A WORD CONCERNING SOME GREAT RELIGIOUS ORDERS

FOR every mind alive to the significance of history, the traces of the great ecclesiastical orders in America are fraught with interest. They tell a story of obedience to an idea, of personal sacrifice, of the power of united effort which refreshes and consoles in an age of materialism. However far the world has advanced beyond the stage of science and philosophy which prevailed in the times of these pilgrim friars and priests, reverence is yet due to them as to a constructive social force of the first importance. Especially is this true of the Franciscans, whose founder, the rapt visionary of Assisi, still compels the homage of free-thinkers as well as of churchmen; still attracts both writers and readers to consider the lesson of his life.

The founding of the Franciscan and the Dominican orders—which events were nearly synchronous—was the last great rally of the Church to preserve the unity of Christendom. It was the age of Pope Innocent III., who almost attained world-sovereignty, and this by the force of a spirit that stood for political progress, freedom and justice, as was proven by his intervention in English affairs relating to the Magna Charta.

It was this great pope who gave the Franciscans their charter, and the Order was sworn to poverty, chastity and obedience. Hard and ascetic rules without doubt, but such as were necessary to propagate truth and to develop character. And in the first enthusiasm of the spiritual crusade against vice and worldliness, the walls of the Franciscan mother-church at Assisi flamed out, beneath the pencil of Giotto, with the joys of what in modern speech are called “plain living and high thinking.” With imperfect technique, but with a power of story-telling scarcely surpassed in the history of the
plastic arts, Saint Francis is seen espousing Poverty. Around him stand the scoffers of the world; while he and his bride are goaded and pricked by the great thorn-plants which encompass them. And yet, as a reward of the trial endured and the blood spent, from space to space the plants bloom with roses. The picture with all its intense symbolism, is yet a transcript of an every-day assemblage of the time along a Tuscan or Umbrian highway. It warned the mediaeval Italian, tempted by the luxury of the city republics which was derived from Oriental commerce. It appeals yet to-day to the disciple of Emerson; to all those who see clearly enough into the future to know that the permanence of society depends upon the maintenance of stern virtues.

Another picture of as intense symbolic meaning is one found on the walls of the basilica of St. John Lateran, Rome—"that mother and head of all the Christian churches"—which represents St. Francis and St. Dominic upholding the Car of the Church: a Saint on either side supporting his holy charge. To lovers of history as well as to the devout children of the faith of Rome the meaning of the allegory is clear. It may be explained and extended to those less penetrating, by a simple reference to the course of the two monks so distinguished, and to the work of the orders which they founded. The Franciscans were to exemplify the love of God toward the universe, to carry the message of the brotherhood of man throughout the world; to labor for the advent of an era of peace and good-will. Hence the legends of the tenderness of St. Francis for all created things; the stories of his sermons to birds and fishes, which to the sympathetic reader are not childish fairy tales, but which, instead, incorporate modern thought under the ingenious semblance of mediævalism, just as the technically imperfect art of the period burns and flames with a spirituality superior to all restrictions of time and place.

It is indeed true that the purity
and religious fervor of the Franciscans degenerated all too quickly, so that less than a century after the foundation of the order, Dante, with a bitterness which only Tuscan vituperative can attain, scathed the grey friars who went about “hiding devils within their cowls.” Still the example of Saint Francis was set for all time, and his work broadcast. The preaching methods of his followers gave to Wickliffe the idea of the Lollards whom he sent through the lanes and the by-paths of England to carry the Bible to the people. The vows which made up the rule of St. Francis came to be pronounced in continents of whose existence the founder never dreamed, and centuries after the hands and feet which received the Stigmata had turned to dust, savages were Christianized by the story of the self-denial, pity and tenderness of the monk of Assisi.

A great idea once projected into the world is never lost, and the Rule of St. Francis wrought its purifying work upon the men of all nations, classes and conditions who gave themselves up to follow it. The very acceptance of the three requisites of membership in the Order could not fail to benefit the individual and to favor the cause of civilization in times of violence, and in the new countries in which the successors of St. Francis established their missions.

Together with their essentials of self-restraint, these friars carried with them the rudiments of all the sciences and the principles of all the arts that make for the elevation and the beauty of life. Assimilative like all travelers, they gained from each people among whom they lived and labored, useful or aesthetic ideas. With the sure sense which comes from long-continued, well-directed training they adapted the sciences and the arts to new environments, as we find them to have done in the case of the Gothic-Moorish architecture which renders so picturesque the mission districts of California. These towers, colonnaded courts, and curiously arched doorways, aided by the enchantment of the surrounding
nature, must have created for the exiles a second Spain, reproducing their lost and distant home almost to the point of deception; while the names of St. Francis, St. Clara and St. Antonio, given to the new places in which they labored, constantly brought to their remembrance the lives and examples which they were set to emulate. The Franciscans of California are comparable with the Jesuits of Peru, who raising everywhere possible their domed churches, thus multiplied for themselves the vision of St. Peter’s, which was for them the symbol and type of Rome.

It is the foreign and old-world character given by the Spanish Franciscans to the missions in California which to-day attracts the traveler, who is often seized with a desire to imitate structure and fittings in surroundings quite hostile to their effect. The mission architecture demands the clear atmosphere, the play of natural color, the background of mountains by which the friars profited when they reared their simple imitations of still more historic and admirable edifices. And the fittings of the missions were the proper belongings of men living under the imperious rule of a high ideal and apart from ease and luxury. An incentive to labor, a call to higher thought, to the principles of St. Francis adapted to a wider and wiser world than that of the thirteenth century, cries out from every bench and chair and desk of the Spanish missions, just as the inanimate objects of Savonarola’s cell have each a voice, strangely like that of the Dominican friar whose compelling power brought the worldly and splendor-loving Florentines to the point of burning in public their luxuries and superfluities.