

The Seminarian and the Legion of Mary

By Fran Peffley and Marcus Pollard

The Legion of Mary is essentially a lay organization, offering a proven means of sanctity to its members and zealous apostles to the Church. But its success is ultimately in the hands of the priest: its effectiveness, experience has shown, can be greatly reduced or tremendously enhanced by the way he accepts and handles it. That, in itself, would be a sufficient motive for educating seminarians and priests about the Legion of Mary. But more important still, the Legion sees the need of ever greater support from the clergy because it offers the priest a sound, Marian, Christ-centered method for making people holy and a unique, tested system for nurturing lay apostles. These graced individuals not only depend on the priest for his help in discerning and fostering their personal call to sanctification, but they also provide the priest with invaluable cooperators for the extension of his parochial mission.

The Laity Need the Priest

As a future priest, the seminarian's main duty will be to sanctify his people. This will principally be done by the saying of Mass, preaching, and the administration of the Sacraments. The priest *must* help his laity strive toward sanctity (*Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 5) and fulfill their obligation to spread their Catholic Faith (*Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, 3). The Second Vatican Council made it very clear that every member of the Church has the "obligation of spreading the Faith to the best of his ability" (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 17). It will be the duty of the priest to offer his parishioners the means whereby they can fulfill their vocation to grow in holiness and to evangelize. The duty to evangelize placed on the faithful by their reception of the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation and by the personal call of Jesus Christ (*Apost. of the Laity*, 3). Some of the laity are given specific apostolic charisms for the building up of the Church (*Const. on the Church*, 12). These members of the laity are especially warned, (as are all laity, depending on the graces they've received) that their salvation is in jeopardy "if they fail to respond in thought, word and deed to that grace" (*Const. on the Church*, 14). Out of Christ-like concern for his flock, the priest takes care that his parishioners respond to the gifts God has given them, as canons 528 and 529 of the *Code of Canon Law* state. In addition, an enlightened and humble priest will realize that he cannot fulfill the Church's apostolic responsibilities on his own but needs the help of the laity (*Const. on the Church*, 30).

The parish priest can promote the lay apostolate both by direct and indirect means. From the pulpit and in the classroom, he can present the importance of the apostolate of the laity and the responsibility each Catholic has to discern and respond to the gifts God has given. The priest can also work to establish specific apostolic associations and foster membership for them in the parish. More

indirectly, he can emphasize to parents their duty to help their children find their vocation and respond generously.

Yet all these ideas presuppose the pastor's own familiarity with the different kinds of lay apostolic activity in the Church. Here is a specific area where the seminary can help by familiarizing its men with effective, faithful lay apostolic groups.

The Legion in the Seminary

With a *praesidium* (local unit) of the Legion of Mary in the seminary, a young man can become familiar with - and even expert in - a system that he can later use both to sanctify his people *and* to form them into lay apostles. He will come to realize that the Legion is a tool, a pastoral instrument that, when properly applied by the priest, can provide the laity with a system that increases their knowledge of the Catholic Faith, develops their prayer life simultaneously brings that Faith to others. In regard to the pastoral formation which a man should get in the seminary, the Holy See's 1970 letter on priestly training states that he should be able to enlist "the support of the laity to encourage and develop their own special apostolate" (*A Basic Scheme for Priestly Training*, 95).

There is no way better for a seminarian to learn about the Legion of Mary than to be a member of a *praesidium*. By attending the weekly meetings and doing the two hours of apostolic work according to the spirit of the Legion, a seminarian can see for himself what the Legion could do in his parish. The weekly gathering for the Rosary and Legion prayers, reports on the apostolic work, spiritual reading, discussion and *allocutio* (a short talk by the *praesidium*'s spiritual director) offer the seminarian both a formation in the spiritual life and a training in the pastoral care of souls. Members of the Legion are trained to be - are molded into - apostles, are taught to do their apostolic work in union with Mary by consciously striving to see and serve Christ in everyone they meet (*Legion Handbook*, p. 181). Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (to Whom the members dedicate themselves at the time of reception into the organization), the legionaries hope to bring each soul they meet closer to Christ. According to the Council's teaching about Mary's spiritual motherhood of the Church and each of its members, Christ, Who became Incarnate by the power of the Holy Spirit and the cooperation of the Virgin Mary, is born again in each soul by that same power of the Holy Spirit and cooperation of the Blessed Mother (*Const. on the Church*, 53). Whenever the Apostolate is successful, it is because the apostle has been the effective instrument of the Holy Spirit and the Blessed Mother in bringing about the birth of Christ in souls. Since the priest will have as his objective his own sanctification and that of his people, he will see the Legion as the maternal influence of Mary operating in his life and in that of his people.

