

Venerable Brethren, Health and the Apostolic Benediction.

A happy circumstance enables the Christian world to celebrate, at a not far distant interval, the memory of two men who, having been called to receive in heaven the eternal reward of their holiness, have left on earth a crowd of disciples, the ever-increasing off spring from their virtues. For, after the centenary solemnities in honour of St. Benedict, the father and law-giver of the monks of the West, the opportunity of paying public honours to St. Francis of Assisi will likewise be furnished by the seventh centenary of his birth. It is not without reason that We see therein a merciful intention of Divine Providence. For, by calling on men to celebrate the birthdays of these illustrious Fathers, God would seem to wish that they should be induced to keep in mind their signal merits, and at the same time to understand that the Religious Orders they founded ought on no account to have been the objects of such unbefitting acts of violence, least of all in those States where the seeds of civilization and of fame were cast by their labour, their genius and their zeal.

2. We are confident that these solemn feasts will not prove fruitless to the Christian world, which has always, and rightly, deemed the Religious Orders its friends; and thus, having honoured as it has with love and gratitude the name of St. Benedict, it will strive with equal ardour, by public festivities and by numerous acts of piety, to revive the memory of St. Francis. Nor is the field whereon this noble rivalry in devotion will be displayed bounded by the limits of the region where this great saint first saw the light, nor by those of the neighbouring territories enlightened by his presence, but it extends to every part of the earth, wherever the name of Francis has become known and his institutions flourish.

3. Certainly We, of all others, approve of this zeal for so excellent an object, especially because We have been accustomed from Our youth to admire Francis of Assisi and to pay him a particular veneration; because We glory in being on the roll of the Franciscan family; and because, more than once, We have, out of devotion, climbed with eagerness and joy the sacred heights of Alvernia; there the image of that great man presented itself to Us wherever We trod, and that solitude teeming with memories held Our spirit rapt in silent contemplation.

4. But, however praiseworthy this zeal may be, it is not enough; it must be understood that the honours in preparation for St. Francis will be especially pleasing to him who is honoured, if they who pay them derive profit therefrom. Now their solid and lasting fruit is in the attaining some likeness to him whose eminent virtue is an object of admiration, and in endeavouring to improve by imitating him. If, with the help of God, this practice is zealously followed, an opportune and extremely efficacious remedy will have been found for the evils of the present time.

5. And therefore it is that We wish, venerable brethren, not only that these Letters should convey to you the public testimony of Our devotion to St. Francis, but that they should, moreover, excite your charity to labour with Us for the salvation of men by means of the remedy We have just pointed out.

6. Jesus Christ, the Liberator of mankind, is the everlasting and ever flowing source of all the good things that come to us from the infinite bounty of God; so that He who has once saved the world is he who will save it throughout all ages; "for there is no other name under heaven given to men whereby We must be saved."⁽¹⁾ If then the human race fall into sin, either through its natural propensities or through the faults of men, it is absolutely indispensable to have recourse to Jesus Christ and to recognize in Him the most powerful and the most sure means of salvation. For so great and so efficacious is its divine virtue that it is at once a refuge from all dangers and a remedy for all evils. And the cure is certain, if mankind returns to the profession of Christian doctrine and to the rules of life laid down by the Gospel.

7. When the evils We have spoken of arise, as soon as the providentially appointed hour of help has struck, God raises up a man, not one of the common herd, but eminent and unique, to whom he assigns the salvation of all. Such is what came to pass at the end of the twelfth century and in the few subsequent years; St. Francis was the agent in this great work.

8. That period is sufficiently well known, and its character of mingled virtues and vices. The Catholic faith was deeply rooted in men's souls, and it was a glorious sight to see multitudes in flamed by piety set forth for Palestine, resolved to conquer or to die. But licentiousness had greatly impaired popular morality, and nothing was more needed by men than a return to Christian sentiments. Now the perfection of Christian virtue lies in that disposition of soul which dares all that is arduous or difficult; its symbol is the Cross, which those who would follow Jesus Christ must carry on their shoulder. The effects of this disposition are a heart detached from mortal things, complete self-control, and a gentle and resigned endurance of adversity. In fine, the love of God and of one's neighbour is the mistress and sovereign of all other virtues: such is its power that it wipes away all the hardships that accompany the fulfilment of duty, and renders the hardest labours not only bearable, but agreeable. There was a dearth of such virtue in the twelfth century; for too many among men, enslaved by the things of this world, either coveted madly honours and wealth, or lived a life of luxury and self-gratification. All power was centred in a few, and had almost become an instrument of oppression to the wretched and despised masses; and those even who ought by their profession to have been an example to others, had not avoided defiling themselves with the prevalent vices. The extinction of charity in divers places was followed by scourges manifold and daily; envy, jealousy, hatred, were rife; and minds were so divided and hostile that on the slightest pretext neighbouring cities waged war amongst themselves, and individuals armed themselves against one another.

