



*The Spirit of Home
Visitation*

By

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The Handbook describes the work of visiting the homes as the chosen one of the Legion.

The home is the fortress of society. Despite all the assaults which have been made by the various Isms, the home seems still to remain firm. Socialism originally set out more or less to wipe out the home. On the principle of alleged equal opportunity for all, it proposed to educate every child in a school on the ancient Spartan model. Modern socialism does not think that way and the home survives.

Vital Importance of the Home

Whoever holds the home holds the mastery. It is imperative that Religion understand the full force of this. Of course religious education is a vital ingredient, but to believe that it alone makes the position safe would be a mirage.

So I voice two ideas: First, religion taught in a cold, official way has no higher place in the children's minds than any other school subject¹. Second, even religion admirably taught in the school has too much to contend with in the world to be able to stand unaided.

And so I talk to you about the Home, the fortress of society, and the privilege you have of being able to enter it.

Though the Legion did not start on this work it swung to it almost immediately. Therefore both tradition and first principle bid us to attend to it everywhere. In some places the conception of the home is different to ours. In Africa, for instance, they live together in closer groups than our families would. You must penetrate into those communities and carry on your work. Such is the insistence of the Legion.

Typical Legionary Contact Work

Our works being multitudinous, it follows that many legionaries are not visiting the homes. This does not mean that what I am going to say has no bearing for

1. See appendix for quotation from Catechesi Tradendae No. 68. (Editor)

you. Really every word will apply equally to those who are engaged on the other works. As visitation concerns the dealing with people on a fairly intimate footing, it is typical of all legionary contacts. If we acquire the art of visiting properly, we can employ that art in all circumstances whatsoever. This is all the more the case because people are less approachable in their homes than anywhere else. This is not commonly realised. Some people have the notion that going to the homes is quite a simple business, easier than other kinds of work. I assure them to the contrary.

That inaccessibility would proceed from various causes, all of which must be taken account of: "My home is my castle and my privacy must not be violated." There is the possibility of interfering with the duties of the home which have to be attended to and the desire to be at ease in one's own home; there is television; you go into a home and you may sit among the family but not to talk!

All those things represent formidable barriers. But there is another one which exceeds all of them put together. It is the fact that people do not want to talk religion, nor to have religion talked to them. That is not only the biggest but the most disconcerting difficulty, because it shows that the roots of religion are weak there. People are irresistibly moved to talk about the things they are interested in. If they do not want to discuss religion, it is a reasonable indication that they are not much interested in it. Interest naturally expands into the expression of it. The golfer, the footballer, the horse-addict, are always talking about their pursuit; the Legionary of Mary is found talking about the Legion; and so forth.

That condition of religious deaf-mutedness must be jolted and educated out of itself. Those who do not want to talk religion must have religion talked to them. This is the contrary idea to that argument which is so often astoundingly put forward; that people do not want to be approached on the subject of religion and, therefore, they should not be approached. If yielded to, that argument would mean the abandonment of all apostleship and the ultimate destruction of religion. For who are the people who initially want to have religion talked to them? So we must get in and do that very thing. We must overcome their reluctance and sweetly manage to get them to receive us and to listen to the unpopular thing that we represent.

Campaign Must Be Planned

In the foregoing lies a massive line of fortification against the legionary visitors. So every aid must be mobilised. The Praesidium must think out its methods just as an army would work out its plan of campaign.

Obviously, the primary element in the making of that difficult advance must be our manner. In our own weak way we must reproduce the quality which Chesterton ascribes to St. Francis of Assisi and which is referred to in the pages of the Handbook. He says that the Saint possessed such an attractiveness that

at his words people were drawn to him, were willing to hear him, were prejudiced in his favour. Chesterton says that this was due to the realisation by all that the saint was truly interested in them, in each individual one; that if you met him and he looked at you and spoke to you, you knew for certain that he really was interested in you. You were not a sort of number to him; you were a person about whom he was deeply concerned. They understood that he loved them and would do things for them. The same is what you must seek to present to those people to whom you go. This simply cannot be put on, as a doctor would assume a professional manner. It has to spring from roots in you. It must be a radiation of Christ. You cannot pretend it for the ordinary run of people quickly measure the genuineness of a transaction.

