

Inside the Legion of Mary – Our Lady of the Legion

What Our Lady Gives Her Legionaries

By Father Francis J. Peffley

When Frank Duff was asked what makes a good legionary, he smilingly responded, “One who keeps the rules and perseveres to the end!” I know most legionaries selflessly fulfill their membership without much thought as to what they get out of it, but do they occasionally send a heartfelt thanks to Our Lady for her gift of the Legion to them? Here I’d like to point out some effects and benefits of that gift from Our Lady to her legionaries as they follow their founder in “keeping the rules and persevering to the end!”

A Simple Way to Holiness

The Legion is a proven school for saints. Frank Duff once said that “The Legion makes saints and makes them by the bushel!” When we consider that an organization not yet a hundred years old already has three members up for canonization, it is truly amazing. Legionaries by their faithful membership should be aware that they are linked to and are in the company of these three “Saints-in-Waiting”, as well as their some thousand heroic brothers and sisters in China who were martyred for their Catholic Faith and Legion membership between 1949 and 1953. The Legion is not just an organization but a way of life, a vocation of the lay apostolate, and a school for sanctity. I think legionaries should be especially grateful for the opportunity to attend this “school.” If we want to become good at something, we have to practice it every week – a sport, a hobby, a musical instrument; legionaries “get good” at holiness by being “practicing” legionaries – faithfully keeping up the weekly praesidium and assignment exercises and following the prescribed instructions. It is an ideal expression of the lay vocation for Catholics in all walks of life – a real vocation for the married, the single, the separated and even for a priest, deacon or nun. We know Frank Duff never married, devoting his whole life to serving God and “persevering to the end” in the Legion that he founded. The story is told that he was once asked why he didn’t marry one of those admiring secretaries of his; he replied, “Why should I make one woman miserable when I can keep at least a half dozen waiting in hopeful expectation!”

Good Catholics – Automatically

A follow-up to the previous benefit of Legion membership is the opportunity the Legion provides to fulfill what Canon Law and Vatican Council II say to every Catholic. Canon Law is the official “Rule Book” of the Church and in it – as well as in the documents of Vatican II – is stated very clearly that the lay apostolate is

not optional. All Catholics have the obligation to spread the Catholic Faith. Vatican II states in the Decree on the Laity that *“The Christian vocation is by its very nature a vocation to the apostolate ... a member who does not work at the building up of the body [of Christ] must be considered useless both to the Church and to himself ... From the fact of their union with Christ, the head, flows the laymens’ rights and duties to be apostles.”* This clearly indicates that the lay apostolate is not optional. A Catholic is bound by the very nature of Catholicism to be apostolic. Part and parcel of Catholicism is evangelization – sharing and spreading our Faith. Vatican II further states, *“Inserted as they are in the Mystical Body of Christ by baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit in confirmation, it is by the Lord himself that they are assigned to the apostolate ... On all Christians, accordingly, rests the noble obligation of working to bring all men throughout the world to hear and accept the divine message of salvation.”* As this demonstrates, Vatican II is emphatic that everyone by baptism and by confirmation is to be apostolic and to spread the Faith. Furthermore, Canon Law obliges us to be apostolic as is stated in Canon 225: *“Since all lay people are assigned to the apostolate by baptism and confirmation, they are bound by the general obligation and they have the right, whether as individuals or organizations or in associations, to strive so that the divine message of salvation may be known and accepted by all people throughout the world.”* Legionaries should ask themselves the question: **“What would I be doing to fulfill these rules and exhortations that the Church expects of its members, if I were not in the Legion of Mary?”** We can surmise from the lives of ordinary Catholics what that answer might be. But for the Active legionary it is obvious that Legion membership makes it actually easy to follow the rules of the Church and to be a good Catholic. But the Legion does even more: it provides a proven method and motivation for sanctity, thus fulfilling Canon 210: *“All Christian faithful must make an effort, in accord with their own condition, to live a holy life and to promote the growth of the Church and its continual sanctification”* – the very purpose of legionary membership!

