

REFORMATION BY LAUGHTER

QUENTIN McSWEENEY, O.P.



UR MOTHER THE CHURCH is a remarkable lady in many ways. Not the least of these are the varied means she has taken to reform her own children. Now from altogether too many historical accounts one would infer that the Church has always resorted to stringent measures in disciplining the wayward. On the contrary, however, she has found and has used a number of methods to keep her charges in line.

Take as an example the trouble that happened in Spain not quite 200 hundred years ago. Many clerics at that time were far from being exemplary Christians; in fact, some had completely forgotten what that is known as "ecclesiastical behavior." Worse still, grave arguments and sharp reproofs from the Holy See had little or no effect.

Fortunately for all concerned, the remedies of the evil were near at hand. These were found chiefly in the writings of the Jesuit Father de Isla, a professor at Salamanca. Caustic wit along with reformation by laughter, in his opinion, were the only remaining means that could overcome the prevalent religious disorders.

Like Cervantes, he created a fictional hero. But his Quixote was dressed in the robes of a mendicent and stuck in a pulpit. Friar Gerund de Campazas, as this comic character was to be known, could be found in all ranks of the clergy. Moreover, he was not limited to a particular size or color since he represented the composite of all.

Gerund was born on a farm but before he could read or write, he knew how to preach. As a youngster his greatest pleasure was to hear and imitate the travelling friars who often passed along the country roads. He was a "born preacher" so it was a surprise to nobody when Gerund became a friar.

Having at length completed the first period of probation the young man was sent to a house of higher studies. While there, he unfortunately fell to mimicking one of the older and more noted members of the Order. This famous preacher, by the way, was very polite; even his references to the Fathers and Evangelists smacked of extreme courtesy. To him St. John was ever the Angel of Patmos, St. Ambrose the Honeycomb of Doctors, and St. Gregory was al-

ways mentioned as the Allegorical Tiara. His style was characterized as pure bombast; mentioning the sea, it was "the salsuginous element"; creation, and it was "the universal opifice; burning desire, and it was no less than "the ignited wings of appetency."

Gerund made rapid progress under several such masters; finally he was scheduled to give his first sermon. Hours on end he practised nothing but gestures. In the words of the Jesuit satirist, "the youth shook and tossed his body with motions and violent convulsions; now crossing his arms, now wildly flapping them; at times threatening to jump over the pulpit; now reclining against the wall; again, with hand on his hips he would assume the air of infinite satisfaction. Fully eight days were given to such calisthenics in preparation for the first discourse. And the sermon itself—a masterpiece of quotations and misapplications, of wild nonsense and sheer pomp."

While the style of the hero "fairly bristled with Latin and Greek," he shunned all commonplace expressions. For example, when speaking of Castile he rapturously hailed it as "potent protection of delighted Spain, celebrious colony from Latium sprung, sweet emulation of the globe, sworn queen of the Carpentarian mountains, idea of renowned consuls clarified, and glory of the Arevacian tribes!"

Having sufficiently lashed the faults of the pulpit Father de Isla packed up Gerund McCarthy and carried him into the the classrooms where, he says, "scholasticism had gone mad." The Friar fitted the new rôle so well that it was not long till he became a "furious Aristotelian." Being transformed into such a rabid scholastic, it was but natural that Gerund now spoke only the language of the Schoolmen. Should an acquaintance meet him and say, "Hello, Father, how are you?" . . . the young Lector would reply: "*Materialiter*, fine; *formaliter*, *subdistinguo* . . . *reduplicative ut homo*, nothing ails me . . . *reduplicative ut religiosus*, I have my troubles."

Even in his letters home Gerund went to extremes. One note to his mother expressed appreciation for some chocolates of which, the Friar says, "the intrinsic qualities are good," but the extrinsic are ruined since the candy "was too long acted upon by the combusive virtue of igneous nature." Formal thanks were sent to his sister Rose for some sweat sox. Mention is made that the "*materia ex qua*" appeared very coarse, but the "*forma artificialis* had all its constitutives."

And so . . . on and on in the humorous life of Friar Gerund. Some considered the treatment too sharp. Despite such criticism, however, Philosophy was snapped to its senses and a conceited classicism vanished. By thus allowing faults to be held under the light of

prudent ridicule, the Church achieved her purpose and restored virtuous conduct.

From this unique manner of reformation one can more easily understand the genius of the Church. We see that aside from her divine character she very wisely makes provision for her human element. Being a perfect organization she adopts diverse yet ordinary and suitable means to effect discipline. And so, if at times that mask of apparent severity seems to weigh heavily upon her face, the Church, because she is vigorously alive, has at the same time been able to laugh with the rest of the world at the comic actions of some of her own children.