Therefore, you must go to them, in the spirit of that Third Standing Instruction, which bids you to see Christ in each member of the family, and to behave to him as Mary herself behaved to him. Higher than that you could not aim, but you must not aim any lower. That extreme example is not unattainable. Out from that person whom you visit, our Lord is radiating the help to enable you to proceed in the perfect way. While Mary, who walks hand in hand with you, is filling you with her own spirit to enable you to fulfil your mission. The effort to recollect yourself should be made before entering into each home. It is not enough to go about your work with vague good intention. The difficulties are too great for that. A vivid principle must animate your action.

This effort to get your motives into order at each door will create psychologically, and still more spiritually, the right complexion of mind and of soul in you, so that you enter the home mindful of the dignity of each person there, properly respectful to each one.

You must go with reasonable frequency to each home. Visitation should not be a sort of hit and run business. An isolated call without prospect of seeing the people again for a long time is not visitation according to the Legion idea. It is not possible to develop an acquaintance on such a foundation.

Vital to the process of showing interest in people is that you will know their names. It is a disturbing commentary on the modern set-up that we can deal with people closely, even daily over a long period – for instance in shops, offices or restaurants – and in the end have to confess ignorance of their names. One is tempted to generalise drastically: No names, no influence!

Responsibility for All

An anomaly in this visiting is that the house may not be a home. The home is the family living in the house. Do you ever meet the home in that sense? The cry among you is that you do not; that a large proportion of the family, especially the young adult element, is always out at their own enjoyments. You must not let them evade you like that. As a first step towards tracking them down, you must

try to know them, though absent. Talk about them in the ordinary friendly intercourse which should have developed. Find out what are they following up. Get some idea of what they are like. Then plan as to how you or other legionaries are to get in touch with them. They are part of the home, so you have a responsibility for them. You must not be satisfied with the perfunctory visitation which deals with the people whom you find and no more.

The question of initial stress on entering the home is vital, because the people in the home may have incorrect ideas concerning your visitation. They may expect to be lectured in a superior way. You must disappoint them in that! In fact you must disappoint them even to the extent of leaning backwards. Your manner must preach humility in loud tones. A primary item of your code insists: Do not ask questions. Perhaps the code is too wholesale in saying that, because after a while when a footing has been established, why should you not ask questions? Do we not ask them in the bosom of our own homes! But of course there are questions and there are questions. There are prying questions, and there are loving, stimulating questions; and you must only deal in the latter.

Manners Should be Worthy of the Cause

Get yourselves liked, says that code. Your manners will be the first part of you that the people meet. In fact, it might be said that so far as those persons are concerned, your manners are yourselves. They are definitely part of your respect and of your service, so let them be worthy of your cause which is the cause of God. No matter what holy ideas are in you, no matter what depths of humility, if your exterior is unfavourable it is that which will determine the issue in those early critical moments. So let your manner and your manners – for there is a distinction here – be as irreproachable as you can make them.

“May we have a chat?” “May we come in?” “Is it quite convenient that we should come now? If not, perhaps we could come back another time?” “We are legionaries of Mary – we greatly wish to have your understanding and encouragement. Will you permit us to tell you something about ourselves and our work?” This sort of considerate civility will be found a sovereign way of getting the legionaries in and securing them a hearing.

Obviously you have to introduce yourselves and to explain why you are there. A lady was talking about the visitation of her home by two young legionaries. “I do not know what brings them around,” she said. “They are extraordinarily nice girls, but they are ill at ease while they are here. They have come a good number of times to us and we like them very much. But we do not know why they are visiting us.” I hope this story is an exaggeration – as it may be. But even allowing for that, it is plain that the legionary method was hopeless, and that the gallant young pair had been let loose without proper aid from their praesidium.