9. In this century appeared St. Francis. Yet with wondrous resolution and simplicity he undertook to place before the eyes of the aging world, in his words and deeds, the complete model of Christian perfection.

10. And even as at that period the blessed Father Dominic Guzman was occupied in defending the integrity of heavensent doctrine and in dissipating the perverse errors of heretics by the light of Christian wisdom, so was the grace granted to St. Francis, whom God was guiding to the execution of great works, of inciting Christians to virtue, and of bringing back to the imitation of Christ those men who had strayed both long and far. It was certainly no mere chance that brought to the ears of the youth these counsels of the gospel: "Do not possess gold, nor silver, nor money in your purses; nor scrip for your journey, nor two coats, nor shoes, nor a staff." (2) And again, "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor... and come, follow Me." (3) Considering these words as directed personally to himself, he at once deprives himself of all, changes his clothing, adopts poverty as his associate and companion during the remainder of his life, and resolves to make those great maxims of virtue, which he had embraced in a lofty and sublime frame of mind, the fundamental rules of his Order.

11. Thenceforth, amidst the effeminacy and over-fastidiousness of the time, he is seen to go about careless and roughly clad, begging his food from door to door, not only enduring what is generally deemed most hard to bear, the senseless ridicule of the crowd, but even to welcome it with a wondrous readiness and pleasure. And this because he had embraced the folly of the cross of Jesus Christ, and because he deemed it the highest wisdom. Having penetrated and understood its awful mysteries, he plainly saw that nowhere else could his glory be better placed.

12. With the love of the cross, an ardent charity penetrated the heart of St. Francis, and urged him to propagate zealously the Christian faith, and to devote himself to that work, though at the risk of this life and with a certainty of peril. This charity he extended to all men; but the poorest and most repulsive were the special objects of his predilection; so that those seemed to afford him the greatest pleasure whom others are wont to avoid or over-proudly to despise.

13. Therefore has he deserved well of that brotherhood established and perfected by Jesus Christ, which has made of all mankind one only family, under the authority of God, the common Father of all.

14. By his numerous virtues, then, and above all by his austerity of life, this irreproachable man endeavoured to reproduce in himself the image of Christ Jesus. But the finger of Providence was again visible in granting to him a likeness to the Divine Redeemer, even in externals.

15. Thus, like Jesus Christ, it so happened that St. Francis was born in a stable; a little child as he was, his couch was of straw on the ground. And it is also related that, at that moment, the presence of angelic choirs, and melodies wafted through the air, completed this resemblance. Again, like Christ and His Apostles, Francis united with himself some chosen disciples, whom he sent to traverse the earth as messengers of Christian peace and eternal salvation. Bereft of all, mocked, cast off by his own, he had again this great point in common with Jesus Christ, - he would not have a corner

wherein he might lay his head. As a last mark of resemblance, he received on his Calvary, Mt. Alvernus (by a miracle till then unheard of the sacred stigmata), and was thus, so to speak, crucified.

16. We here recall a fact no less striking as a miracle than considered famous by the voice of hundreds of years. One day St. Francis was absorbed in ardent contemplation of the wounds of Jesus crucified, and was seeking to take to himself and drink in their exceeding bitterness, when an angel from heaven appeared before him, from whom some mysterious virtue emanated: at once St. Francis feels his hands and feet transfixed, as it were, with nails, and his side pierced by a sharp spear. Thenceforth was begotten an immense charity in his soul; on his body he bore the living tokens of the wounds of Jesus Christ.

17. Such miracles, worthy rather of the songs of angels than of the lips of men, show us sufficiently how great was this man, and how worthy that God should choose him to bring back his contemporaries to Christian ways. It was undoubtedly a super-human voice that bade St. Francis, when near the church of St. Damian, "Go thou and uphold my tottering house." Nor is the heavenly vision which presented itself to the gaze of Innocent III less worthy of admiration, wherein it seemed to him that St. Francis was supporting on his shoulders the falling walls of the Lateran Basilica. The object and meaning of such manifestations are evident; they signified that St. Francis was to be in those times a steadfast protector and pillar of Christendom. Nor, in truth, did he delay about his task.

