

Inside the Legion of Mary – On Legionary Principles

Material Relief

By Father Francis J. Peffley

The complete title for this topic in the handbook is Material Relief *Prohibited*. This could give the impression that the Legion of Mary is against the charitable act of relief-giving. The fact is it praises it. It says *to give to the poor is a good work, and if done with a supernatural motive is a sublime one*. The prohibition can be understood with a little look into history. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is known worldwide primarily for giving material aid. In Ireland in the early nineteenth hundreds, during the time of famine and severe poverty in Dublin and other parts of Ireland, the St. Vincent de Paul society was fulfilling its mission of helping the poor, but with so much poverty and civil distress, their time and energy was spent giving food, clothing and whatever money available, without being able to give attention to the spiritual needs of the people, which is another aspect of the Society's charism. Frank Duff and others were members of the Society. After several discussions on St. Louis de Montfort's *True Devotion to Mary* and guided by Divine Providence, the Legion of Mary came into being. Frank Duff, on evaluating the situation, saw the Legion to be primarily an instrument for the performance of the Spiritual Works of Mercy, so as not to appear in competition with their former organization whose primary focus was on the Corporal Works of Mercy. So the St. Vincent de Paul Society continued its great work of feeding the poor and clothing the naked, and the Legion went on to focus directly on the salvation of souls.

It is known from experience that taking care of people's material needs can often be a full time job and not only does it take time, it also requires financial resources. All the resources the Legion of Mary possesses come from that little bag that goes around the table! Just enough to cover the materials needed to perform whatever spiritual works the praesidium is involved with and to support the council as it governs. Even if there were no rule to the contrary, there is no way, especially in today's world, that the Legion would add itself to the list of relief-giving organizations, whose purpose is strictly *temporal* and for which the Legion has no grace. There are so many of these in contrast to the very few that concentrate on the *eternal*. The calling of the Legion of Mary to bring spiritual good to every individual in the population – the True Faith to the non-Catholic and atheist, the sacramental life to the lapsed and lax Catholic – will raise those touched not just temporarily but forever.

It must be agreed that when all is said and done, getting a baby baptized, reconciling a marriage to the Church, or influencing someone back to confession after thirty years is much more valuable than giving food, clothing or money to the needy. It's true that the work of the Legion has an infinite value, because it can completely change a person's relationship with God. But legionaries must

be careful to have the right attitude about relief-giving, for the Legion does not minimize the importance of it. This is a permanent and even sacred work. Jesus said: *The poor you have always with you, and when I was hungry, you gave Me food, when I am thirsty you gave Me drink, I was naked and you clothed Me.* Whatever legionaries do for the persons on their work they do for the person of Christ in His Mystical Body.

The handbook calls attention to legionaries coming upon a situation where those visited are in serious need, both materially and spiritually. They are to assure the person that material aid is forthcoming, that they will arrange with the parish or appropriate organization to provide what is needed.

A great example of this was in the report of a Peregrinatio Pro Christo (PPC) team working in Georgia. Going door-to-door was actually going shack-to-shack, and the appalling condition of some of them went right to the heart of the legionaries. One house visited was lived in by an impoverished elderly couple that had a drastically caved-in-roof. On returning to the parish the distressed legionaries contacted the Knights of Columbus and told them of the sad situation. A few days later the legionaries were making their return visit to the elderly couple and were delightedly greeted with the sight of a brand new roof! Those legionaries gave material relief the Legion way!

In the meantime, the handbook expects the legionaries to be available for *works of service*. Observing their surroundings, they would offer themselves to help in some way – perhaps washing the dishes of an aged shut-in, or running errands, or coming back later for a household job or transportation to a doctor's appointment. This leads to trust and friendship, with the ultimate result of legionaries being able to experience the grateful acceptance of the Legion's spiritual aid and comfort.