

Inside the Legion of Mary – On Legionary Principles

Symbolic Action

By Father Francis J. Peffley

The handbook presents to legionaries a principle which demands effort in all circumstances and at all costs, effort as a first principle both natural and supernatural; and it lies in the repudiation of impossibility as the key to the possible. Scripture says, "With God, all things are possible;" and the Legion builds on that by adding a practical formula. The handbook says the solution on how to deal with the apparently impossible is to attempt it in the spirit of Our Lady with total dependence on her; then divide up the impossibility into thirty-nine steps, each of which is possible. Of course, the number thirty-nine is figurative and the process may only require a few steps to see the resolution of the problem. The idea is to divide and conquer. How do you climb a ladder? One rung at a time. How do you convert a parish? One person at a time, one family at a time, one neighborhood at a time.

There was a pastor with a parish of seven thousand homes. He had his registry of Catholics, but how was he to reach each person in the homes of the lapsed or the unchurched? It was thought to be impossible. Applying the principle of Symbolic Action, a small praesidium was started and the few members began visiting five homes, then twenty-five, then fifty. This attracted new members to the Legion and with each small succeeding effort new praesidia began, and after time and effort six thousand of the seven thousand homes were reached, with many of the occupants met. No, not every person had been contacted, but the imagined impossibility had disappeared.

In the history of the Legion, Frank Duff was faced with many "impossibilities." The story of Bentley Place, where hundreds of street girls were rescued from a sinful district and taken on retreat which changed their lives, should be read by every legionary; it is an actual experience of the dynamic formula of Symbolic Action. The book is *Miracles on Tap* by Frank Duff, who was a natural psychologist and wanted his legionaries to appreciate the value of the positive mental attitude over the debilitating negative one. It's hard to find pessimism in the lives of the saints; they all had optimism in spite of the cross which actually crowned their lives with joyful hope. Sometimes, in evaluating a problem or difficult work, discouragement has the upper hand and brings on the thought of getting it done with the least amount of effort. But the handbook suggests a different outlook and a generous, optimistic attitude: to put more effort than is actually needed into the perfecting of the work, especially when it appears to be almost impossible to complete and when faced with other difficulties which make the situation seem actually impossible.

The principle is to take a first step, no matter how small. It must be an *action*, not the *thought* of a step or plan, and not merely a prayer, but a “symbolic” action. This action will have some kind of consequence leading to another step; this taken, other options will open up. The handbook is very emphatic in its presentation of this principle: “Few things are impossible to diligence and skill. But we imagine them to be impossible, and then by our attitude we render them so.” It goes on with deliberate emphasis: *“The stress must be set on action. No matter what may be the difficulty, a step must be taken. Of course, the step must be as effective as it can be. But if an effective step is not in view, then we must take a less effective one. And if the latter be not available, then some active gesture (that is, not merely a prayer) must be made which, though of no apparent practical value, at least tends towards or has some relation to the objective. This final challenging gesture is what the Legion has been calling ‘Symbolic Action’. Recourse to it will explode the impossibility which is of our own imagining and will enter, in the spirit of faith, into dramatic conflict with the genuine impossibility. The sequel may be the collapse of the walls of that Jericho.”*