourselves, too, among his children, having received the badge of the Third Order. In this year, therefore, which is the Seventh Centenary of the death of the Seraphic Father, the Catholic world, and in particular Our nation, Italy, should receive, through the intercession of St. Francis, so great an abundance of blessings that it will remain forever a year memorable in the history of the Church.

48. In the meantime, Venerable Brothers, We pray for you all heavenly favors and as a pledge of Our love both to you, to your clergy, and to your people, from the depths of Our heart, We impart, in Our Lord, the Apostolic Blessing.

Given at Rome, at St. Peter's, on the thirtieth day of April, in the year 1926, the fifth of Our Pontificate.

PIUS XI

© Copyright - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastery for Communication

Source: vatican.va