

# **The Legion of Mary**

By Father Phelim O.D.C.

## **Humble Beginnings**

On 7<sup>th</sup> September 1921, the eve of Our Lady's birthday, a small group of lay people gathered in Myra House, Francis St., Dublin. A statue of Our Lady stood on a white cloth on a table in the room. It was flanked by two vases of flowers and two candlesticks with lighting candles. A meeting began with a prayer to the Holy Spirit and the kneeling members recited the Rosary. For a time the group was known as "The Association of Our Lady of Mercy". In God's good time it was to become what we now know as the Legion of Mary. As you walk down Francis St. today a plaque on the wall of Myra House reminds you of the historic meeting of 1921. Mary's statue on the table symbolised her presence. The small group asked her to lead them forward as she wished and in the course of time she led them forth to the ends of the earth. Today millions of Legionaries are active in spreading the gospel throughout the world.

## **The Aim of the Legion**

The aim of the Legion of Mary is to give glory to God through the holiness of its members. It aims to promote in the world the reign of Christ through prayer and apostolic action. It works under the control of church authority and is loyal to the church's teaching. Its spirit is that of Mary herself. The Roman Legion was a disciplined army clad in military array. Mary's legionaries put on the armour of God and promise to do battle with the forces of evil. Mary was central to God's plan of salvation. Her role is ongoing in the church. So legionaries act in close union with her in a wide variety of activities.

## **The Role of the Priest**

The model of the priest with a devoted band of lay helpers is based on that of Christ. He chose ordinary lay people to share His work and carry it on after his Ascension. It is clear that a priest in a parish or in the mission field is more effective when others share the burden of his work. Indeed without such workers he cannot reach out effectively to all the souls entrusted to his care. For this reason the Legion enrolls ordinary people of strong faith. It trains and forms them to be active apostles. It apprentices newcomers to experienced members and they learn by doing. The weekly meeting of legionaries with its fine balance of prayer and apostolic work is a powerful instrument of formation.

## **The Weekly Meeting**

Legionaries meet at an agreed time each week. The group President has a work sheet with an agenda. The meeting is conducted in a business like way. Minutes of the preceding meeting are read by the secretary and signed. The group treasurer reports on finances. Members report in an audible voice on work done. Each group has its own allotted work and members go in pairs as did Christ's disciples. Each member does two hours apostolic work per week. Importantly, the meeting has spiritual dimension. Each meeting begins with a prayer to the Holy Spirit and the Rosary is recited. A short spiritual reading, taken from the Legion Handbook is read and later discussed. Midway through the meeting Our Lady's Magnificat is said as well as a prayer to Our Lady Mediatrix of all grace. The priest gives a short spiritual talk. The meeting ends with a prayer in which members ask for a strong faith expressed in apostolic terms.

## **Membership**

The legion recruits members in the normal way. Its ranks are open to Catholics who practice their faith and wish to undertake apostolic work. The period of probation is three months. A new member makes a Legionary promise. In the early days legionaries were all women. Today mixed groups, geared to local needs, are the norm. The Legion system worldwide is invariable but the approach to local needs is flexible.

## **Personal Holiness**

Legionaries recognise that personal holiness is required for fruitful apostolic work. In the words of Vatican II: "The sacraments, especially the Most Holy Eucharist, nourish that charity which is the soul of the entire apostolate. (A.A.) Deep faith in God and a limitless trust in the intercession of Mary are gifts which legionaries continue to pray for. Legionary faith tries to see Christ in all those contacted. Faith enables legionaries to undertake great things for God and souls. Those who persevere in legionary work invariably grow in zeal for souls and for spreading the Gospel message.

## **The Legion Standard**

The Legion has adapted the Standard of the Roman Legion to its spiritual aims. The Roman eagle is replaced by a dove, the emblem of the Holy Spirit. Beneath the dove a crossbar bears the words: "Legio Mariae." Under this again is an oval frame bearing a representation of the Miraculous Medal. The staff of the standard is set in a globe representing the world. The whole design conveys the idea that the world is to be evangelised by the Holy Spirit acting through Mary and her legionaries.