The fact is that you have to tell what you are about. So manifestly you have to present a thought-out explanation. But this does not mean that you embark on a talking campaign. Try to do the opposite. Having got yourself in by talking, turn off the tap. Aim at listening instead of talking. Much talking may mark you as a mere salesman, who is not really interested in the people but has some game or other to play.

Buying the Right to Listen

Another item of the legionary code – dealing chiefly with the visitation of praesidia by their curiae – prescribes that the visitors be sparing with words of criticism; that they must earn the right to say one word of criticism by speaking at least ten words of appreciation. In this matter of talking in the homes I would venture to go even further and to say that we should buy our right to utter one word by listening to fifty of them – perhaps more.

If you show yourself willing to listen in the right way, people will eagerly avail of that chance. They want to talk and to be listened to. If you find a person who seems to exhibit the opposite characteristic, be sure he is abnormal in some way. Because people cannot secure interested listeners, they retreat inside themselves. This means unnatural frustration. They can become hardened and this may produce disastrous results in their characters. In certain of our works we have had demonstration of this. Persons who were absolutely reckless, seeming to have no anchor in life, just plunging wildly into waywardness of every kind, finally fell under the influence of a legionary who offered what they recognised as friendship, who listened patiently to them and tried to enter into their point of view. Almost at once they changed. The hardness melted and the frenzy abated. That true interest was the anchor which the poor ship needed.

If people do not talk to you – worse still if they are prevented from talking by the running tide of your words – how can you know them? A current American character is credited with the following phrase: “You ain’t learnin’ nothin’ when you’re talkin’.” If you do not know people, how can you hope to influence them except in a surface way? There is not the liking and mutual respect on which alone solid building can be done. Absolutely everybody desires that interest. Down inside himself everyone craves for affection.

Everybody is inwardly soft and idealistic, no matter how case-hardened they may be, no matter how inhumanly they talk. I have in my time known many tough people – the toughest that could be got – and on innumerable occasions I have had the experience of seeing that crust collapse, and the hidden softness and idealism gush forth. So believe always in that possibility and cater for it.

We have been hearing of the young man of 20 on whom one of our legionary priests was lavishing great kindness. He asked the boy to tell him his history, whereupon he broke into tears and said: “This is the first time in my life that

anybody has wanted to know anything about me.” Very dreadful – if one thinks it out and reflects that the Christian characteristic is supposed to be that very interest!

More Rare and Precious Than Food

So as a primary rule – listen and encourage the others to talk. You may have to probe with those delicate little questions; not querying or crude questions, but complimentary encouraging ones which will be seen as a mark of your interest. You will find that they will react dynamically; that they will open up like hungry things waiting for food. Indeed you are giving them something which is much more precious than food, because it is more rare. Because once again I have to say it: people will not listen. Just cast your eyes around your own circles, and see how few are willing to listen for a solitary minute. That minute exhausts their endurance and they swing away to someone else. Or they interrupt you in the middle of a sentence - and start talking themselves. The effort is too great after that one minute. Natural but not super-natural!

Do not be content to give that respectful hearing merely as a point of good manners. Ascend to a higher plane. Listen in the spirit of Mary listening to her Son talk. Some have said that the Home of Nazareth was a place of constant silence. But is it right for us to think of it as so unnaturally removed from every other home? We must recoil from that and suppose that normal, lovely exchanges took place. Would it not be an entrancing experience to be able to listen to our Lord talking and to watch Mary listening to him. That idea should be your meditation and then the model in your work.

