

Door-To-Door Visitation

To those of us who are members of the Legion of Mary, “door-to-door visitation” means calling on every home on an assigned street or in an assigned area with the intention of enhancing the spiritual lives of those visited, as well as our own. We are looking particularly for Catholics who are no longer practicing their faith and for those among our neighbors who profess no faith at all. There are a great many such people “out there” and the probability is good that our visits to them will result in a positive response.

The Paulist National Catholic Evangelization Association, which specializes in such matters, tells us that there are at least 15,000,000 baptized but inactive Catholics in the United States. This is to say that 25% of all Catholics over the age of 18 are now inactive. About 40% of young Catholics between the ages of 15 and 29 will cease attending Mass for a period of two years or more. The average Catholic parish in the United States with 2500 members has 800 inactive members living within its territorial boundaries.

The Paulists also tell us that 40% of all inactive Catholics have thought seriously of returning to the practice of their faith. Every parish should be making a positive effort to reach out in love and friendship to such inactive Catholics to invite them to take another look at their Catholic heritage with the hope that many will return to being active once more. The objectives of those appealing to the inactive Catholic must be to extend a warm, personal invitation; to create an atmosphere in which the inactive person feels welcome to come back home; and to set-up programs to help the inactive become reconciled to the Church and to Christ. That is what door-to-door visitation is all about -- taking the initiative in reaching out to find inactive Catholics and then extending to them an invitation to come back home. The Paulists also tell us that 60% of the inactives who return do so at the invitation of a friend, a relative or a neighbor.

What the inactive Catholics do with the invitation we extend is, of course, up to them; we do not coerce them. They can choose to respond or not to respond. But as Catholics who are faithful to Christ and the Scriptures, as Catholics who genuinely love our inactive brothers and sisters, and as loyal members of the Legion of Mary, we are under an obligation to extend the invitation in every way reasonably possible, leaving the outcome in the hands of God.

On their door-to-door visits Legionaries will also be alert to extend a humble and friendly invitation to all the “unchurched” to look at what the Catholic Church is and what it has to offer. Recent studies done for the Paulists by the Gallup Organization reveal that one third of all Americans, of whatever background, can be described as “unchurched.” They have not attended regular services in a church of their choice more than once in the past year.

The Legion of Mary praesidium intending to launch a door-to-door visitation program should first do some careful planning. The pastor and the Spiritual Director should, of course, be involved in all such plans. It may be that the pastor will want to give detailed guidance but it is more likely that he will want the praesidium to develop a draft plan to be presented for his approval or refinement.

The plan should be kept simple and flexible. It should answer the following questions:

- What - The taking of a census and spiritual survey. Give the project a name, i.e. St. _____ "Welcome Home" project.
- Where - In the parish of St. _____.
- When - A beginning date might be projected though the effort will probably be continuous.
- Who - By the Legion of Mary of the parish of St. _____.
- How - By door-to-door visitation of every home within the parish boundaries.
- Why - There are usually many reasons which may include:
1. To determine who in the parish are Catholic, and who are practicing.
 2. To extend to non-practicing Catholics a warm invitation to join the parish family.
 3. To extend to those attending no church or a different church a friendly invitation to come and learn what the Catholic Faith has to offer them.
 4. To update parish records.
 5. To provide data on which to build parish programs.

It is good to clearly identify at the outset what the effort is intended to achieve. Doing so establishes guidance that will keep the effort on track. It also provides criteria by which to evaluate the worth of the total effort and to measure progress toward specific goals.

The establishment of specific goals is extremely important, although only initial goals need be identified at the outset. Having specific goals that are attainable in a reasonable period of time provides incentive for everyone. Not only is a closer goal easier to work toward but it provides the stimulus that comes from achievement. Since the door-to-door effort in most parishes will probably be a long term or continuing operation, it is particularly important that the overall parish effort be assigned in terms of specific short-range goals. Also, it is important to show the pastor and the rest of the parish from time to time what is being accomplished. Since most parishes are defined by a set of geographic boundaries, specific goals fit nicely into these boundaries if they are identified in geographic terms such as residential developments, apartment complexes or sets of adjacent streets.

Having well-defined goals helps the praesidium president in making assignments. The president should keep a record log of all assignments. This record should include, in separate columns, the area or street assigned, the names of the Legionary visitors, the date of assignment and the date when work sheets (about which more will be said later) are turned in, completed. If work has to be reassigned it will be treated in the log as another assignment.

