

# Legionary Parenthood

By Mary Peffley

All that we know about children we have learned since Regina Edel arrived a year ago! So obviously we are not authorities, but we are so full of enthusiasm over our vocation of marriage and parenthood, and how the Legion fits in, that we would like to share with other legionaries some of our ideas and experiences.

In preparation for this article I jotted down, over a period of several months, innumerable ideas which occurred to me while doing housework and caring for the baby. As a result, I am now confronted with pages and pages of somewhat haphazard and unrelated sentences and paragraphs, all of which I would like to somehow incorporate.

At the moment our small daughter is hanging onto the gate separating her from the living-room where I am typing, and making all sorts of commotion because she cannot come in and pull the lamp over. Which must prove that we have spoiled her, because why can't she be content with a long bright hallway in which to practice walking, and two boxes of toys to play with? But in spite of the small problems, we intend to cherish every moment of the few years of babyhood when we have her to ourselves.

"Your children are not your children," a poet has said. "They come through you but not from you." Our role as parents, we feel, is that of John the Baptist – to prepare them for the Lord. It is a challenging vocation, and one which requires a great deal of trust and all of the virtues which the Handbook urges us to develop, especially humility and patience.

## *Seeing Christ in the Children*

Humility to see that the child in his baptismal innocence is better than we, and that we must attempt to raise ourselves to his spiritual level rather than bringing him down to ours. "Between us and the baptised child," says Dr. Maria Montessori, the noted educator, "lies the gulf created by our own sins." And Emerson has written: "Infancy is the eternal Messiah, which continuously comes back to the arms of degraded humanity in order to entice it back to heaven." Our awareness of the doctrine of the Mystical Body will enable us to see the small Christ Child in our own children and give us a deep sense of their dignity and a reverence before the mystery of creation and growth.

And if we have tried to make part of us the great Legion principle that infinite patience and sweetness must be lavished on a priceless soul, we will be better able to deal with our children in the same way. These constant proofs of our love will bind them more closely to us than any material comforts we might provide for them.

It seems that nothing is ever achieved by becoming angry at a child. A firm but affectionate discipline, which helps him early in life to triumph over the weaknesses left by original sin and trains him in the fear and love of God, is more effective and keeps us aware of our own dignity and that of the child.

I often think that it must require supreme heroism for parents of a large family to be always patient. It takes patience and a spirit of sacrifice, for example, after an exhausting day, to be up at night with a child, or even to be cheerful when a child wakes and demands attention an hour or two earlier than we would ordinarily have to get up. It is a life of continual giving, but who better than the child can teach us the joy of the cross? "We give but little when we give of our possessions. It is when we give of ourselves that we truly give."

St. Paul reminds us that love is patient. So perhaps if we could love enough, and in the right way, we would never lose patience. It is indeed fortunate that marriage and parenthood are based on love (and that love is patient!) because it seems that patience is required at every step.

### *Crucial Years of Childhood*

Psychiatrists have discovered that many mental and emotional problems originate in babyhood and could be avoided if the child is surrounded by an atmosphere of love and peace, joy and order. Even the smallest infant needs love and cannot thrive without it. The cross will come soon enough, and he must be strengthened and prepared for it as Mary and Joseph prepared their Child.

During the crucial years from birth until the age of three a child unconsciously absorbs everything in his environment and it becomes part of his being. That is why it is so important to speak to an infant in a pleasant tone of voice – and to speak to him as if, he could understand everything we are saying. It is surprising how quickly he begins to respond. Pius X has said, "There is in man *from his birth* a power of understanding, a power which requires a mother's word that it may be aroused to action and, so to speak, reach outwards."

If only we could give the minds and souls of our children the same attention we give their bodies! There are many beautiful practices which can bring grace to the child – consecrating him to Our Lady at the time of baptism, blessing him frequently with holy water and, when he is a few months old, taking his hand and helping him to make the sign of the cross himself and perhaps saying a short prayer aloud in his behalf. Just as the sponsors act for the child in Baptism, the parents can act for him in other aspects of his Catholic life.

As soon as possible he can be brought, at least occasionally, to Mass and Benediction and visits to the Blessed Sacrament to receive Christ's blessing just

as the children received it in Galilee. And when we say, "I am all thine, my Queen, my Mother, and all that I have is thine," we give our children to her.

What we have learned in the Legion we can give to them. We can impress upon them the awe-inspiring truth that they were created by God for some great work which will not be accomplished if they fail Him. It is tragic that many persons become aware of their vocation *in spite of* their training at home and not because of it. Perhaps as a result many years are wasted. We should regard our children as Christ regarded His apostles. At the Last Supper He said to His Heavenly Father, "I pray for them because they are Thine."

We can help our children to develop their talents and use them for God. We will want them to be great legionaries, of course (preferably envoys!), but how can we inspire that desire if we do not give them an example?