Having practised it for a while, something has to happen. Having listened patiently and respectfully, you have won the right to be heard. Having had the opportunity to express themselves fully – which may mean frankly, even roughly – people become receptive. This is so in a bigger sense than merely being ready to listen in their turn. They feel themselves to be under obligation to you. They are grateful. They are inclined, almost impelled, to act on your suggestions. You have established your footing. Now at last you have that soil in which you can set to work to plant most profitably.

Some Golden Rules

In the discussions which will develop as acquaintance grows, you must always observe restraint. Because there is far more at stake than the common duty of maintaining friendly relations. You have a trade to operate and therefore you will have to be more silent, more humble, less assertive than you could afford to be in everyday relations. You are not to force your point of view. It is essential not to irritate. If you do that, you will not accomplish your work. So do not contradict people. Especially this would apply where you are dealing with those who hold opposite opinions to those which you are seeking to get over.

Many people, too, have a vein of perversity in them. They contradict you in every sentence. Such persons are a perpetual puzzle. No matter what remark is made, they will say the opposite of it. If on a Friday you state a thing, they will contradict it. If on the following Monday you say the opposite, again they would be in opposition.

That contrary strain is a feature of general human nature. Frequently it has remotely good roots. It may spring from a sense of independence. Sometimes it can proceed from a defensive attitude; they are suspicious or they are taken unawares; they want time to think. You must take definite count of that characteristic. Do not allow the presence of it in those you meet (or in yourself) to introduce contention into your visitation. In circumstances which might bring it into play, steer warily as the mariner would in reef-strewn waters.

There will be circumstances when you will have to differ from people. If you are discussing religion with a non-Catholic, obviously you have to propose a counter point of view to him in many respects. But let it be done in the most judicious way. It is essential to get people into good humour and keep them in it.

Our message is a precious thing. It is the Christian message. It is “the jewel of great price”, as the Scriptures call it. More than the natural jewel, this one depends on its setting – which is your approach. So give attention and time and trouble to that setting. Remember too that in this case it is both the gem and the setting which are under doubting scrutiny. It is not certain that the jewel itself is being accepted as genuine. You have to prove its genuineness and also that you yourself are genuine. You have to convince the people that you are not patronising them; that you have interest and love for them; that you are servants of Mary and therefore sweet, gentle, merciful, sympathetic, and dependable. The bare fact that you are visiting them is not evidence of all that. For there *are* people who go around nosing into the affairs of others. You have to lift yourself drastically from that category and to stamp your motives with a heavenly character.

Every home should be viewed from the angle of rendering service. Can something practical be done for the people in it? Succeed in this and you have won your way. Is there an infirm person to whom you could turn the attention of some juniors? Could you not do some little acts of helpfulness to the man or woman of the house? Supposing you find them busy, could you not lend a hand instead of sitting there and waiting until they are finished and free to talk?

Providing Nourishment for the Masses

You must get everyone to appreciate the religious idealism which has brought you there. This means that you must in the end get home to them the same knowledge of the Mystical Body and of the Mass and of our Blessed Lady which you yourself possess. You must not yield to the temptation of saying: “They

would not understand.” Why should they not understand when we after our fashion are able to understand? You will recall Grignion de Montfort’s intriguing statement that it was to the souls who were particularly ignorant and debased that he used to talk his True Devotion, which we would be inclined to regard as a select or advanced notion. The Christian mysteries were not promulgated for the learned alone. They are to be the nourishment of the masses. The learned persons might see a doctrine in a different light to that in which the simpler souls would. But it is not certain that they would see it any better. There can be a degree of detail which obscures and which turns into complexity. The simpler view may be the truer view.

The doctrine of the Mystical Body was the first thing taught to the Christians. In those early days it was rendered more bluntly than we would put it: “You are the Body of Christ.” The word “mystical” was not then added; it was obliged by the need for precision as time went on and heresies thickened. “You are the Body of Christ” – the people were told and they grasped the idea. Is there greater difficulty in telling about the Mystical Body than in telling about the Eucharist? Surely the one is on the same plane as the other! If I myself were asked which of the two I would deem the easier, I would say the Mystical Body. Yet little children are expected to understand the Eucharist in their fashion and use it in Holy Communion.

