

THE RULE OF THE THIRD ORDER

By Fr. Ferdinand, O.F.M.

REGARDING the rule of the Third Order, people entertain opinions as opposite as black and white. To some its precepts appear so few and insignificant as to be altogether unable to exert any influence on Christian life; to others, on the contrary, they appear so numerous and strict as to render the Order inaccessible to the generality of mankind.

What! say the first, a scapular, a chord, and a few Paters, what can such trifles contribute to the sanctification of a soul? Those that reason in this strain, labor under the delusion that these "trifles" constitute the quintessence of the Third Order. They forget to take into consideration the ensemble of of Franciscan duties; they gauge the value of exterior practices apart from the spirit that animates them. Not accustomed to the terseness of religious codes, they do not realize that every word in such a code has its meaning; hence, they fail to discover the treasure hidden beneath the surface. If they would take the pains to study the Rule of the Third Order, they would be astonished to find in it an admirable program of Christian life.

Another mistake, not less detrimental, is that the Third Order is inaccessible to the generality of serious minded Catholics. Those that labor under this prejudice do not reflect that the Order was founded, and its Rule formulated not for a select few but for the many. How can a Rule be too strict which is observed by millions of Catholics who make no pretensions to heroic virtue; which even young people and children find light and sweet; which the Sovereign Pontiffs whose wisdom can not be questioned propose and recommend to all the faithful?

To assert that the Rule of the Third Order is difficult or impossible to observe merely because it contains a few precepts not expressly contained in the law of God is to make sweeping conclusions from slender premises.

But it may be reasonably doubted whether such as make these assertions have ever read the Rule. For unless they give it an interpretation wholly foreign to its letter and spirit, they can not aver without manifest exaggeration that it is too difficult for anyone to observe. Possibly this objection is only a screen behind which they wish to hide their own weakness. If it is already too much for them to abstain from sin; if they are wholly intent on gain and pleasure; if they have no understanding for the simple lessons of the Gospel; if they are so imbued with anti-Christian ideas as to be on the point of shaking off the yoke of religion: then it is no wonder that for them the Third Order is "a closed garden" and the Rule a code of Draconian laws.

But to refute the objection of those who say that the Rule does not hold up an ideal sufficiently exalted for them, and of those who assert that this ideal is out of the reach of ordinary Christians, let us only place before them a list of its obligations.

What then does the Rule of the Third Order require? The first chapter which treats of aspirants to the Order, requires them to be fourteen years of age, of good morals, peaceable disposition, practical faith, and tried obedience to the Church; to wear the chord and scapular; to make a year's novitiate; to make the profession as prescribed; to observe the commandments of God and of the Church.

The second chapter, which regulates the life of Tertiaries, demands of them to shun luxury and excessive display; to observe in all things the law of moderation; to refrain from dangerous plays and dances; to be frugal in eating and drinking; to say grace before and after meals; to fast on the feasts of Immaculate Conception and of St. Francis; to confess and communicate once a month; to recite twelve "Our Fathers," "Hail Marys" and "Glories" every day; to dispose betimes of their property by request; to study to give a good example; to promote pious practices; to refrain from reading bad books and papers and to forbid them to those under their charge; to practice charity and to settle quarrels; not to take an oath, except in case of necessity and never to use vile language; to examine one's conscience daily and to assist daily at Mass if possible; to attend the monthly meetings; to contribute, each according to his means, to a common fund for the poor.

The third chapter which concerns itself chiefly with the offices of the Third Order, obliges the members to accept the penance imposed by the Visitor for any breach of the Rule and to ask for a dispensation from provisions of the Rule which it is impossible for them to observe.

It must be remembered that infractions of the Rule do not constitute sins unless they are at the same time transgressions of the commandments of God or of the Church.

Now after glancing over this list of precepts and councils, who will dare to say that the Rule has no power to promote Christian life, or that, on the other hand, it exacts too much? Even the most volatile reader can not fail to see that it is admirably adapted to the condition

of everyone. Its precepts are numerous and important enough to satisfy even the most religiously inclined; yet they contain nothing that is beyond one's power.

That the Tertiary must be an earnest minded Christian, no one will deny, but he need not be a finished pattern of virtue, least of all must he practice virtue in an heroic degree, unless, perhaps, perseverance in good deserves the name of heroism. According to Leo XIII, the Third Order is a school of Christian virtues. Now, on entering a school, it is not necessary for a pupil to be an adept in any branch; it is sufficient for him to have the sincere desire to profit by the lessons and instructions of the teacher. And no one ever sat at the feet of St. Francis who was not forced to admit that his lessons are at once the most sublime and the most simple.

We can not better end this treatise than by quoting from a sermon of Bl. Angelo of Chivasso on the Third Order. "O most holy Rule, how wrong are they who despise thee! O most perfect Rule, how blind are they who criticize thee! O Rule, source of every good, what chastisements do they deserve who murmur at thy prescriptions! What are you about, lazy and negligent men? Why do you not embrace this Rule? Why delay doing so? What are you waiting for? For soon the time will come for you to repeat the words of wisdom: 'These are they who were once the objects of our derision and insults. Fools that we were!' There is no one who, if he can not embrace the First or the Second Order of St. Francis, can not at least enter the Third Order, and so deserve that peace and mercy of God should rest upon him."