Early in the planning effort the best possible maps should be obtained. Start with a small-scale map that covers the entire parish and a little beyond. Use the Diocesan Directory to find the boundaries of the parish. Once the boundaries are lined in as accurately as possible, obtain larger scale maps on which can be identified specific geographic goals and on which can be recorded the areas of the parish that have been completed. You should also make smaller copies of the maps for the Legionaries to use when they make house calls. Maps can usually be obtained from County Courthouses. Other good sources are bookstores, real estate developers, Highway Departments and Tax Offices. The quality and usefulness of maps vary from source to source.

Before the president starts making assignments by street, it is a good idea to list all of the streets in the parish. There should be two lists – an alphabetical list of all the named streets, and a numerical list of the numbered streets. Then have a pair of Legionaries, using these lists and the parish maps, record the lowest and highest house numbers on every street within the parish boundaries. Having this data, the praesidium president can make assignments with the confidence that all homes will be visited and that Legion visitors will not call on homes in adjacent parishes. The pair that is assigned the lowest and highest home numbers will have to work in daylight.

The door-to-door Legion visitors should be provided with essential forms, selected literature, and some sacramentals. An important form, of course, is the parish census card. Some Dioceses have a standard form printed on 5" x 8" cards; it is recommended that this standard card be used if available. The card, of course, should be filled out as completely and legibly as possible. The Legionary should fill out the card himself while making the visit. Don't leave the card to be filled out by the family and mailed to the rectory - it won't get there. The card includes quite a bit of information but not all that is needed so we also have a notebook or worksheet. One of the visiting Legionaries fills out the census card; the other fills out the work sheet.

The title of our worksheet is the "Legion of Mary Visitation Record Sheet." Its use is essential to a well-managed and effective program. It tells where and when we have called, what we found out at every address, who did the work and other pertinent information of interest to the pastor and the Legion. If we don't get a completed census form on a visit, the work sheet may still give us a basis for follow-up action. The important thing is to be sure that we have a complete address. Dates are entered for all calls. Names of those called on should be

indicated. Visiting Legionaries should be furnished with clip boards to hold the forms and provide a writing surface. Try and visit in the early evening or on weekends. Having an extra pen along is a good idea. When completed and turned in, these forms become important parish and Legion records. They should be as accurate and neat as possible. Sometimes this is difficult to achieve in the semi-dark on somebody's windy doorstep. It may be necessary when you get home to make a more legible copy to submit. If you recopy, or add more details, do so as soon as possible while your memory is fresh.

Hands-outs are good to break the ice and many people expect you to have them, but don't overdo it. Although not mandatory, each Legionary may carry with him some of the following items if they are available and appropriate to the visitation effort:

- Parish data sheets or brochures;
- Parish bulletins;
- Small maps orienting the parish church to main local streets; these maps can be combined with parish data sheets;
- Miraculous Medals and Rosaries;
- Catholic literature;
- Legion Literature.

Briefed and equipped, and with a short prayer to the Holy Spirit, the Legionary is ready to start his calls. If possible it is best to use the Legion "Master/Apprentice" system sending an experienced Legionary with an inexperienced one the first time or two, at least. To be on the safe side, each Legionary should have a memorized opening statement. The following is one I often use:

"Good evening. We are from St. _____ Catholic Church. We are visiting all the homes in the area, on behalf of the priests of the parish. Are there any baptized Catholics in your home?"

The opening statement can say many things but it should come to the point immediately with a straightforward statement of your purpose in being there. A few people resent our calls but most of them accept our being there and asking our questions as legitimate and reasonable. We can expect that they will be cooperative and give us the best information they can.

If they say that there are no Catholics in the family we usually ask what their religious preference is. If they say that they have no religion we invite them to come to St. _____ and we give them a parish bulletin and a parish data card. We try to make sure that they know how to get to St. _____. We try to get their full name and set up a situation that calls for a return visit.

If they state that they are Catholic or have a Catholic member in the family, we ask if we can fill out a census form. If they say they are already registered at St.

_____, we explain that Fr. _____ has asked us to fill out new census forms on all Catholics in the parish to bring the parish records up to date. If they say that they are active in another parish, we try to explain to them that there are still good reasons why they should be registered at St. _____ in the event of death, accidents, marriage, Baptisms, etc. If they still will not let us register them we at least try to get their full name and the parish they are attending for use in follow-up efforts. In most situations, where there are Catholics in the family, there will be no objection to our completing a census card and people will be very cooperative.