Help For Busy Priests

Once a priest is ordained he usually becomes very busy. His schedule is filled with appointments, meetings, instructions of converts and engaged couples, holy hours, visits to the local hospital, etc. He might think that being a spiritual director of a praesidium in addition to all this would take up too much of his time, since the weekly Legion meeting usually lasts about an hour and a half. But - strange to say - that hour and a half could be equivalent to doing thirty hours of hard work each week. Here's why.

Lay Legion membership requires a minimum of two hours of weekly apostolic work. If a priest had fifteen members in his praesidium, he would be *guaranteed* at least thirty hours of apostolic work *each week*. It would mean that these parishioners would be consoling shut-ins, teaching CCD, visiting prisons and hospitals, keeping in touch with alienated Catholics and visiting door-to-door in search of the unchurched - all in the name and under the influence of the parish priest. For that hour and a half spent at the meeting guiding, encouraging and spiritualizing his members represents a tremendous amount of directed apostolic work done. Think of how long it would take one priest on his own to accomplish as much.

But if a priest were able to accomplish all that on his own each week, what would happen? Perhaps three things: First, there is the chance that the priest could be overwhelmed with work and eventually burn out; or, being so tied up with this work load, he might not be able to reach everyone else who needed a visit from the Church; but most important of all, if the priest were able to do all this work on his own he would be *depriving his lay people of their right and duty to be lay apostles*. Doing apostolic work is formative and sanctifying. Not encouraging the laity to do the apostolic work of the community would be detrimental to their spiritual welfare and, in fact, even to his own priestly office, since many souls within and outside the Church would never have been reached.

The Three C's

The priest could use his legionaries to accomplish the three types of apostolic work: *Consolation*, *Conservation*, *Conversion*. *Consolation*: visiting the elderly, the sick, the handicapped, the bereaved. *Conservation*: bringing back the lukewarm and lapsed Catholics to the practice of the Faith; *Conversion*: the offering of the fullness of revealed Truth to those who are without it. This is one of the primary reasons why a seminarian should try to learn as much as he can about the Legion in the seminary - it would enable him to better fulfill his priestly vocation and further his calling to extend the kingdom of God on earth.

The idea of a priest gathering around himself a band of chosen souls to help in his priestly work has the greatest of models - Our Lord Himself. Jesus Christ chose not to convert the world alone, but gathered around Him twelve apostles,

whom He instructed, formed and then sent out with the mandate to teach all nations (Mt. 28:19). The Catholic priest is an *alter Christus* (another Christ) and what would be more Christlike than to gather a similar group around himself, to instruct, train, and send out in his name and from the church, to offer the treasures of the Faith to all? If the priest is to be truly an imitator of Christ, and is in fact an *alter Christus*, he has no alternative but to use others in his work of spreading the Faith. Furthermore, the laity must depend on the priesthood and hierarchy for guidance and discernment in their performance of apostolic work. Special mention is made in chapters four and six of the *Decree on the Laity* that the Church secure the proper training of lay apostles and provide established associations for them to join. Pastors are to promote responsible lay apostolic activity (*Const. on the Church*, 37) and see that the work in the three main fields of lay apostolic endeavor are being done: evangelization and catechesis; renewal of the temporal order; works of charity and mercy (*Decree on the Laity*, 6 and 31).

All-Inclusive Outreach

Most priests are assigned to a parish within the diocese to which they belong. According to the *Code of Canon Law*, the parish priests have a responsibility to all the souls living in their parish boundaries (*Code*, Canon 528). This includes practicing Catholics, lapsed Catholics *and* non-Catholics. How could a priest ever hope to visit or come into personal contact with all these people if he did not mobilize his laity to visit them in his name? This is being done regularly by legionaries in their door to door evangelization program (a hallmark of the Legion), whereby every home within the parish boundaries is visited, a friendly contact established and consistent follow-up calls are made.