## **A Prayerful Meeting**

The weekly meeting is conducted in a prayerful manner. The room is well lighted and heated. Seating accommodation is comfortable. Punctual attendance is essential. Good chairmanship ensures that the meeting is run in an orderly fashion. Prayer forms an integral part of the proceedings. Members' reports are the concern of all and are open to comment and question. The atmosphere of the meeting is loving and caring. Subjects of a sensitive nature are treated as confidential. A due regard is had for freedom of speech and "fair comment" is welcomed so long as due regard is had for the President's authority. Each Legion meeting is an ongoing presence of Mary. She inspires group unity and harmony.

## **Apostolic Work**

Working in pairs legionaries begin their weekly work with a prayer. The work done is not of one's own choice. It is assigned by the group President. Mary's legionary must be ready to undertake types of work that are difficult and monotonous. What seems to be a poor contact often proves to be a very successful one. Often a seed is sown which bears fruit later on. Those who work in close union with Mary may rest assured of success in the long term. In face of criticism and cynicism a legionary needs moral courage of a high order.

## **Spiritual Works of Mercy**

The Legion's apostolate is concerned with the spiritual welfare of souls. No material or financial help is given. Members seek out patients in hospital or in homes. They will go in search of the most wretched and rejected members of society. A favoured apostolate is the visitation of homes to encourage households in the practice of faith. The making of a parish census can be a useful means of making contact with those who may have 'lapsed'. Manning a book barrow with good religious literature can provide useful contacts in a busy city area. Legionaries devote time to the running of youth clubs. In practice the list of apostolates is endless and legionaries will expend their energies in the service of local needs anywhere.

## **Legion Envoys**

To extend the Legion to foreign lands special envoys are sent abroad. The efficiency of the envoy system accounts for the rapid spread of the legion. Envoys of the calibre of Edel Quinn and Alphonsus Lambe, whose causes for beatification are now in progress, and a host of other such envoys have rendered enormous service to the Legion. Other legionaries known as Incolae Mariae reside in foreign countries for shorter periods in order to promote Legion interests.

## **Pilgrims for Christ**

Legionaries also go abroad to do apostolic work in foreign lands. Teams of volunteers with a priest as spiritual director will visit a parish at the request of the parish clergy. They pay their own expenses, do their own catering and give up a portion of their annual holiday. Reports from these groups suggest that their labours are blessed with extraordinary success. Equally successful are similar projects in the home country. A crusade of prayer for the success of this work is carried on by fellow legionaries who are not free to participate.

## **Auxiliaries**

The Legion of Mary comprises active and auxiliary members. The latter recite prescribed legionary prayers. They constitute the praying wing of the organisation. Their prayers are offered not directly for the Legion but are presented as a gift to Our Lady. What wings are to the bird auxiliary members are to active legionaries. Thus elderly folk in nursing homes can become powerful instruments of evangelisation.

## **Patricians**

Legionary Patricians run meetings aimed at adult religious education. The Patrician meeting is carried on in a friendly atmosphere in which the smallest people can feel at home. The room is arranged as for a normal meeting. A secret bag collection covers expenses. After a short paper on a religious topic is read an informal discussion takes place and all present are encouraged to express their views or to raise questions. After an hour's discussion there is a short period for tea. Then the Spiritual Director gives a talk and discussion resumes. The meeting ends with the recitation of the Apostles Creed and the priest's blessing.

## **Conversions**

Legionaries contact individuals with the aim of bringing them nearer to God. They remind them of the riches of the Catholic faith. Contacts with non-Catholics, non-Christians, lapsed Catholics show that all are open to listen to legionaries. This kind of personal contact can yield a rich harvest. A friendly approach breaks down prejudices and a precious seed is sown. Even in the most depraved heart there is a longing for goodness. Infinite patience and tact must be lavished on a priceless soul. Personal holiness and love will work wonders. There are no hopeless cases when one works with Our Lady.

## **In Mission Lands**

The value of lay apostles has been endorsed by Popes and Councils. In mission lands a priest with a group of dedicated lay workers will succeed in preaching the gospel to everyone in his area. The Legion of Mary has a well-trying system to put at the disposal of missionaries. It can even recruit the simplest folk and mould them into efficient lay missionaries. It can release untapped energies for the spread of the gospel.

