

The Legion of Mary

By Rev. Philip C. Hoelle, S.M.

“Never has so little been made of so much” was the laconic comment of a Belgian Benedictine when he discovered the Legion of Mary, perhaps the most successful lay movement in the Church. Quietly and unobtrusively it all began in the top back room of a house in a poor section of Dublin on the eve of Our Lady’s Nativity, September 7, 1921, when a priest, a layman, and fifteen women gathered around a table containing a statue of Our Lady of Grace, flanked by two lighted candles and two vases of flowers. Frank Duff, the layman, a civil servant by trade and a St. Vincent de Paul member in his free time, suggested that the group form a little association to do spiritual works of mercy. They would start by visiting the sick in the wards of a large Dublin hospital.

FIRST MEETING –

The seventeen fell to their knees and invoked the Holy Spirit and prayed the rosary, exactly the same way thousands of Legion praesidia around the world begin their weekly meeting today. The Holy Spirit and Our Lady first brought Christ to the world and together they still bring Christ to the world. Without the Holy Spirit, Mary is nothing and without Mary, the Holy Spirit appears all too vague and distant. In Mary at the Annunciation the Holy Spirit fell in love with humanity. For this reason, the Legionary makes his promise to the Holy Spirit and begs Mary to make him also a pliable human instrument in His service.

The International Eucharistic Congress held in Dublin in 1932 made the Legion known to delegates from the whole Catholic world. Here was a successful lay apostolate in simple, attractive form. The laity was enthusiastically sharing in the spiritual work of the hierarchy. This was not just another parish organization. It definitely refrained from work of a financial or merely social nature, good though these works are. It was limiting itself to spiritual work in the parish, the work which no other lay group was doing but the very work which needed laymen: bringing Christ to souls and souls to Christ.

Today the Legion is organized in nearly a thousand dioceses throughout the world. Its rules are printed in more than a score of languages and its prayers are recited in over sixty languages. The *Handbook*, the official 348 page guide in the hands of every active Legionary, the most popular book ever written by an Irishman, is the work of the founder of the Legion, Frank Duff.

ORGANIZATION –

Blending mobility with stability, the Legion is built on two masterpieces of organization – the ancient Roman Legion and the modern Society of St. Vincent de Paul. From the famed Imperial army of the Caesars comes the call for loyalty,

courage, discipline and the Latin names, such as *praesidium*, *curia*, *senatus*, *concilium*. From Frederick Ozanam's St. Vincent de Paul Society comes its spirituality, adaptability, fraternal charity, the personal report at the weekly meeting, visiting in pairs and the secret bag collection.

The seed of Frank Duff's outstanding devotion to the Holy Spirit was sown in his school days with the Holy Spirit Fathers at Blackrock, where he won several high academic honors. From the writings of St. Louis de Montfort and the Marianist founder, the saintly Father William Joseph Chaminade, the Legion founder absorbed his inspiring, apostolic devotion to Mary. Because he grasps all the consequences of the thrilling doctrine of the Mystical Body, Mr. Duff is convinced that the Legionary must bring Mary as Queen into hearts and as Mother into homes if Christ is ever to reign in individuals and in families.

We, the members of His Mystical Body, are His lips and hands and feet and His Mother is our true spiritual Mother. When the Legionary, in imitation of Mary, places himself as a docile instrument in the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, he learns from his spiritual Mother that men are changed not so much by logic as by personal influence and kind deeds. Mary fills the Legionary's soul with kindness and devotedness and the Holy Spirit through His cooperating instruments accomplishes wonders in hungry human hearts.

One of the annual statistical records of the Legion Senatus of the Philippines was hailed by a prominent American bishop as "the most inspiring report that I have seen." It is no wonder that the Legion is today the largest lay organization in the Church carrying on a universal spiritual apostolate.

DEFINITION –

The Legion of Mary, listed officially as a pious union in the Church, may be defined as an association of Catholics, formed into an army for service in the spiritual warfare which the Church is perpetually waging against the evil forces in the world. The Legion aims to sanctify its members by a solid interior life of prayer which forms the mainspring of a very definite, active cooperation in spiritual work assigned by the Church. A Legionary must forget himself, his own comforts and desires and concentrate completely on what he can do for others with the power of the Holy Spirit and the ministering help of Mary.