### *Marriage no Barrier to Active Membership*

When our Edel arrived, we were tempted to think: "Now everything will be different. Now only one of us can belong to the Legion." Actually, it was I who experienced the temptation! I succeeded in overcoming it by transferring to another praesidium and engaging Bill as baby-sitter on Wednesday evenings. Of course, circumstances differ and we must each make our own decision. But married couples in the Legion receive very special graces – at least that has been our experience. The fact that we met in the Legion makes us feel particularly indebted to it. And when a little ingenuity is required to fit in meetings and assignment, we remind ourselves that since most of our joys and blessings have come to us either directly or indirectly through the Legion, it is only right that our difficulties and sacrifices should also come in the same way.

Most of us are inclined to take for granted the sacrifices which families of servicemen, doctors, politicians, travelling salesmen, scientists and other professional men must make for material success or the good of society. But what about sacrifices which are required for the good of the Church? I have noticed that many young men and women drop out of the Legion as soon as they marry, and that the term "family obligations" seems automatically to excuse us in the minds of others from any type of apostolic work. This idea is so widespread that I was somewhat startled to come across recently (in *Love and Grace in Marriage* by a French priest, Father Caffarel) the following opinion:

"The strength of the Communists comes from the fact that they do not hesitate to sacrifice their family life for the sake of the cause. Among Christians the family is not always a radiating centre; it is sometimes a barrier to the gift of self, and sometimes extinguishes any apostolic zeal. The crucial question is whether Christians must not sacrifice certain family joys and pleasures for the sake of serving God, and compensate for these renunciations by a greater effort of

understanding and family intimacy, with the hope that Our Lord will, by an increase of grace, make up for the hours or days taken from the life of the home.”

Father goes on to say: “The true order consists in this: a head of the family who takes charge (in the fullest sense) of the home; a wife who without herself failing to respond to the appeals of the city and the Church, encourages her husband to assume his responsibilities, and helps him to bear them. But this is possible only where a deep mutual love exists and that common seeking of the Lord which the Christian ideal of marriage ceaselessly urges us.”

The graces of the Sacrament, coupled with the graces we receive as legionaries, will help us work towards this Christian ideal of marriage. Countless legionaries throughout the world are giving the example. We know, for instance, of a young legionary mother of three small children whose spirit is an inspiration to everyone. In spite of the fact that one of her children suffered severe brain damage at birth and another is blind, she finds time not only to belong to the Legion but to direct a junior praesidium.

It is significant that the number of Legion marriages has increased so rapidly. Surely God expects not only holy marriages but apostolic marriages, which will give saints to Him and which will truly reflect the union of Christ and His Church. Marriages in which the husband and wife pray, work and do penance for the sanctification of each other and for their children – “giving all for love and counting it as nothing.” These marriages will be full of joy. “If true love and an unselfish spirit of perfect sacrifice guide your every action,” the Church tells us, “you can expect the greatest measure of earthly happiness to be allotted to man in this life.” But if, in the words of the poet, we seek only love’s peace and love’s pleasure, “we shall laugh but not all of our laughter and weep but not all of our tears.”

The Legion is not only a way of life in itself, but it prepares us for and directs us toward our ultimate vocation. Membership in the Legion, and particularly officership, gives us responsibility and the obligation of developing others. It teaches us self-sacrifice, discipline and order – all so important in family life. A Legion home should be different from other homes. From the beginning the children can be trained for apostleship. Family prayers would, of course, include the rosary and tessera – and why not, also, invocations to Edel Quinn, Alfie Lambe and all Legion martyrs? Special Legion feasts could be celebrated. A large framed tessera could have a place of honour in the home. The children can be taught that graces come from the father to the entire family, and they will be proud and happy when he is working for their Blessed Mother, going about her business.

It seems that Legion children just naturally grow up in a Legion atmosphere. Our Edel received her first blessing from a Legion priest, and was fortunate enough to be baptised on the Feast of the Miraculous Medal. In her short lifetime she has

attended two acies ceremonies, a praesidium and curia function, has been blessed by a Legion Bishop, and was present at the wake of an active member. And we have noticed that she saves her biggest, wettest kisses for her crucifix and the smiling photograph of her patron, Edel Quinn, which hangs near her crib.

So far, she has taught us far more than we have taught her – and given us far more. “Who will ever love us as the child loves us?” Dr. Montessori has written. “We defend ourselves against this love that will pass away, and we shall never find anything to equal it. We in our turmoil say, ‘I haven’t time. I can’t. I have a lot to do,’ and we think in our hearts, ‘The child must be taught better, or he will make us his slaves.’ What we want is to be free from him to do what we ourselves like doing, so as not to give up our convenience. It is necessary that a new creature should stir us and sustain us with a fresh and living energy that we have long lost.”

From *Maria Legionis*, June, 1962