The Gift of Learning

Long-time legionaries are aware of the wealth of knowledge of their Faith gained by their membership and the spiritual direction and formation received. Every Legion meeting attended has been a class in adult Catholic education. One of the biggest problems of the Church throughout the entire world is that most Catholics do not know their Catholic Faith. The Legion addresses that problem by supplying weekly spiritual formation as well as weekly education in Catholicism. The handbook contains one hundred and seventy-three quotations from Sacred Scripture, excerpts from the writings of sixty-two saints, references more than forty Church documents, and over forty quotations from popes. The legionaries have also learned apologetics by way of assigned works involving the duty of explaining the Faith to others. Important Catholic teachings, namely the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, Mary’s motherhood of souls, as well as de Montfort’s True Devotion, help members to live that same Catholic lifestyle that

shaped the holiness of people like John Paul II, Mother Teresa, Maximilian Kolbe, Matt Talbot, as well as the Legion's three "Saints-in-Waiting", and many others. Every time legionaries have come together for their meeting it is as if they were gathered at the cenacle with Our Lady, as in the days of the first apostles; every Legion meeting becomes the Upper Room where modern-day apostles gather together in a cenacle of prayer with Mary, asking the Holy Spirit to come upon them so that they can do great things for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

Recipients of Graces

A true story is told concerning the great Legion priest Father Francis Ripley of Liverpool, England. He was working with some ex-soldiers as hospital chaplain after World War II and wanted to start the Legion among the patients and staff. Going about recruiting members he met a German soldier who had lost all his hair in a tank explosion. When Fr. Ripley asked him to join the Legion the soldier asked if he joined, would the Blessed Mother help his hair grow back. Fr. Ripley said he would not be surprised if that happened, and after three months of Legion membership the bald German soldier had a head of beautiful blond hair! (When I told my Dad this story he said that it had never worked for him, and he's been in the Legion over fifty years!). The principle, of course, is that Our Lord and his Blessed Mother are never outdone in generosity. Legionaries have experienced that if we give them something, if we sacrifice time, effort or energy doing their work, they always give something in return. Perhaps a child or grandchild will come back to church; maybe an un-churched spouse will convert to the Faith. There will always be some special grace because of our Legion membership.

During my years at college I asked one of my good friends to join the Legion. He declined, giving the reason that he needed all his time to study. He was taking the History of Philosophy, a difficult two-semester course. He failed the course in the first semester, and when the next one started, I asked him again, mentioning that Our Lady would help him see to it that he would find time to study; and, besides, he couldn't do any worse than fail the course anyway! He joined the praesidium and passed this time with a C grade, a fairly respectable achievement for that course. My friend learned to love the Legion, which brought the call of a vocation. He went on to the seminary, was ordained a priest and is now one of the Monsignors of his diocese. Our Lady is never outdone in generosity.

The Gift of Sacrifice

Almost immediately after joining the Legion, new members feel the pinch of sacrifice: meeting night comes around and there's a good movie waiting to be watched; assignment time comes and the weather is bad. It doesn't take long, though, before Legion membership begins to harden the muscles of the will and the realization that the duties of membership are real means of proving one's

love for God and his mother. This is where Our Lady gives her legionaries the opportunity for genuine sacrifice. For many legionaries this weekly sacrificing blossoms into the fruit of desire to do more and give more to grow in personal spiritual life. Legionaries have gone on to be Extension Workers or even Incolae Mariae, going to live in another place to work for the Church through the Legion.

In the book of Deuteronomy we find the principle of tithing – the giving of ten percent to God. While in Scripture this generally refers to finances or to the fruit of the harvest, this principle could also be applied to our time and effort. Out of the one hundred and sixty-eight hours in a week, tithing would commit ten percent of that time to God. For the average Catholic this would include attending Mass, daily prayer, spiritual reading, holy hour, perhaps helping in the parish, etc. I wonder if legionaries could consider tithing within their Legion membership? They already have a good jump-start on this by the requirement of the three and a half hours each week they set aside for the Legion, which is two percent of a legionary's time.

Brian Tracy, an internationally known speaker on time management presented the following research in one of his seminars: a person who lives to be sixty years old will spend twenty years of life sleeping, seven years of life in the bathroom, six years eating, five years waiting in line or sitting in traffic, four years cleaning house, three years at meetings, and one year looking for lost objects (I have figured out how to save this year of life – pray to St. Anthony!), and eight months reading junk mail (I can also save eight months by throwing junk mail directly into the “circular file” as soon as it comes in.) Out of those sixty years, how much time will be spent for God? Legionaries have this problem solved by the ready-made system which helps them to become apostles by prioritizing their time and drawing on their untapped generosity.

