

Door-to-Door with the Legion of Mary

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Door-to-door evangelization is usually considered the domain of the sects. When we hear knocks at the door, we assume sectarians cause them – Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Seventh-Day Adventists.

We don't think the evangelists might be Catholics, but some of them are, and many of the most effective are members of the Legion of Mary.

A worldwide lay organization founded in 1921 by Frank Duff, the Legion uses time-tested methods to locate, identify, and invite into (or back to) the Church everyone from fallen-away Catholics to people uncommitted to any religion. The Legion does this quietly and unobtrusively, yet effectively. The results have been phenomenal.

The most common way to begin is with a parish census. Every family within the parish boundaries is contacted, and every door is knocked on to discover the inhabitants' religious preferences. Even on the first call the parties contacted are invited to the parish and literature, including church schedules, is left.

After the initial call, the evangelists decide whether the parties are likely candidates for follow-up contacts. If so, they're put into the follow-up system. Normally these are lapsed Catholics and non-Catholics who indicate an interest in the Catholic Church.

The methods used by the Legion are non-threatening and neighborly. The religious heritage of others is always respected. The census is highly structured and is designed to secure information quickly, pleasantly, and almost effortlessly. Legionaries don't argue, confront, or antagonize. Their strategy is long-term. I know, because I've been active in Legion work myself.

We work in pairs. After the initial objective is accomplished – after we identify and invite – we attempt to leave the house with an invitation to return again. That's the short-term goal.

The long-term goal is to get the fallen-aways back to the Church and uncommitted non-Catholics to convert. This could take years of follow-up contacts, but occasionally we strike pay dirt on the initial call. I've lost count of how many have come back to the sacraments and how many have started taking instructions as a result of a single invitation. It's as though there are thousands out there just waiting for a knock at the door.

Needless to say (but I'll say it anyway), adequate programs must be in place and operating in parishes where this type of work is being done by the Legion. Parishes must insure cordial and professional reception of the returnees and prospective converts. The overall program, which encompasses the support activities as well as the door-to-door work, may be as simple or as sophisticated as the pastors, their resources, and the zeal of the parishes allow.

Here's what a typical parish located in Reno, Nevada, accomplished in a two-year period: We knocked on 2,151 doors, made 1,004 initial contacts, and had 512 follow-up calls. Twenty-five non-Catholics started instructions, 27 lapsed Catholics returned to the sacraments, 60 practicing but unregistered families were signed up at the rectory, and hundreds of pieces of Catholic literature and many holy cards and rosaries were distributed. (Our favorite handout is "The Catholic Church: Who Are We?", published by Franciscan Communications in Los Angeles.)

These are not unusually large numbers. Our work has been duplicated in hundreds of parishes around the country, thousands of parishes around the world – anywhere the Legion is active. In much of the Third World door-to-door work is a routine part of parish activities, and the number of conversions and reconversions is incredible.

We find people must be invited to faith, much the same way they must be invited to buy worldly goods. Fallen-away Catholics often think about returning to the Church, and non-Catholics toy with the tantalizing idea of investigating Catholicism, but most don't know how to start. Even if they do, they're hesitant to take the first step. They need to be invited. It's much as in any sales work: The salesman must ask for the order.

Nowadays there is a tendency to rely too heavily on evangelization through means of mass communication. Although these means must be used effectively, they will never substitute for the primary means of evangelization; personal contact. In fact, the more use we make of radio, television, and direct mail, the greater the need for the shoe-leather apostolate.

Consider what other religions accomplished during 1989 (the most recent year for which there are figures):

The Jehovah's Witnesses baptized 48,358 adult converts and rose to 817,881 members. The Mormons received about 200,000 converts and brought their total to about four million. Campus Crusade for Christ, an Evangelical organization, worked on 175 campuses with 965 full-time, self-supporting volunteers, who brought 18,000 people to "a decision for Christ."

Contrast these figures with those for the Catholic Church. In 1989 we had about 55 million members in this country, but only 82,000 converts – a large number,

but not large compared to our base. If the Jehovah's Witnesses started with as many members (and assuming the same ratio of conversions), they would have brought in 3,251,928 converts in one year! It doesn't take much imagination to see we Catholics should do a lot better.

After all, we have some advantages over others who engage in door-to-door work. The first is that we possess the truth, the fullness of faith. Our "product" is the genuine article. Second, in a sense we're the new kids on the block. People aren't accustomed to having Catholics come to their doors, and they're relieved to discover we aren't one of "those others."

Not only are they surprised we're there, but they're pleased with our low-key approach. They realize we aren't going to pressure them. As a result, we're treated courteously and are routinely invited to return. So, while "those others" are wearing out their welcomes (despite which they have great numerical success due to their perseverance), the time seems opportune for Catholic cadres to hit the streets.

Catholics have another advantage – our salvation theology. Many other door-to-door missionaries believe one can be saved only by becoming a card-carrying member of their church. Many sects believe Catholics in particular are damned precisely for being Catholics. Naturally, the sectarians are aggressive; they want to save people from a terrible fate. They know they many not have another chance to talk to the people who answer the doors, so they try to get attention right now.

In contrast, Catholics believe that, although all who are saved are saved as Catholics and through the Catholic Church (which is to say through Jesus, since the Church is his mystical body), people who are not card-carrying Catholics can make it to heaven too. (This is not to say there are no significant advantages in being a card-carrying Catholic.) This means our approach need not seem so urgent. Of course, our theology shouldn't lead us into complacency, nor should it cause us to avoid opportunities to ask people to commit themselves, but we don't have to strong-arm them.

We're able to be authentically neighborly, extending warm welcomes and trusting that the Holy Spirit will work through us when and how he sees fit. We have more time to spend with the people we visit, because we aren't compelled to complete everything in one session.

Most people can't imagine themselves doing any kind of direct home contact work, especially when the "product" is religion. This is understandable: We've all had unpleasant experiences with proselytizers at our doors, and we don't want to come across as pushy. We all fear rejection, and there certainly is rejection involved in this work, but seldom hostility.

Although we are well received generally, not everyone will be persuaded to return to the faith or to become a Catholic, and there are some who won't even talk to us, but I can't recall the last time one of our members was treated rudely. Still, rejection can be painful, and when it occurs Legion members treat it as an opportunity to share the rejection suffered by the Master. When our fragile egos are bruised, it is well for us to reflect on the zeal of the early Christian evangelists, who exposed themselves not just to rejection, but to torture and martyrdom.

Even when we experience indifference or a little hostility, we can't be sure of the result. A veteran evangelist once told me, "Those persons who seem to reject us are nonetheless spiritually pricked, and only God knows what fruit will spring forth." We never can be sure whether a contact has been in vain.

I've trained hundreds of people to do door-to-door work, and practically anyone can do it after a few hours of instruction and field training. There's no need to be a salesman or a theologian. Seldom do we encounter difficult questions; if a sticky situation does arise, we have techniques for handling it.

There are few requirements in this work; a desire to engage in it, a willingness to learn a few tricks of the trade, confidence in the Holy Spirit, confidence in our Lady. If those are in place, the work proceeds and becomes challenging, at times exhilarating, possibly addictive. (But it's a good addiction.)

(Robert H. Nyssen writes from Reno, Nevada.)