Through all of this it is most important that the Legionaries be as friendly, cheerful and helpful as possible. Our purpose is defeated if we get angry or show any irritation. Remember - our attitude can convey more of what we say than the words we use. Try to develop a situation in which we get the chance to talk a little while to people. If we are permitted to fill out a census card the conversation needed to do that will often result in a friendly, parish oriented discussion in which we can do a lot of selling of the parish. Our objective is almost always to sell the parish first and then the Church. In situations where we need to sell the Church to people we should try to steer them to the clergy. However, to most people, the parish is the Church and we laymen and laywomen are often in a better position to sell the parish than is a priest. To be really effective at this we should know as much as possible about our parish; a salesman has to know his product. We should be prepared to talk enthusiastically about:

- Current parish activities;
- Parish organizations;
- Historical background of the parish;
- Things that make it a warm parish;
- The friendliness of the parishioners;
- The helpfulness of the pastor and the parish staff;
- Whatever relates to the apparent interest of the people being visited.

When we find people with special interests or talents we should make this known to appropriate parish organizations and staff members. It will be very helpful if callers are kept informed of current parish activities and the names of the people in charge. Legionaries should especially keep in mind recruiting for the Legion.

Try to plant the seeds for another visit if it appears that it will be needed or profitable. Some of the ways in which this can be done are:

- Set a date for another call;
- Promise to deliver some literature we do not have with us;
- Offer transportation to Mass;
- Offer to get them in touch with the parish school or religious education program, if children are the right age;
- Arrange for contact with inquiry classes, parish organizations, RCIA etc.

Invite people to parish events such as Christmas or Easter devotions and special things like missions, study groups or parish novenas.

Thank the people for the time they have given us and leave with a friendly, "God bless you, and please keep us in your prayers." Never hurry - if it is evident that we are hurrying, we won't be very effective. Let people talk. One good, productive contact in an evening is far better than a dozen homes visited and no friendly contact established.

If there are children in the home, sacramentals such as blessed medals, rosaries and holy cards given the children at the right time can do a lot to break the ice. Miraculous Medals should be on chains or strings. Rosaries we reserve for older children or adults and we present them with a leaflet on "How to say the rosary." Legionaries should also be alert for opportunities to propose the enthronement of the Sacred Heart in the home.

At many homes we visit, people will not be in. We make a practice of knocking three times or pressing the door bell switch two times (if it rings). Moreover, we also make it a practice of calling at each home three times. If we have not made a contact in three calls, we leave a letter of invitation to the parish in both English and Spanish.

When we find homes in which they do not speak English we turn the call over to our Spanish speaking Legionaries. We do what we can to cope with other languages. Sometimes children will know English better than their parents and they can interpret for us. We must treat our foreign origin parishioners with much concern. Most of the Spanish are baptized Catholics but if they do not make a meaningful contact with a Catholic Parish they will drift away or be lured away by other denominations or aggressive cults.

It means a lot to people to see that Catholics are active for the Church. It gives them a basis for being proud of their Faith when they see Americans working for the Faith, going out in friendship to them, showing sincere interest in them and inviting them to join us as members of our parish.

Legionaries must take care of their house-to-house visitation forms. Once a form is filled in, it becomes an important parish record. The records must be as accurate and legible as we can make them or our whole purpose is defeated. A record that is wrong or illegible may cause embarrassment to the parish or even thwart action to bring someone closer to God. Moreover, we cannot very well make return calls just to correct careless records. If they are hard to read, records should be recopied before they are turned in to the president, or the vice president, whoever is keeping the files.

If the pastor is deeply interested in the information being gathered, it will be a good idea to recopy all census cards and work sheets with the Legion keeping a

file of originals and the pastor getting the final copies as long as he wants to use them. All records, of course, must be kept secure and confidential.

As records are turned in the president should be watchful when the work on a specific goal is completed. He should tabulate the significant data achieved by that effort and have it published in the parish bulletin or in the Sunday announcements. At the same time, the next specific goal should be announced and the Parishioners requested to assist the Legion as they can. By thus informing the parish, it will become aware of this vital ongoing apostolic effort. Parishioners in the new goal areas will be alerted that the Legion is going to be making calls soon in their neighborhood. People in the parish who are interested in doing truly apostolic work will see what the Legion is doing and some of them will want to join the effort.