18. Those twelve disciples who had been the first to place themselves under his government were like a small seed, which by the grace of God, and under the fostering care of the Sovereign Pontiff, quickly became an abundant harvest. After having holily instructed them in the school of Christ, he allotted to them for the preaching of the Gospel the various parts of Italy and of Europe; and some he sent even as far as Africa. There was no delay; poor, ignorant, unrefined, they mingled with the people: in the highways and in the public squares, with no preparation of place or pomp of rhetoric, they set themselves to exhort men to despise earthly things and to think of the time to come. It is marvellous to see the fruits produced by the enterprise of such workers, apparently so inadequate. Crowds gathered round them, eager to hear them: faults were bitterly bewept, injuries were forgotten, and sentiments of peace were reintroduced by the appeasing of discords.

19. It is impossible to express the enthusiasm with which the multitude flocked to St. Francis. Wherever he went he was followed by an immense concourse; and in the largest cities as in the smallest towns, it was a common occurrence for men of every state of life to come and beg of him to be admitted to his rule.

20. Such were the reasons for which the Saint determined to institute the brotherhood of the Third Order, which was to admit all ranks, all ages, both sexes, and yet in no way necessitate the rupture of family or social ties. For its rules consist only in obedience to God and His Church, to avoid factions and quarrels, and in no way to defraud our neighbour; to take up arms only for the defence of religion and of one's country; to be moderate in food and in clothing, to shun luxury, and to abstain from the dangerous seductions of dances and plays.

21. It is easy to understand what immense advantages must have flowed from an institution of this kind, as salutary in itself as it was admirably adapted to the times. That it was opportune is sufficiently established by the foundation of so many similar associations which issued from the family of St. Dominic and from the other Religious Orders, and by the facts themselves of history. In fact, from the lowest ranks to the highest, there prevailed an enthusiasm and a generous and eager ardour to be affiliated to this Franciscan Order. Amongst others, King Louis IX, of France, and St. Elizabeth of Hungary, sought this honour; and, in the course of centuries, several Sovereign Pontiffs, Cardinals, Bishops, Kings, and Princes have not deemed the Franciscan badges derogatory to their dignity. The associates of the Third Order displayed always as much courage as piety in the defence of the Catholic religion; and if their virtues were objects of hatred to the wicked, they never lacked the approbation of the good and wise, which is the greatest and only desirable honour. More than this, Our Predecessor, Gregory IX, publicly praised their faith and courage; nor did he hesitate to shelter them with his authority, and to call them, as a mark of honour, "Soldiers of Christ, new Maccabees;" and deservedly so. For the public welfare found a powerful safeguard in that body of men who, guided by the virtues and rules of their founder, applied themselves to revive Christian morality as far as lay in their power and to restore it to its ancient place of honour in the State. Certain it is, that to them and their example it was often due that the rivalries of

parties were quenched or softened, arms were torn from the furious hands that grasped them, the causes of litigation and dispute were suppressed, consolation was brought to the poor and the abandoned; and luxury, that gulf of fortunes and instrument of corruption, was subdued. And thus domestic peace, incorrupt morality, gentleness of behaviour, the legitimate use and preservation of private wealth, civilization and social stability, spring as from a root from the Franciscan Third Order; and it is in great measure to St. Francis that Europe owes their preservation.

22. Italy, however, owes more to Francis than any other nation whatever; which, as it was the principal theatre of his virtues, so also most received his benefits; and, indeed, at a time when many were bent on multiplying the sufferings of mankind, he was always offering the right hand of help to the afflicted and the cast down; he, rich in the greatest poverty, never desisted from relieving others' wants, neglectful of his own. In his mouth his native tongue, new-born, sweetly uttered its infant cries; he expressed the power of charity and of poetry with it in his canticles composed for the common people, and which have proved not unworthy of the admiration of a learned posterity. We owe to the mind of Francis that a certain breath and inspiration nobler than human has stirred up the minds of our countrymen so that, in reproducing his deeds in painting, poetry and sculpture, emulation has stirred the industry of the greatest artists. Dante even found in Francis matter for his grand and most sweet verse; Cimabue and Giotto drew from his history subjects which they immortalised with the pencil of a Parrhasius; celebrated architects found in him the motive for their magnificent structures, whether at the tomb of the Poor Man himself, or at the Church of St. Mary of the Angels, the witness of so many and so great miracles. And to these temples men from all parts are wont to come in throngs in veneration for the father of Assisi of the poor, to whom, as he had utterly despoiled himself of all human things, so the gifts of the divine bounty largely and copiously flowed. Hence it is clear that from this one man a host of benefits has flowed into the Christian and civil republic. But since that spirit of his, thoroughly and surpassingly Christian, is wonderfully fitted for all times and places, no one can doubt that the Franciscan institutions would be specially beneficial in this our age. And especially for this reason, that the tone and temper of our times seem for many reasons to be similar to those; for as in the 12th century divine charity had grown cold, so also is it now; nor is the neglect of Christian duties small, whether from ignorance or negligence; and, with the same bent and like desires, many consume their days in hunting for the conveniences of life, and greedily following after pleasures. Overflowing with luxury, they waste their own, and covet the substance of others; extolling indeed the name of human fraternity, they nevertheless speak more fraternally than they act; for they are carried away by self love, and the genuine charity towards the poorer and the helpless is daily diminished. In the time We are speaking of, the manifold errors of the Albigenses, by stirring up the masses against the power of the Church, had disturbed society and paved the way to a certain kind of Socialism. And in Our day, likewise, the favourers and propagators of Materialism have increased, who obstinately deny that submission to the Church is due, and hence proceeding gradually beyond all bounds, do not even spare the civil power; they approve of violence and sedition among the people, they attempt agrarian outbreaks, they flatter the desires of the proletariat, and they weaken the foundations of domestic and public order.

