

Inside the Legion of Mary – On Legionary Work

Hospital Visitation

By Father Francis J. Peffley

As is mentioned in the article “Sanctity and Legion Work,” the visiting of a hospital was the very first work assigned to legionaries. They went seeking Christ in the deprived, suffering, cancerous poor of Dublin, visiting as the Blessed Mother would visit Jesus, with genuine love and selfless care.

There is a handbook quotation from Father Creedon, the first spiritual director of the Concilium in 1921, in which he impressed and edified to see how the Legion could gather a small group of ordinary Catholics together to pray, plan and then to be sent out on “angelic missions.” That is an apt expression because in a sense they were assuming the work the Church usually ascribes to Guardian Angels, of being spiritual guides and care-givers in the lives of souls assigned to them.

The Legion is very clear about its purpose for doing hospital visitation: *“To educate the patients to a true conception of their sufferings, that they may bear them in the proper spirit.”* One wonders how often this principle is applied as the legionaries of today go about their hospital and nursing home visitations. As one of the three Cs, this work of Consolation can easily be stalled on the surface-level of care – that of merely giving social or religious comfort – and not reaching the depth necessary to educate the patients to the true meaning of their suffering.

Words of consolation and the praying of the rosary are of course beautiful and commendable. But to let patients know that suffering is a great blessing from God; that it molds and forms a person into the image and likeness of Christ; that once understood, the value of suffering takes away half its sting; that grace and strength to endure their sufferings are guaranteed by their heavenly Father and are perfecting them for heaven; that their present period of pain is God’s personal way of getting their attention to spiritual things in life – these are some of the components of care legionaries can use to help them deepen the real purpose of their visits to hospitals, nursing homes and shut-ins. The handbook also recommends letting the patients know this quotation of St. Peter of Alcantara: *“O happy patient, God has shown me how great a glory you have merited by your illness. You have merited more than others can gain by prayer, fasting, vigils, scourging and other penitential works.”*

Another important recommendation is to let the patient know that suffering can be an apostolate. Everyone carries personal or family cares or intentions in their heart, hoping and praying about them. Legionaries should take this a step further, and inform their contacts of their ability to beneficially suffer for others.

Bishop Sheen has told of his visits to hospitals: after consoling and sympathizing, he would ask the patient, "Can you offer your suffering in the next ten minutes for me?" Or, "Can you offer fifteen minutes of your suffering today for a special intention?" Or, "Can you suffer an hour for the intentions of the Holy Father?" This goes to the heart of the legionary purpose of visiting the sick and suffering. The salvation of souls, the souls in purgatory, the conversion of sinners – whatever could impress the patient with the knowledge that their sufferings are valuable for themselves and others should be uppermost in the mind of the visiting legionary.

There is also the Church's teaching on sacrifice and penance. Some patients will react favorably to this, having had the experience of Lenten penance and sacrifice through the years. This intention alone could turn every hospital and nursing home into a powerhouse of prayer and sacrifice if included in the legionary's approach to the patient. Prayer rising out of suffering will combine to become the penance necessary to pay for sin – of the patient himself and those of the "whole world," as the chaplet of Divine Mercy reminds us. And whether it be upon hospital bed or death bed, life can become a campaign of prayer and penance in the eternal plan of Grace, for Jesus said some demons are cast out *only* by prayer and penance.

A very important point the handbook makes in the section on hospital visitation is that occasionally legionaries come across patients with extraordinary suffering seemingly beyond their ability to endure. Legionaries are exhorted to realize that these patients, in the mysterious plan of God's Providence, are perhaps enduring the debt of suffering due to the justice of God by the very legionaries on the visit! It makes the fascinating point that because of original sin and personal sin, everyone has suffering to endure in this life and to some is given this special calling to suffer for others; otherwise the whole world would be sick and incapacitated. So legionaries should harbor in their hearts a debt of gratitude in their visits to the sick and should in some way make this personal appreciation known to the patients. Perhaps their illness is giving the legionaries the health to do God's work like visiting the sick! A genuine understanding and acceptance of this aspect of the mystery of suffering could mean the difference between a life of anger, despondency or despair, or one of high, peaceful and profound holiness.