The basic unit of the Legionary system is the *praesidium*, a Roman army term indicating a detachment, a frontier guard, a beachhead for conquest and a bulwark for defense, a symbol of loyal courage and soldierly solidarity. The primary obligation set by the Legion as a standard procedure is regular attendance at the weekly meeting, a brief, personal audit report, and accepting a spiritual work of bringing Christ to souls and souls to Christ. This work, assigned by the spiritual director is usually done in pairs.

TYPICAL MEETING –

Lasting at least an hour and at most an hour and a half, the weekly meeting begins with the prayer to the Holy Spirit and five decades of the rosary, said kneeling. The spiritual director then makes a brief spiritual reading while all sit down. This is followed by the audible reports to the president on the previous week's assigned two hours' work. This report should be brief, informative, and helpful to all the other members. Whatever is discussed is kept strictly confidential among the members, since the sole purpose is to have this *praesidium* know the problems as a group and thus obtain mutual encouragement, prayerful cooperation and additional inspiration to continue the work with greater confidence despite real difficulties.

Halfway through the meeting all stand to recite together with the spiritual director the *Magnificat* and the collect prayer from the Mass for the feast of Mary, Mediatrix of all Graces. When all are seated the spiritual director gives an *allocutio*, a brief exhortation intended to deepen the spiritual life of the Legionary and encourage him to greater generosity and a more lively appreciation of his Legionary mission in the Mystical Body. When the reports of the members are completed, new business is discussed, assignments for the coming week are made in pairs for all the members and finally all kneel to recite the concluding prayers and receive their spiritual director's blessing. Every meeting follows this carefully blended mixture of prayer, spiritual reading and business.

There are four officers for each *praesidium*: The president, who conducts the weekly meeting; the vice-president, who is especially responsible for the auxiliary members, the secretary and the treasurer. During each meeting there is a secret bag collection. Several *praesidia* in a city or area make up a local *curia* and several *curiae* constitute a regional or national *senatus*. At present there are five *senatus* in the United States. Over all the world's *senatus* is the chief governing body, the international *concilium* in Dublin, which meets on the third Sunday of each month to keep abreast of all reports sent in from all branches around the world. Very few men in the world are as well informed of the apostolic activities in the Catholic church as is Frank Duff, who has never missed a monthly *concilium* meeting.

WHO CAN BELONG? –

Membership in the Legion is open to all Catholic men and women who lead edifying lives and are animated by the Legion spirit or at least desire to foster that spirit in themselves and are willing to fulfill the required duties. Let's listen to the founder himself describe the members of the Legion: "Not special souls or unusual types, but ordinary Catholics living the everyday life of the world. Its membership comprises the learned and the unlearned, laborers and leisured, the unemployed, widely differing classes, colors, races, including not a few whom the

world would consider as primitive or depressed. In a word, it represents typical Catholicism.”

Persons desiring to join must apply for membership in a *praesidium*. A *praesidium* numbers from six to twenty members. *Praesidia* are organized with the approval of the local *curia*. The *praesidium* may be for men only, for women only, or mixed, according to circumstances and needs. Candidates have a three months' probation in which they perform all the prescribed duties. Then they become full-fledged members by making the Legionary Promise to the Holy Spirit during the weekly meeting in the presence of the *praesidium*. Any member may be chosen as an officer and full obedience is given to the authority of the president approved by the spiritual director.

The Legion is a lay apostolic group and the spiritual director remains behind the scenes as advisor and director, representing the clerical guidance required by Catholic Action, which is a sharing by the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy. A member must be at least eighteen years old. However, there are junior *praesidia* for those between ten and eighteen, with duties befitting their abilities, under the direction of a senior Legionary.

Auxiliary members do not undertake the active apostolate of weekly meetings and weekly two hour assignment, but they assist the active Legionaries with the *Tessera* prayers, which consist of all the prayers of the weekly meeting. There are two kinds of Auxiliaries – coadjutors and lay auxiliaries.