The legionaries have something to offer each person they meet: to the atheist or agnostic they present the idea of God and the fundamental principles of Christianity either by word or by example; to the non-Catholic they offer the fullness of revealed Truth found only in the Catholic Church; to the lapsed Catholic a gentle and encouraging word is spoken and an invitation given to return to the practice of the Faith; to practicing Catholics, the legionaries encourage interest in spiritual things, such as daily Mass attendance, a more enriched life of prayer and a greater involvement in parish activities or organizations. Experience has shown the response of the people to this door-to-door visitation by Catholics to be excellent. They are usually pleased to know that the Catholic Church is reaching out to their own and are coming into friendly contact with those not of their Faith. Because of this work, many non-Catholics and non-Christians have desired to learn more about Catholicism and have signed up for parish instruction classes. Shut-ins are found who are in need of help, Catholic families with unbaptized babies are discovered, and marriage cases are brought to the notice of the priest.

More Work for Father?

But doesn't this mean, after all, *more* work for Father? Not necessarily. Much of this uncovered work could be followed up by the local parish praesidium. For example, the legionaries could continue to visit the elderly and the shut-ins; they could give the long term individual instructions to those wishing to enter the Church, getting them ready for their "finals" with the priest; they could keep in touch with children not attending CCD, etc. Of course, the priest would take care of marriage validations and other cases of a more delicate nature, with the legionaries providing sensitive, confidential after-care in his name.

Let us say the Legion members, going door-to-door, have visited a thousand homes during the course of a year. They continue to visit some fifty cases that need follow-up. The priests would then concentrate on the fifteen to twenty "urgent" cases that require their attention. Imagine how long it would have taken the priests to visit the thousand homes on their own and to regularly keep in touch with the "follow-ups". Realistically, there isn't that much time in a priest's daily schedule. But with the praesidium doing the ground work, the priests can focus their attention on the heart of the matter. The legionaries take much of the *ordinary* duty of personal contact off the priests' hands and present to them the *extraordinary* cases that especially require the grace of the priesthood. The legionaries do the plowing, planting and cultivation, the priests the pruning and the harvesting. *This* is cooperation, an ideal example of what the Second Vatican Council meant when it called for the laity to work in harmony with the priest.

The Priest's Own "Mystical Body"

Just as the Lord added to Himself the Apostles as the first members of His Mystical Body, so a Legion Priest (an *alter Christus*) can be said to "have members", a "mystical body". This means that he has extensions of himself going to places and touching people he could never reach. His priesthood knows a certain completeness for he offers his parishioners a *lay vocation*, a participation in his own priesthood yet genuinely "lay" in its expression. (One byproduct of this arrangement in the priest's life is the effect a group of loyal Catholics sharing his outlook has on his own vocation. Many times they have become a circle of "safe" friends in which the celibate priest can move with ease and find genuine comfort to help offset the vocational hazard of loneliness.)

Some think of the Legion merely as an organization for promoting lay apostolic activity, but it is much more than that. It can be a way of life for lay people. It has many of the qualities of a religious order, but translated into the lay state. It has the spirit of "Religious Life" without the vows and external structure. The ordinary Catholic, as a member of the Legion, knows growth in the prayer life of the Church and becomes a missionary within his own parish boundaries. The Legion system presents a discipline that is able to produce great virtue and holiness in Legion members, and a sound flexibility that allows the laity to live out their

vocation in the world as doctor, housewife, teacher, etc. With the Legion of Mary the priest has a way of life to offer his lay people - an expression of the Christian vocation which would sanctify them, form them into apostles, and educate them in the truths of the Faith; it would give them a means to bring Catholicism to those who are without that great treasure or to those who, for one reason or another, have separated themselves from it. The Legion is described in the Handbook as the "leaven in the community". If it is used to its potential, the Legion can be the yeast which raises the spiritual level of a parish while at the same time helping to transform the secular order. This fulfills the desire of the Council for the laity to sanctify the secular order in which they live "after the manner of leaven" (*Const. on the Church*, 30).

