

*Inside the Legion of Mary – On Legionary Principles*

## **Sanctity and Legion Work**

By Father Francis J. Peffley

In various places in the handbook legionaries are reminded that they are to be sanctified not only by prayer, devotion to Mary and knowledge of the Faith, but by the doing of apostolic work. It goes on to define this Legion holiness as *apostolic* holiness, the unique charism of the Legion of Mary. Oftentimes sanctity is viewed as a personal, interior and individual state of soul, the focus on 'Jesus and I,' the self and God. But the fullness of sanctity is Trinitarian: God, the soul and *others*, a sanctity that will radiate supernatural influence to other people.

My Dad tells the story of how, in the beginning of his spiritual journey he resisted for nearly two years his spiritual director's advice to join the Legion. He felt he had everything in place to advance in holiness: daily Mass, Divine Office, rosary, spiritual reading, holy hours and spiritual direction (which he was doing his best to evade!) The priest, in my Dad's weekly confession, after commending him on his spiritual routine said, "All that is fine, but if you don't take on the apostolic heart of Christ you'll end up a spiritual dwarf!" My Dad says he left the confessional unsettled, visualizing his soul to be something like a Munchkin from the Wizard of Oz and somehow sensing he had received a grace to avoid a stunted spiritual life. The following week he attended his first Legion meeting, never to leave.

Christians are to be followers and imitators of Christ: since Christ was apostolic, being sent by the Father to redeem and show love for all mankind, Catholics by the very nature of their Baptism and Confirmation have the mandate to be apostolic, being sent to evangelize the world. The one difference between the standard spirituality of the general Christian life and that of the Legion life is its emphasis on apostolic spirituality. It is this which will keep the legionary from spiritually becoming like one of those decorative, miniature Chinese trees – a perfectly formed, dwarfed, living tree, stunted in growth due to the cutting of its roots when very young. The Legion asks that its members not stunt their spiritual growth by a self-focused or self-serving spirituality. It offers an *apostolic* spirituality – holiness that radiates itself out into the world to sanctify others.

The handbook insists that Legion works should be directed towards the gravest needs. What are the gravest needs? Obviously, the greatest need is the salvation of souls. How are souls to be reached? The Legion opens three avenues upon which to send its apostles – the three Cs: Consolation, Conservation and Conversion. Consolation: the souls in hospitals, nursing homes, prisons, sick at home, the bereaved; Conservation: lax and lukewarm families, individual lapsed parishioners, Catholics in name only; Conversion: new family visits, door-to-door visitation, book-barrow projects, crowd contact work.

The ideal praesidium will be doing or will be attempting all three. The purpose of doing any of these works is the salvation and sanctification of souls and the Legion has many methods at its disposal to do them.

The handbook has called attention to the fact that trivial work has a negative and unfavorable effect on the praesidium and its members, so priorities must be considered. I once heard of a priest who wanted the legionaries to do no door-to-door visits, no new families, no Pilgrim Virgin, no Enthronements of the Sacred Heart – only visits to the sick and shut-ins, because, he said, “that is very dear to my heart.” It was a touching thought, but was that the gravest need of his parish? Perhaps it was considered so, but if those souls are already receiving Communion every week from Ministers of the Eucharist, Junior legionaries could be assigned to visit them, or one team of the Senior praesidium could be assigned permanently to fulfill his wishes, while the other members could be allowed to move up to the second and third Cs where there are many more souls much more in need of the Catholic Church’s gift of salvation and sanctification. A praesidium is meant for challenging, difficult work, and these challenges are the roots of the members’ holiness. The priest above was cutting the roots of his members and stunting their spiritual growth.

I know of another priest – the one who got my Dad into the Legion – who was aware of how the Legion sanctifies its members: he assigned his developing legionaries to do Crowd Contact in a notorious red-light district of the parish. When his uneasy members reacted with shock and misgivings he said, “I need you to go; I always send my legionaries to places I’d rather not visit myself!” Here was a true Legion priest who knew that trust in Our Lady and challenging work would grow his members into genuine, apostolic holiness.