Coadjutors include priests and men and women religious who offer their daily prayers for the work of the Legion and daily recite the *Magnificat* and the accompanying prayer mentioned above in the weekly meeting. Moreover, orally or at least mentally they say this prayer daily: “*Mary Immaculate Mediatrix of all graces, I commit into your hands, in so far as I can, my daily Masses, Communions, prayers, works and sufferings.*”

The Lay Auxiliaries daily recite the *Tessera* prayers – all the prayers said in the weekly meeting by the active members. Annually, as close as possible to March 25, the feast of the Annunciation, active and auxiliary Legionaries assemble in a sacred and solemn religious ceremony, called the *Acies*, to renew individually and collectively their consecration to the Blessed Virgin. This assembly recalls Mary's complete dedication to the Holy Spirit during that momentous visit of the Archangel Gabriel when the fate of mankind hung in the balance and awaited Mary's free acceptance. This impressive rite reminds every Legionary of his duty of surrendering to continue her mission of crushing the serpent's head.

The Legion limits its activities to the spiritual sphere. It has no intentions of interfering with any other Catholic organization. There are no dues and no drives or collections of any kind, not even for charitable causes. Others do that kind of

work. The secret bag collection is the only mention of finances and this voluntary contribution supports the highly organized, far-flung Legion.

SPREAD OF LEGION –

The spread of the Legion all over the world is a modern miracle. In 1927 with thirteen *praesidia* in Dublin, it branched out to Waterford, Ireland. In the first decade it consolidated itself firmly in Ireland, England, Wales, and Scotland. Dublin now has over four hundred *praesidia*. In the second decade the Legion stormed through the United States, Canada, India, Australia, and Africa. The third decade saw it span the length and breadth of Europe and in the last decade the vast Spanish-speaking countries caught its contagious missionary zeal.

BEGINNING IN FRANCE –

An article in the *Ecclesiastical Review* entitled, "Is this the long awaited parish organization?", launched the Legion in this country in 1931. Father Joseph P. Donovan, C.M., the author, had gone to Paris to attend a general chapter and met there an Irish nun at the famous Charity convent on Rue du Bac. She handed him a copy of the Legion *Handbook* and told him that it had been left with her to get the Legion started in France, but so far no one in France was interested. Father Donovan read Frank Duff's Mariology-packed manual, and on his return visit to the nun commented that it was beautiful but not practical. The nun had a hard time convincing this practical American seminary professor that it was really working in Ireland, but Father had just come from Ireland and had not even heard of it. Hastily changing his plans, Father Donovan retraced his steps to Ireland and came back to France convinced. On his return to St. Louis he wrote his epoch-making article.

After reading the article a priest in the mining town of Raton, New Mexico, set up the first American *praesidium*. In their first meeting the spiritual director noticed that some of the candidates stumbled over parts of the rosary. Before some could become members they had their marriages rectified in the Church. The second American *praesidium*, was organized in a progressive midwest Catholic college for women.

A strange feature of the Legion's spread is the fact that in its pioneer days it was made up of women, except for the founder himself. Seldom are men attracted to such a group but Frank Duff attributes this unusual development to the toughness of the Legion. The first American *praesidium* in Raton was comprised entirely of men. Indian men made up the first Canadian *praesidium* and the first African group was all men.

The most remarkable successes of the Legion have been recorded in mission areas among the unlettered. This is due primarily to the excellent Legion envoys sent out from Dublin with special authority to organize the Legion in order to

assist the missionaries in almost all capacities opened to Catholic lay apostles. Above this highly select group of envoys, all of whom have penned glorious pages in the modern lay apostolate, towers the compelling personality of Edel Quinn, “destined,” in the thrilling prophecy of Archbishop Antonio Riberi, “by sheer force of example to influence the course of history.”

This gay, attractive, County Cork business girl, in 1936 at the age of twenty-nine was dying of tuberculosis. Given six months to live, she was sent as envoy to East Africa by the Legion’s founder, despite the council’s doubts as to wisdom of his decision. Dying, yet determined, Edel in seven and a half years under tremendous difficulties succeeded in establishing the Legion all over Zanzibar, Kenya, Tanganyika, Uganda, Nyasaland and the Island of Mauritius.