## **Love the Secret**

The secret of success in Legion work lies in personal contact laced with love and kindness. The legionary must "walk in love as Christ also has loved us." (Eph. 5:2) The world belongs to him who loves it most and proves that love." (Cure of Ars) Love proves itself by deeds, by generous service and heroic self-giving. A legionary must be always on duty. Legionaries establish strong ties of friendship with their contacts. To a legionary of faith the image of God is multiplied in every individual but is never monotonous. Seeing Christ in every contact gives the legionary the greatest possible motive to love.

## **The Eucharist**

Legionaries must be particularly devoted to the Eucharist. There lies the source of their apostolic strength. "Lay apostles can help others to receive the sacraments frequently and develop their piety especially towards the Eucharist." (Laity Decree 3) Tender devotion to the Eucharist must characterise the life of each legionary. As the Council says: "The Eucharist is the source and apex of the whole work of preaching the gospel. It contains the entire spiritual wealth of the church, that is Christ Himself." From the Eucharist the legionary will draw strength to be a channel of grace to others. If the lay apostle is to be successful he must draw from this divine source.

## **The Miraculous Medal**

Part of the equipment of active legionaries is the Miraculous Medal. They find it exerts a profound influence on their contacts. Primarily the aim of the medal is to further devotion to Mary's Immaculate Conception. But the medal represents her too, in her role of channel of grace. If the medal on one side portrays Mary Immaculate the image of her Immaculate Heart on the reverse side shows her sinless ever after. The reverse side of the medal bears the images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary side by side. The images of these two hearts, the one pierced with thorns, the other by a sword recall the Passion of Christ and the compassion of Mary which earned all those graces which legionaries desire to bear to others in the company of Mary. The legionary aims to be as it were a living Miraculous Medal, a humble instrument of Our Lady's graces to the world.

## **The Legion Handbook**

The Legion system is clearly outlined in the Handbook. It is the work of Frank Duff, Legionary extraordinary from 1921 to his death in 1980. He guided the fortunes of the Legion with unerring instinct during his long life. The Handbook gives unity, strength and cohesion to the whole organisation. Its guidelines stem from long years of practical experience. Fidelity to its well tried rules is essential if the Legion in the future is to preserve its identity. Revision of the text of course may be necessary from time to time to keep it abreast of new developments but its basic insights will continue to be valid and are not subject to change.

Frank Duff gave the Legion a strong Marian devotion gleaned from the treatise of St. Grignon de Montfort's "True Devotion to Mary". De Montfort's teaching finds practical expression in the pages of the Handbook. "It is through the most Blessed Virgin Mary that Jesus Christ came into the world and it is also through her that He must reign in the world", so wrote de Montfort in his monumental work. In the plan of God for our salvation it is God's will that Mary play an indispensable role. All we entrust to Mary by way of consecration, we give entirely to God. It is because legionaries live out this truth that they have become such a powerful force for good in the church.

## **The Legion Vision**

The cover of the Handbook has a picture which enshrines the Legion's vision. It shows a dove, the Holy Spirit overshadowing Mary, filling her with divine light and love. It recalls the moments, the central moment of all time, when Mary consented to be the mother of the Saviour. At the moment she became the Mother of God and of divine grace. It recalls too, how the church was launched at Pentecost in the power of the Spirit. Above Mary's head are the opening words of her Magnificat written in letters of fire. In the border surrounding the picture are three Marian texts: "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, between thy seed and her seed, she shall crush your head". "Blessed are you because you have believed". "Behold your Mother". Legionaries are thus reminded that in the end victory will come through Mary.

## **The Legion Today**

A brief perusal of "Maria Legionis" the official bulletin of the Legion will give the reader a good idea of the work of legionaries worldwide. When Frank Duff attended the Vatican Council he was given a spontaneous round of applause by the Council Fathers. In a telegram to Legion headquarters on the occasion of Frank's death Pope John Paul II declared that "the organisation which he founded made countless lay Catholics aware of their indispensable role in evangelisation and has enabled them to fulfil that role zealously and effectively". These tributes acknowledge the fact that legionaries had been pioneers in the domain of lay evangelisation long before Vatican II strongly affirmed the role of

the laity. The ovation accorded Frank Duff at the Council expressed how much the whole church appreciated the Legion of Mary whose millions of active and auxiliary members encircle the globe and are in the forefront of the work of evangelisation all over the world.

A.A. – The Decree on the Laity

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