The Priest's Ambassadors

The Legion brings the priest to the people, not always in person but in influence. Because the Legion is lay, its resources are without number, yet it works in inseparable union with the priest. They go out as *his* missionaries, as *his* representatives. St. Pius X has said, "What is most necessary at the present time is to have in each parish a group of Layman at the same time virtuous, enlightened, determined, and really apostolic." A group of dedicated lay people, men and woman of all ages, sharing the outlook of the priest, should be a presence in every parish. Without a group of this nature a priest will only realize a fraction of his potential. Pius XI wrote that, "The lay apostolate must be considered by priests as a definite part of their ministry, and by the faithful as a duty of the Christian life". Priests could offer each parish age group a chance to be spiritually active in the Church by providing for praesidia of *Juniors* (ages 8 to 13) and *Intermediates* (high school age) and *Seniors* (18 years and up).

Heeding the Call of Vatican II

It is only a matter of time before people realize that the Legion of Mary is exactly what the Documents of Vatican II are calling for in the Church. The Council stated that each Catholic has the obligation to strive for sanctity and to be apostolic, to learn more about his Faith and to help transform the temporal order. The Council called for the mobilization of the Catholic laity (*Decree on the Laity*, 3) which is nearly impossible without an organization like the Legion of Mary. Furthermore, the Council held Our Lady to be the model and source of Apostleship in the Church. Mary is the pre-eminent apostle, not only by her example, but also by the Divinely-willed - and therefore indispensable - role of transmitting the life of grace (*Decree on the Laity*, 4). The Legion not only has Mary as its model, but exhorts its members to live their lives in union with her, a spiritually endorsed by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Mother of the Redeemer* where he presents St. Louis de Montfort's *True Devotion to Mary*. Pius XI asked that the lay apostolate be carried out in dependence on the Mother of God and in complete cooperation with the priest. The Second Vatican Council demands lay evangelization and asks loyalty towards the pastors, Bishops and

Magisterium (*Const. on the Church*, 37). From the earliest days, the Legion has fulfilled, and will continue to fulfill, these requests, having made Evangelization its first priority and having enshrined in its constitution the necessity of obtaining permission of the Ordinary of a diocese and the pastor of a parish in order to organize and work.

Now Is the Time

The time to learn about the Legion is as a seminarian when the duties of the priesthood still lie ahead. Some seminarians are fortunate enough to have a praesidium or two in their seminary, while others could get permission to start one if they asked. To train a group of ten future Legion priests would in effect be influencing thousands and thousands of souls and at the same time helping to secure those ten priestly vocations. By using the Legion, each of these priests could multiply their influence 30, 60, and 100 fold. If a seminarian could not be a member of the Legion during the school year he might join a praesidium in his home area during the summer and on semester breaks. If this would not be possible he could study the Legion Handbook on his own; it is a spiritual classic available in some forty languages and dialects, containing a wealth of spiritual insight and practical wisdom for the modern lay apostolate. To be in the Legion while a seminarian does not require a lot of time, since the apostolate given to each young man by the seminary itself would suffice for the Legion apostolate. The weekly meeting, and the daily praying of the *Catena* (comprised mainly of the Magnificat) would be the only other duties of membership. The seminary meetings would run in the same way as the usual parish meetings, thereby educating the future priest in the proper system and spirit of the Legion. The meetings would be a training ground, providing the Church with future Legion spiritual directors and experts in the Legion system.

It is not uncommon for pastors to assign a newly ordained deacon or priest to be the spiritual director of the parish praesidium. Having had a solid seminary background in Legion formation, the newly ordained priest or deacon would be an effective spiritual director and a true motivating source. If no Legion of Mary existed in his parish, he would have the know-how and experience to start one and see it flourish.

A mere academic knowledge of the Legion of Mary cannot be compared to the experience gained by actual membership. One can know *about* the Legion, yet still not *know* it. Thus the importance of seminary praesidia and the need for large numbers of legionary seminarians. By the time they reach ordination these seminarians will have learned the philosophy of religious action and will go on to their parishes with a means to mobilize the Catholic Faithful. For beyond Ordination a world awaits these future priests – priests who will know how to mold the laity and to sanctify them, thus affecting that world for good, and in the process, finding themselves fulfilled.