The System
THE ALLOCUTIO
By Father Francis G. Lendacky

In a one-line footnote on page 114 in the handbook, the allocutio is described as the Roman General’s address to his legionaries. In the Legion of Mary, the allocutio is the short talk given by the spiritual director to the members of a praesidium or council. As in any talk addressed to a few or to many, the speaker should be aware that [a] the purpose of the talk ought to guide his exposition; [b] the subject matter should be clearly defined; and [c] the speaker should keep his exposition appropriately suited to his audience.

The handbook is quite clear about the purpose of the allocutio; it is to play an all-important part in the development of the member. Almost from the very start of probation, the lay person is reminded that the primary purpose of membership is personal holiness of life. The two-fold weekly duty of meeting and assignment is the basic curriculum to develop a holy legionary apostle. Since the meeting is recognized as the mainstay of membership, the meeting is of more importance than the assignment, because the Legion intends to render the work meritorious through the sanctification of the worker rather than the perfecting of the work. The handbook states that in an atmosphere made supernatural by its “wealth of prayer, by its devotional usages, and by its sweet spirit of fraternity … the meeting is the heart of the Legion from which the life-blood flows into all its veins and arteries.” The purpose of the allocutio, therefore, is to sustain the heart-beat of the praesidium.

The Legion specifies the subject matter of the praesidium allocutio: It is to be a commentary upon the handbook with the stated purpose of making the members completely familiar with every point therein. The 1993 edition has more than 350 pages overflowing with ideas, which would take several complete readings to understand adequately and many allocutios to explain thoroughly. Since there are only 50 opportunities a year – each limited to five or six minutes – to emphasize the ideas in the handbook, the spiritual director, or president, can not afford not to comment on the content of the handbook.

The praesidium allocutio is addressed to members whose appetite should be whetted to pursue their personal spiritual journey and whose apostolate should be encouraged to serve others in the manner in which Mary serves her Son. It would be unfair to the Legion and to the legionaries, if the allocutio did not foster Legion principles and legionary practice. To provide an appropriate and adequate allocutio, the spiritual director himself must study the handbook and try to absorb the major tenets of the Legion. The benefit of a thought-provoking and
authentically Legion allocutio is beyond telling, but will be discerned in the growth and development of the legionaries who hear and heed it.

The allocutio, then, should foster the spirit and scheme of the Legion. Legionaries are to be reminded frequently that the spirit of the Legion is the spirit of Mary herself. Together with practicing the ten virtues of Mary mentioned in Chapter Three of the handbook, legionaries should emulate her devoted discipleship to the Lord and her dedicated apostleship to the members of his Body. Though valid in themselves, other “schools of spirituality” should not be intermingled with the Marian spirituality, which the Legion advocates. An indiscriminate mixture of diverse charisms would not well serve the Legion or the legionary. An allocutio which would fail to honor true Marian devotion would be treacherous, as an edited or rehashed Sunday homily, in substitution for an allocutio, would prove to be inane.

Fullest effect will be achieved when the allocutio comments on the same topic, which was read for the spiritual reading and then discussed by the members immediately after the reading. The spiritual director, whose duty it is to read the reading and to listen attentively to the handbook discussion, can utilize the ideas of the reading and the remarks made by the members in delivering his allocutio. Herein lies the wisdom of the Legion which states that the spiritual director, or the president in his absence, should speak to the members out of his own personal study and experience, and should refrain from simply reading someone else’s words, when personal input is required. (Reading the allocutio adds a second spiritual reading, which the specified agenda does not allow.) By linking this time of handbook reading, discussion, and allocutio, a mini-Patrician format has been incorporated into the praesidium meeting. This accumulated time could be as long as fifteen minutes and much can be taught or learned in fifteen minutes, when one idea has been presented, discussed, and wrapped up in some pertinent thoughts which the allocutio would contain. Those three items of the agenda have been thereby integrated. By this formula, reasonable progress can be made in making the members familiar with every point in the handbook.

Sometimes, the allocutio has been considered similar to a “fervorino.” Perhaps, sometimes, the spiritual director may detect an occasion when that kind of talk would be necessary; however, that should not be the frequent fare of the allocutio. An allocutio is, most of all, an exposition of the spirit and scheme of the Legion. Since obedience is one of the most important virtues of the legionary of Mary, the allocutio should applaud and bolster the truth and soundness of the Legion’s principles and practices, because the members have a right to an orthodox presentation of Legion principles in the allocutio. Obedience seeks strong foundations on which to support its conviction, and conviction breeds a constant behavior which endures; whereas, a behavior dictated by fervor alone suffers from fluctuating seasons. The allocutio must seek to develop holiness in the members and perseverance in the Legion apostolate.
Ultimately, the praesidium allocutio should be considered as the pivotal item in promoting legionary spirituality. The Legion, by its two-fold weekly duty of formational meeting and apostolic assignment, offers to the lay man or woman a non-sentimental, active-contemplative kind of Marian spirituality. In fact, some spiritual directors believe that for the laity the Legion is a “school for saints.” The fact that there are presently three candidates for canonization who faithfully followed the Legion regimen provides proof for that statement. Furthermore, who can count the number of other Catholic lay men and women who have reached a high degree of sanctity by following the regimen of the Legion in their daily lives? If, deep in the apostolic heart of a legionary, the meeting is to beget the fire of an ardent and servile love of Jesus through Mary, then the allocutio at the weekly praesidium meeting could be the stoke to keep the fire aflame.

In addition, there is another Legion meeting which calls for an allocutio. It is the monthly meeting of the council, which governs and supervises the Legion in its area of responsibility. The council could be as simple as a curia or as extensive as a senatus, but an allocutio is always part of the agenda. On page 158, the handbook mentions that the legionary council is not merely a supervising or decision-making body, but a “school for officers.” If that is the case, then the allocutio at the monthly council meeting must be viewed as having an additional dimension to that of a praesidium allocutio, and that dimension can be described as didactic. In the midst of reports concerning practical governing, the council allocutio introduces a note which comes closest to resembling a lecture of instruction, a format usually discouraged in the Legion, but could it not be deemed appropriate in this acknowledged “school for officers”? Keeping in mind the Napoleonic quote in the handbook that “there are no bad soldiers, only bad officers,” the council spiritual director must realize the importance of delivering an appropriate allocutio to legionaries who are the officers, who conduct the weekly praesidium meetings, and who control the apostolate of the Legion in their council area. At the same time, the council spiritual director realizes he may be addressing officers who are in charge of supervising councils directly or indirectly attached. The goal of the Council allocutio, then, is to instruct officers in the fundamentals helpful in governing the council, since on page 152, the handbook says that the Legion in any area will be as good as the council wishes to make it.

The handbook states that “as a burning lens is to the rays of the sun, so is the meeting to the members.” All the good intentions and inspirations of the members and all the graces channeled through them are brought to the meeting which focuses them, begets the fire, and kindles everything that comes near it. It is the meeting which makes the Legion. The allocutio must catch all the rays, and adjust the angle of the lens in such a way as to enkindle the fire in the hearth of each Mystical Home of Nazareth and the flame in the hearts of all its members.

From Insights of a Legion of Mary Priest