

Inside the Legion of Mary – On Legionary Membership

Extension and Recruiting

By Father Francis J. Peffley

Extending the Legion and recruiting new members should be a dominant interest in the mind and heart of every legionary, not just of praesidium or council officers. *Extension* is the setting up of new praesidia, the expanding of the Legion's Marian and evangelizing influence throughout the world by contacting pastors, chaplains, campus ministry directors, etc. in every possible level and location of society. Although it is usual for councils to contact pastors in their local areas, individual legionaries – so the handbook says – have an obligation to do whatever they can to extend the Legion on their own. How can this be done? One example would be by long distance: a legionary who knows a priest in a different part of the country (or in another country!) could correspond by letter, perhaps sending him a handbook or the booklet *The Priest and the Legion of Mary*, encouraging him to consider starting the Legion. Another idea – perhaps after some conversation about the Legion – is to arrange an appointment with a priest, deacon or religious sister that they may have met on a retreat or workshop. The handbook exhorts all legionaries – laity or priest – to try to start the Legion in as many places as possible. In the early days in Dublin, there were praesidia in hospitals among the doctors and nurses; there was even a praesidium of detectives and police! And today there are praesidia in prisons and colleges. Non-parochial praesidia can also be set up for a specialized work like the street contact apostolate, the book barrow, or information tables in malls, etc.

The main reason for extension is that every praesidium is a source and channel of grace, and does immense good. And so the handbook says every member "... should endeavor to bring about this desirable thing." Think of all the benefits that are available to Catholics who become members of the Legion: there is real growth in faith and love for the Lord and Our Lady and increase in holiness and intimacy with God, not just for the members but also for those contacted in the work. The Legion has been proven to be an infallible means of bringing a person closer to God.

Divide and Conquer

Another practical way of starting a new praesidium is to divide and grow. What the handbook says about the importance of starting new praesidia it says about *Recruiting*, which can often result in the gaining of enough new members to consider dividing. The handbook says there can come a time when it is beneficial – in fact necessary – to divide and thus start a new praesidium. It says when the agenda has to be regularly shortened because of the rule of automatic closure, or if all the reports cannot be taken, or if there is little time for discussion

of the reports or the handbook, it is time to divide. It warns (based on actual experience) that if this is not done at that time, the spirit of the praesidium will begin to diminish, membership will fall off and people will stop recruiting – because it is felt the praesidium has enough members! The Legion can never have enough members! Having grown to that size, the members oftentimes will have become too comfortable and resistant to change, which is a reason in itself to consider division! With the existence of two smaller praesidia comes a greater desire to recruit, more meeting time for proper reporting and discussion and no tension with regard to closing the meeting on time – until these praesidia grow large enough to divide!

The logic of dividing praesidia is based not only on the idea of extending the Legion but of *developing* officers and thereby strengthening the council and the Legion at large. Even in a praesidium of ten or twelve members, if there were three or four members other than the appointed officers who would be willing to attend the council meeting and to try officership, that praesidium should divide – for the numerical growth of the Legion, yes, but more so for the spiritual growth of the members. There is special grace in officership, and for members who are convinced of the main reason they are legionaries – their personal holiness – division of the praesidium is a providential opportunity for advancement in sanctity. For a praesidium that feels disinclined to follow this directive, the handbook remarks that the praesidium should consider it their greatest honor to supply their best material for the formation of the new praesidium! Why? Because this is the healthiest form of pruning. “A praesidium depleted by such a gift of its members to form a new praesidium *will find its ranks quickly refill and the work attended by added blessings.*”

Invite Souls

With regard to personal recruiting, legionaries will sometimes pick and choose: thinking one prospect may be a better member over another, or mentally excusing the prospect because he or she is married and has several kids, or the personality may not be to their liking, etc. Legionaries cannot know which Catholics Our Lady has called to her Legion and have no right to make a judgment for her by excusing or overlooking potential members based on personal preference. Allowing for obvious conditions that would be contrary to membership, the invitation to the praesidium is open to anyone willing to accept it. The probationary period is a time of grace and always decides the future for the newcomer, one way or the other. In the meantime he is exposed to the presence of Our Lady through the spirit, order and charity found there and in the evangelizing influence of the work. The effect is all in the Blessed Mother's hands. The handbook gives reasons why a praesidium doesn't grow or becomes stagnant, the most important one being that there is no serious effort being made to recruit. Our Lady knows the new members she wants, but she must rely on her legionaries to ask them. Quite a few years ago the Concilium sent an official “Visitator” to all the major councils in the United States. In one of his talks he

suggested that every member should be making *ten* contacts a week for Active membership! Needless to say, that statement produced reaction! After comments like “I don’t see that many people in a month!” or “That’s unreasonable!” or “Impossible!” he asked if they had spoken about the Legion to the girl at the check-out counter in the supermarket, or to the receptionist at the dentist’s office, or the man who came to fix the roof? He asked that when going to Confession on the weekend, did they linger and approach any fellow Catholics coming out of church with a “firm purpose of amendment?” And what of college kids home for the summer or Christmas break, etc.? Exposed to the meeting and the work they could catch fire and perhaps become the future of the praesidium or start the Legion somewhere else! The Legion is open to and has room for every Catholic. Our Lady knows the souls she wants to sanctify as Legion members; it is the constant obligation of the praesidium and the individual member to recruit them. We should ask ourselves: Who will be sitting around the table of this praesidium ten, twenty, thirty years from now; who will take my place? They are out there. We must not let them pass Our Lady by!