

## *Inside the Legion of Mary – On Legionary Principles*

### **Perfection of Membership**

By Father Francis J. Peffley

This title from the handbook should indicate to every legionary that “good enough” is not the level of excellence expected of its members. The word *perfection* indicates the ideal held in the mind of Frank Duff as the Legion was being formed: the ideal of *human* perfection being a basis for *spiritual* perfection. So I will use this word to highlight some things that help toward the perfection of Legion membership.

The letter P in perfection applies to the *praesidium*, since the first rule of membership is attendance at the weekly meeting. “Punctual and regular attendance” is the most important aspect of legionary membership. Just as weekly Mass attendance will form good Catholics, so weekly praesidium attendance will form good legionaries. The doing of the work is important as well, but not as important as the meeting. Some people presume the performing of an active work is more important than mere attendance at a meeting. This is not true in the legionary world. The fundamental purpose of Legion membership being spiritual formation, it will be found that the spirit and order of the praesidium meeting, through the rosary, spiritual reading, allocutio, reports, etc., and the member’s humble response and willing compliance, will reap that spiritual growth intended by the founder.

The second letter is E and stands for *Eucharist*. The handbook emphasizes that the Eucharist must be at the very center of the legionary’s spiritual life and so the undertaking of Praetorian membership is encouraged. In many places across the world legionaries can be seen stopping in a church to make a visit before going on assignments, attending daily Mass and receiving Holy Communion and keeping Eucharistic holy hours. Devotion to the Holy Eucharist is the hallmark of Legion of Mary spirituality, loving and serving the Son of Mary, Mother of the Legion and Mother of the Church.

The third letter R in the pursuit of legionary perfection is to always strive to prepare and give an excellent *report*. The report is actually as important as the assignment since it is the second of the three steps necessary for a good meeting: the assignment, the report and the discussion on the report. These three are a unit and are to be present in every meeting by every member. A report should be neither too short nor too long and should present a good example for the other members. The handbook says the report should be audible and adequate – audible enough to be easily heard by everyone and adequate in detail to give the praesidium a picture of the experience and what was said by the visitors as well by those visited. This would include the

members' thoughts about the assignment, ways things could be improved, what could have been done better and ideas of how more souls can be reached.

The next letter in perfection is F and stands for *fidelity*, for being faithful to the spirit and system of the Legion. Mother Theresa was once asked her definition of success. God expects of us, she said, not to be successful but to be faithful. Success is not indicative of holiness – fidelity is. So legionaries in their week to week membership should not be expecting to *accumulate results* in their work but actually should be expecting to *become a result* themselves, by being faithful to Our Lady as she guides and forms them in legionary life.

E is the letter for *evangelizer* – to be always on duty for souls, trying to share and be aware that they are Our Lady's means of serving her Son in his Mystical Body today, as she did for him in person in gospel times. In a sense the Legion can be said to be her own "mystical body" by which legionaries take on her anxiety for souls and practice seeing *her* Son in each and every person, fellow members included. It would do no good trying to have a certain charity to those met on assignment and not include our brother and sister legionaries in that charity. Frank Duff considered this important enough to have it become part of the Third Standing Instruction!

*Catena*, meaning *chain*, is the C word in perfection, the most important prayer legionaries say. The length of this "chain" is global and reaches many times around the world since it links together the millions of Active and Auxiliary members who say that prayer every day. Just as with the Consecration of the Mass, which is happening at every present moment somewhere in the world, so it is with the catena of the Legion. Father Aedan McGrath, who spent nearly three years in solitary confinement in a Chinese communist prison, said what was most consoling and inspirational for him during that time was the knowledge that when he said the catena he was one with all the legionaries across the world who said the same prayer every day. Though the catena takes but a minute to say, it is so important a prayer that if a potential member would agree to follow all the Legion rules, say a daily rosary and all the other Legion prayers but not the catena, he would not be qualified for Legion membership.

The letter T in perfection of membership could only stand for *True Devotion to Mary* as taught by St. Louis de Montfort. This is at the heart of Legion devotion and spirituality. Out of the early discussions of Total Consecration to Jesus through Mary, held by Frank Duff and others in the St. Vincent de Paul Society back in 1917, came the Legion of Mary in 1921 – today the largest lay apostolic organization in the world. It was not a premeditated organization but an organic outgrowth of accepting and applying de Montfort spirituality. And just as there has been spiritual growth and development in the *organization* of the Legion as a result of the de Montfort way, so there is always growth and development in the *individual* spiritual life of the legionary who makes the True Devotion consecration. That is why the Legion encourages all its members, Active and

Auxiliary, to “pick a day and give themselves away” by learning the devotion and making the consecration. It is the crowning step in perfection of Legion of Mary membership.

The I in perfection of membership stands for “*infinite* patience and sweetness which must be *lavished* on the priceless soul.” The section in the handbook on this topic is three pages long and elaborates on one of the most important characteristics of a true legionary. It should be read often by legionaries personally and at praesidium meetings occasionally during the course of the year. Of all the words Frank Duff could have used to emphasize this principle, the words *infinite* and *lavished* were deliberately chosen as the highest standard to be measured up to by the members; they should evaluate their attitude, voice and demeanor when on assignment, at the meeting and in personal life in the light of this standard. The Church has asked that religious orders and organizations review and return to the ideals of their founder. When the canonization of the founder of the Legion of Mary is eventually achieved, it will be found that one of his greatest virtues was this infinite patience and sweetness which he lavished on everyone he met as a priceless soul.

The O stands for *order*, order in the system and order in the membership of the individual legionary. In fact, in comparison with other organizations the Legion is notorious for its insistence on order. The strict adhering to the handbook, which on page seven highlights the “system invariable” – the agenda of the praesidium and council meeting, the manner of saying the prayers, the methods of work and the Acies Ceremony – all contribute to the tranquil, orderly environment encompassing the Legion system. For the individual member, for example, there is the keeping of the notebook and the custom of order at the praesidium meeting by refraining from private conversations and by the non-interruption of members giving their reports; by the humble acceptance and performing of the work assignment, etc. All these contribute to the ideal of the peaceful “Mystical Home of Nazareth” which the Legion intends itself to be for its faithful members.

And the N stands for *never quits*, like the Chinese martyrs in time of persecution, like Edel Quinn and Alfie Lambe in the mission field, like the countless legionaries across the world since the beginning, faithfully perfecting and finishing their lives living out the Legion Promise in all climates and countries. Frank Duff was once asked for his definition of a legionary. He said a good legionary is one who lives the Legion system in the true spirit and who perseveres to the end. If we live as good legionaries, God willing, we’ll die as good legionaries, and be known as good legionaries for all eternity!