23. In these many and so great miseries, you well know, venerable brethren, that no small alleviation is to be found in the institutes of St. Francis, if only they are brought back to their pristine state; for if they only were in a flourishing condition, faith and piety, and every Christian virtue would easily flourish; the lawless desire for perishing things would be broken; nor would men refuse to have their desires ruled by virtue, though that seems to many to be a most hateful burthen. Men bound together by the bonds of true fraternal concord would mutually love each other, and would give that reverence which is becoming to the poor and distressed, as bearing the image of Christ. Besides, those who are thoroughly imbued with the Christian religion feel a conviction that those who are in legitimate authority are to be obeyed for conscience' sake, and that in nothing is anyone to be injured.

24. Than this disposition of mind nothing is more efficacious to extinguish utterly every vice of this kind, whether violence, injuries, desire for revolution, hatred among the different ranks of society, in all which vices the beginnings and the weapons of socialism are found. Lastly, the question that politicians so labouriously aim at solving, viz., the relations which exist between the rich and poor, would be thoroughly solved if they held this as a fixed principle, viz., that poverty is not wanting in dignity; that the rich should be merciful and munificent, and the poor content with their lot and labour; and since neither was born for these changeable goods, the one is to attain heaven by patience the other by

liberality.

25. For these reasons it has been long and specially Our desire that everyone should, to the utmost of his power, aim at imitating St. Francis of Assisi; therefore, as hitherto We have always bestowed special care upon the Third Order of St. Francis, so now, being called by the supreme mercy of God to the office of Sovereign Pontiff since thereby We can most opportunely do the same, We exhort Christian men not to refuse to enroll themselves in this sacred army of Jesus Christ. Many are those who everywhere of both sexes have already begun to walk in the footsteps of the Seraphic Father with courage and alacrity, whose zeal We praise and specially commend, so that, Venerable Brethren, We desire that by your endeavours especially it may be increased and extended to many. And the special point which We commend is that those who have adopted the insignia of Penance shall look to the image of its most holy founder, and strive to imitate him, without which the good that they would expect would be futile. Therefore take pains that the people may become acquainted with the Third Order and truly esteem it; provide that those who have the cure of souls sedulously teach what it is, how easily anyone may enter it, with how great privileges tending to salvation it abounds, what advantages, public and private, it promises; and in so doing all the more pains are to be taken because the Franciscans of the First and Second Order, having been struck recently with a heavy blow, are in a most piteous condition. God grant that they, defended by the patronage of their Father, may emerge, youthful and flourishing, from so many disasters; may he also grant that Christian people may rend towards the discipline of the Third Order with the same alacrity and the same numbers as formerly from all parts they threw themselves into the arms of St. Francis himself with a holy emulation.

26. We ask it above all and with yet more reason of the Italians, from whom community of country and the particular abundance of benefits received demand a greater devotion to St. Francis, and also a greater gratitude. Thus, at the end of seven centuries, Italy and the entire Christian world would be brought to see itself led back from disorder to peace, from destruction to safety, by the favour of the Saint of Assisi. Let us especially in these days beg this grace, in united prayer to Francis himself; let Us implore it of Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, who always rewarded the piety and the faith of her client by heavenly protection and by particular gifts.

27. And now, as a pledge of celestial favours and in proof of Our special good will, We impart most lovingly in the Lord to you, Venerable Brethren, and to all the clergy and the flock committed to each of you, the Apostolic Benediction.

Given at Rome, at St. Peter's the 17th day of September, 1882, and in the fifth year of Our Pontificate.

LEO XIII

REFERENCES:

1. Acts iv., 12.

2. Matt. x., 9-10.

3. Matt. xix., 21.

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