

Inside the Legion of Mary – On Legionary Things

The Book-barrow

By Father Francis J. Peffley

Have you ever seen a book-barrow? They come in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes a book-barrow can be a mere card table with literature and sacramentals; other times it could be a portable book rack showing all sorts of Catholic pamphlets, holy cards or booklets with rosaries and miraculous medals hanging along the sides. But the one I was assigned to every week from the time I was about fifteen until age twenty was the real thing, an authentic and very unique book-barrow with big wagon wheels and mobile side racks for the supplies that flipped upright to open. It was six feet long, two feet wide and two feet deep, looking when closed like a long black coffin on big red wheels. In fact, on one occasion as we were wheeling the barrow back to the Legion building, a passerby mockingly looked at the barrow, removed his hat and said, "Poor soul; did I know him?" Another time we were offered \$500 for the antique wagon wheels!

Book-barrowes are meant to be set up in a public place, usually by a train station or bus stop, park or shopping mall or in front of a store or busy street corner. The primary purpose is to bring notice to the Catholic Church in the marketplace. It is a wonderful opportunity to meet people. The handbook says it brings the notice of the Faith to many unthinking people who don't often think about God or the Church; their passing by the book-barrow with its Catholic literature can often times remind them of God and become a moment of Actual Grace for them. It is an apostolate directed to the good, the mediocre, the bad or the religiously indifferent. Every kind of person will be drawn to the book-barrow: Catholics will stop and want to talk to the legionaries simply because they're Catholic and want to share their common beliefs; they might walk away with the intention of joining something Catholic like the Legion or perhaps with the desire to undertake daily Mass or a daily rosary; non-Catholics will approach who might be interested in learning more about the Catholic Faith; others will leave with the desire to make their peace with God; those who are just killing time to browse and have a friendly chat, often returning in later weeks to chat some more.

Personal contact is the important thing for the two legionaries who staff the book-barrow. Usually one will remain in care of it while the other moves around nearby, quietly making contacts, politely inviting them to visit the book-barrow. It is not enough to give a holy card or prayer booklet, rosary or medal and have a pleasant conversation. The ideal is to have each person contacted raised at least one level higher in their spiritual life. The handbook says that all of these will enter into conversation with the *gentle and sympathetic* legionaries in charge. This is all that is required of the legionaries, that they be *gentle and sympathetic*, on duty there to make friends with people for the Catholic Church, to smile and

say hello as they walk by. There will be an occasional one or two who will want to argue a religious point, but many will pause and acknowledge the greeting – some stopping to look, others to stay and talk and hopefully leave liking the Catholic Church a little bit more than before.

The work of the book-barrow is twofold: to attract souls to the Catholic Church and to follow-up as many contacts as possible, which is probably the more important aspect of the work. A most inspiring case is told by two legionaries who on book-barrow duty noticed a disheveled, homeless-looking “bag lady” nearing the book-barrow, who paused and read aloud the sign: “Legion of Mary”. Looking at the smiling legionaries she paused and said, “You know, years ago I used to be in the Legion of Mary!” The legionaries were stunned; they stood speechless for the moment, then went around and shook her hand and offered her a rosary which she accepted with tear-filled eyes and eventually began confiding her story. The legionaries learned she had been a junior legionary in Catholic grade school but as she grew older drifted away from her Catholic Faith into a life of ill repute and ultimate dereliction. They discovered she was not homeless but very much alone and living in utter squalor. They visited her regularly and when she became seriously ill and on her deathbed, they were able to arrange for the priest to bring her back to the Sacraments before she died. It’s a powerful example of how God’s grace works through the book-barrow. Just by being on the street at that time, being “gentle and sympathetic” and following through with the caring visitations, the legionaries became instruments in a remarkable work of Grace.

The handbook assures that exceptional knowledge of the faith is not needed by the members to staff the book-barrow. Of course, it helps to have knowledge on certain occasions but what is even more necessary is earnestness and sweetness towards the people who are encountered. Tough questions about religion can be dealt with by the simple acknowledgement that one doesn’t know, but will be sure to get the answer by next week or by leaving the information off at their home in the near future. That name and address is then added to the follow-up file of the praesidium for future visits. (Sometimes, even if the answer is known, the evangelizing legionary could say “well, I’m not really certain about that point but we’ll keep in touch and get to you with the information.”)

Since the book-barrow is intended to call attention to and promote the teachings of the Catholic Church, the handbook recommends three basic points be kept in mind by the legionaries as they work the book-barrow. Discussion with others about the Church can go in all directions but the handbook says it should always be brought back to the facts that: *Jesus Christ founded the Catholic Church, that there can only be one true Church and that the fullness of Divine Revelation is found in the Catholic Church alone.* Experience has shown that this practice of constantly calling attention to these three points has been instrumental in itself in making many converts.