Scripture says that with tithing, God's blessings are always far greater than the generosity shown to him. If legionaries – already ahead by their exemplary Catholic life – were to apply, where possible, the tithing principle to their membership, great things would happen for them, for the souls they contact and for the Legion itself. Ten percent of a legionary's week would be about sixteen hours. There are many legionaries across the globe who often give far more than that. But I propose it as an ideal, or a goal to aim for, in keeping with Frank Duff's theme of “Perfection for Mary.” To start, there is the basic gift of three and a half hours a week; taking on an officership or Praetorian membership would add an increase to this, as well as making more time for studying the handbook, reading the many Legion books available or making holy hours for the extension of the Legion. Anything “Legion” would contribute to the tithe. Taking an occasional extra assignment, helping on extension or with the organizing of a new praesidium, going on Evangelization projects or PPC would also be moving further into realizing the ten percent goal. Eventually, this gift of tithing would be seen to be just one more gift Our Lady waits to give her legionaries.

The Gift of Friendship

Legionary membership is a seedbed for friendships that form and for Legion marriages that sometimes result. For example, one Legion council in Cork, Ireland, reported *five* marriages from one praesidium alone. It was probably the most popular praesidium in all of Ireland! The Legion is a family, and that is why we call ourselves “brother” and “sister” at the meetings. During the course of the year the Legion offers many opportunities to celebrate legionary friendship: the Annual General Reunion in December, the Acies Consecration in the spring, the summer outdoor event, and the September praesidium function, not to mention the many times a cup of coffee is shared after a meeting or assignment, or the treating to dinner for a member’s birthday or when the Promise is taken. The Legion’s main purpose is the holiness of the members; it increases the vertical relationship we have with God and the Blessed Mother, but it also enriches the horizontal relationship of friends we gain as we live the Legion way of life. It reminds me of a beautiful jeweled cross with the vertical bar, which is symbolic of our relationship with God, and the horizontal, symbolic of our relationships with others, brilliant and glowing with a true expression of Christian love.

A Special (but not necessary!) Gift

A minor gift from Our Lady to many of her legionaries is the “younger look” and the “longer life.” This can’t be found in the Legion handbook or in Canon Law but I believe it can be shown nonetheless. For example, Fr. Aedan McGrath, official Legion visitor to the Far East, while still active at age 95, looked to be about 75. I myself on occasion was required to show proof of age when ordering a glass of wine in a restaurant – and I was 35! My own Mom and Dad look ten years younger than they are. And Frank Duff was still riding his bicycle at the age of 91! He never owned a car. In fact, he never drove a car except on one occasion, when, as a young man, he borrowed his brother’s car and the engine exploded! As with Frank Duff, so it was with Edel Quinn, Alfie Lambe and others: the Legion kept them young in spirit and in body. I knew some little old ladies in Philadelphia who were still doing door-to-door assignments in their nineties!

A Future Blessing

A special benefit to the legionaries has its basis in the *among you should stray from the truth and someone bring him back, he should know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.* Think of all the joyful successes legionaries have had in their Legion work, being instrumental in bringing back lapsed and lax Catholics to the practice of the Faith; and the many unchurched people who have converted as a result of legionary influence. The Legion, with its program of conversion and encouraging the lax and the lapsed to live again their Catholic Faith, ensures its members of this future blessing.

The Greatest Gift

Legionaries should find great consolation in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25, referring to the Final Judgment. Our Lord describes what it will be like to stand before him and be judged. Jesus says: *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne and all the nations will be assembled before him, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him and say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will say to them in reply. ‘Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.’ And then these will go off into everlasting life.”* Mother Teresa said that not only are people hungry for bread, they are hungry for the word of God and the Eucharist. People are not only thirsty for something to drink, they are thirsting for God’s love. Legionaries, who have given of their time and effort to perform the spiritual works of mercy, know these to be more important than the corporal works of mercy (feeding the hungry, clothing the naked), because the soul, unlike the body, is eternal and will live forever in either heaven or hell. What a great blessing it will be for them to hear the Lord say, *Come, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for when I was sick in that nursing home you legionaries visited me; when I was in prison you came to see me. When I was hungry for the Truth, you brought me back to the Faith; when I was thirsty for love, you came and comforted me.*

And for those legionaries who may find themselves in the “waiting room” of Purgatory, not to worry; you will remember the November Mass said for departed legionaries by every praesidium in the world; and as the first of November comes along, with three hundred thousand Masses being said for you, your Welcome to Heaven! call will certainly be heard!