With ebbing physical strength but invincible faith and irrepressible zeal she traveled the jungle roads with her Mohammedan driver in a 1932 V-8 Ford, breaking through racial prejudice and planting the Legion standard with almost incredible success. When asked about her devotions to Our Lady she replied: “I could never refuse her anything I thought she wanted.” Her dying words were: “What is happening to me? Is Jesus coming?” It was May 12, 1944. From the Holy See came immediate recognition of this heroine of the apostolate in these words: “In truth she spent herself in planting the Legion of Mary in the soul of Africa.” In 1956 her cause for canonization was introduced in Rome.

How has Edel Quinn influenced the course of history? Archbishop Riberi, Papal Internuncio to Africa during Edel’s legendary conquests there, was later transferred to China and there he used Edel’s methods to organize the Legion of Mary in China before the Communists forcibly took over this unfortunate people.

The Irish Columban, Father Aedan McGrath, spent the three most thrilling years of his life as Legion envoy in that nation where so few have heard the Gospel. Often only a day’s march ahead of the Communist armies, Father McGrath set up over a thousand *praesidia* in ninety Chinese dioceses. The Legion patrols in China became the Communists’ most feared enemy. Today they are keeping the Faith alive in the chained Church in China. The Communists’ plan for a National Church was ruined by what they called an “Imperialist Legion of Mary.” A “progressive” priest in a Communist newspaper article said that wherever there was a *praesidium* of the Legion the National Church has been a complete failure.

The Legion *Handbook* quotes the Cure of Ars as saying: “The world belongs to him who loves it most and proves that love.” The Challenge of Communism can only be met by apostles, active workers for God shielded with the armor of prayer and branded with the marks of heroic self-sacrifice and total dedication to Christ. This is God’s world and Chinese Legionary heroes and heroines are proving their loyalty in prisons and in death. In China alone the Legion of Mary has a thousand martyrs and ten thousand who have suffered in prison for the Faith.

The thrilling saga of Legion conquests in Kerala's reconquest of freedom is another glorious page in the annals of modern lay apostles.

The Holy Father's constant pleas for the reunion of Christendom were anticipated by the unprecedented cooperation of faithful Legionaries with members of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

It was my precious privilege to welcome Frank Duff at the Daytona airport in December, 1956, when he came to receive the annual Marianist Award for outstanding devotion to the Mother of God. Never have four hours passed as quickly as they did that evening in the Marian Library as we talked about the Legion of Mary. Half of the wonderful conquests of the Legion are not published for good reasons! Despite a rainy, blustering night from hundreds of miles, in all directions, devoted Legionaries flooded the capacious University of Dayton Chapel to witness the evening ceremony in which Frank Duff received the highest award in the power of the University of Dayton to bestow.

In his brief message of acceptance, at the reception following the ceremony, swarmed by hundreds of admiring Legionaries, the self-effacing, humble award-winner expressed his glowing gratitude in these words: "I suppose there is no tribute that could be addressed to me that would give me greater pleasure than to tell me that I have served Our Lady."

A few years ago the Legion headquarters in Dublin received from South America a wire saying: "Alfie joined Edel today." Frail, twenty-six year old Alfred Lambe had ended his triumphal Legion envoyship in South America in a blaze of glory. Another brilliant chapter had been written in Legionary annals in still another continent desperately in need of lay apostles.

The Legion of Mary is a potential maker of canonized saints. Edel Quinn and Alfie Lambe await a gifted pen to etch their lives of high adventure on the minds of our restless Catholic youth and stir their hearts into glowing zeal for souls.

When the history of the twentieth century will be written it will reveal a galaxy of eminent lay leaders in the Church. Among the crowning glories of this century's apostles will stand the name of the founder of the Legion of Mary, called by Archbishop Riberi "the nearest approach to the ideal of Catholic Action as fostered by the Holy Father," the founder of the largest body of lay apostles the Church has ever blessed.

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