In your visits you will not get the opportunity of giving detailed explanations. So keep to the core of the matter. If you are talking about the Mass, do not concentrate on the ceremonial and the vestments. Use those precious minutes to deliver what could be called a punch, that is an idea which will make a devastating impact on the mind. The Mass contains Calvary. Why not proclaim that? The Mass is Calvary around the corner, where they can go in any morning and be present really and truly at the tremendous event which changed the history of the world – and our destiny. As you have been able to glimpse that terrific fact, so can each one of them do it. As it took a little trouble in your case, so will some trouble be needed with them. Take that trouble! Half of the waste and neglect and under-development and indifference in religion comes from the fact that people do not understand. But how could they be expected to appreciate the superb truths when they do not understand them. Why should they want to talk about things that they do not value?

Find and Fan the Spark

When dealing with a Catholic family, have it in your mind to bring each individual into the active ranks of the Legion itself. This programme may seem to be unreal, but it is necessary in order to screw up your approach to the proper pitch. Consider this important idea for a moment. Suppose you believe those whom you visit to be unfit for Legion membership. Does this not mean that in a charming way you are patronising them; that in your heart you are adopting the superior attitude which we have been deprecating? You may not see it so, but

they will discern it. They will know that you are limiting the appeals which you make to them. Your talk is of auxiliary membership, the Patricians, etc., but not a word about the active ranks of the Legion! Tactically a wrong position is created. You are making a radical difference between them and you.

And actually are they not all capable of being active members of the Legion? Certain ones might not be able to do a particular work, but surely in the width and length of society a Christian job can be found for each willing one? Never forget that every Christian is bound to be apostolic according to his capacity. Never should you judge too much from the outside. Even to the less critical eye, some may appear to be pretty backward and unpromising. I give you one example where that surface view was infinitely misleading.

It is the case of Michael Stephen Ekeng, the first legionary of all Africa. When first he arrived in Calabar as a little boy of six, stolen by slave dealers from his village in the centre of Africa, brought down the river and sold as a kitchen boy – I am sure he gave no sign of his future possibility. Yet he fought his way into the Church. He became the president of the first praesidium in all Africa, then president of the first curia, and then president of the first comitium. He was initially a rough diamond. Yet that diamond was able to be polished up so that it became something rare and beautiful. Now that diamond is adorning the diadem of our Lady up in heaven.

So do not be tempted to judge by exteriors. Try to see in everybody to whom you go a like possibility, the rough stone that can be polished to a diamond – the undeveloped soul that can be turned into a Michael Stephen Ekeng. Be sure that God made no soul without hiding in it a spark of his own immensity. Your mission is to detect that spark and fan it to celestial fire.

Appendix

Extract from Catechesi Tradendae No. 68

The family's catechetical activity has a special character, which is in a sense irreplaceable. This special character has been rightly stressed by the Church, particularly by the Second Vatican Council. Education in the faith by parents, which should begin from the children's tenderest age, is already being given when the members of a family help each other to grow in faith through the witness of their Christian lives, a witness that is often without words but which perseveres throughout a day-to-day life lived in accordance with the Gospel. This catechesis is more incisive when, in the course of family events (such as the reception of the sacraments, the celebration of great liturgical feasts, the birth of a child, a bereavement) care is taken to explain in the home the Christian or religious content of these events. But that is not enough: Christian parents must strive to follow and repeat, within the setting of family life, the more methodical teaching received elsewhere. The fact that these truths about the main questions of faith and Christian living are thus repeated within a family setting impregnated with love and respect will often make it possible to influence the children in a decisive way for life. The parents themselves profit from the effort that this demands of them, for in a catechetical dialogue of this sort each individual both receives and gives.

Family catechesis therefore precedes, accompanies and enriches all other forms of catechesis.

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