

Upgrading the Legion Work

The question of the nature of the work of the Church presented itself at its very beginning; Our Lord's command on Mount Oliver had been that his disciples were to go out over the whole world and seek to give the Gospel to every man. That was clear cut. The disciples saw it in no other light and they acted accordingly. But we see from the Acts of the Apostles (6:1-6) that this created a problem. It was the care of the widows and those who needed charity. The missionaries of the Gospel had no time for that work, important though it was. The tremendous judgement which proceeded from the Twelve Apostles was: 'It is not desirable that we would forsake the Word of God and serve at tables. The remedy was proceeded to of ordaining deacons who *would* attend to it.'

The Priorities of The Infant Church

From the very origin of the Church you had that distinction between works proposing itself. First: the special characteristic work of the Church, the giving of

the Gospel. Second: the care and the winning back of the weaker brethren. Third: the looking after the physical necessities.

There you have the same classification which the Concilium established a while ago, with the exception that the Legion does not indulge in category three, the giving of material relief which has been assumed by other societies and by state agencies. The Legion should be found confronting its problems in identically the same spirit as in the early Church, namely that the prime work of converting must be properly attended to, and after that the other works; always provided that there is enough manpower left over for them from the main work. If we allow the lesser works an equal claim, there will never be any manpower left over for converting. This should be the Legion mind. If places do not want to operate that policy, then they have not got the mind of the Legion.

What indeed would we think if, in that section of the Acts of the Apostles, we read that the decision then taken had been that as the widows needed looking after, the apostles were to be recalled from their districts abroad and the evangelisation of the world called off! The notion would be preposterous, but this is in fact what the greater part of the Church is doing today, and the Legion has to a large extent been caught up in that tendency. We have precisely reversed the due order in our apostolate. First, we are comforting and consoling; secondly, we are attending to the careless and the lapsed; and only thirdly to the work of works, converting.

Admittedly there has been a difference between the Legion position and that of the first Christians. The Lord had told the latter quite peremptorily that they were to go forth to convert. That set the pattern and priority. It

placed the supreme work first as if there were no other. It left to the future the question of the other Church occupations which would arise. That was the principle on which the Church started.

The Legion Aspires to the Same Order

Things were different in regard to the Legion. Its course was set by circumstances. It began in a Catholic environment and amid conditions of great poverty which were monopolising the attention of all the apostolic workers. As the Protestants were relatively few in number, psychologically remote from the people, and regarded as unconvertible, they were not initially viewed as part of the Legion problem. That reduced the general problem to the preservation of the Faith which was acute by reason of the largeness of the proselytising campaign. It represents an immense, and indeed astonishing mental breakthrough that the infant Legion boldly put aside the relief programme which absorbed everyone else, and proposed to itself the building up of the people in Faith. It viewed as contained in that category the visitation of those who were in no peril of faith but who needed spiritual comforting and consoling.

That was the first mould and it formed the original legionaries. Wherever the Legion started, the work for the Faith attained a higher dimension than that of preserving it. Obviously the giving of the Faith should take precedence. That realisation so to speak took off the Legion's baby clothes and placed its programme in complete alignment with that of Our Lord's command. The original incomplete mould was supplemented accordingly. That was about ten years after the beginning of the Legion.

But the older idea died hard. The very works undertaken by the earlier legionaries continued to be imitated as if this were a rule. As those works swallowed up the available membership, the legionaries in most places did not go on to the stage of raising their eyes to the wheat fields ripe for conversion.

This has produced a generally anomalous situation. Despite the insistent pleadings of the Concilium, the great bulk of the legionary effort is devoted to the preserving of the Faith and to less than that – to the works which of late we have been referring to under the somewhat belittling title of comforting and consoling. And as it is difficult to remain firm on a slippery slope, we have trouble even in diverting legionaries from humanism.

Comforting Not Converting

The dismaying fact obtains that in many countries, where the vast majority of the people are non-Catholics, the Legion is giving little attention to that section, and not even attending to work which could be regarded as necessary to the Faith. They are confining themselves to comforting and consoling those who are in no need of being comforted or consoled. The Legion in one great city is described as an organisation for visiting high-class nursing homes. In another city a legionary who had brought a would-be convert to a priest was told by him that the work of the Legion is the visiting of the aged and infirm, not converting. Therein is the Legion being caricatured and perverted.

A very important person, the late Fr Simon Harrington, at that time Superior General of the African Missionary Society, saw this clearly as the result of his missionary movements. He declared to us that the Legion represented

a providential gift to the missionaries enabling them to reach out to the multitudes, but that it was being misused. It was being supplied to the domestic chores and these were monopolising its manpower. He saw the uselessness of just telling legionaries that they should rather go to the pagans. The retort would be that there was no surplus membership to take on that extra. As if the giving of the Faith to those who do not possess it is no more than an extra, a Church embellishment.

A Radical Remedy

So his plea to us was that the original programme of Our Lord was to be re-stated and insisted on conversion as the first work and all others only secondary. But he also contended that this proposition would in practice be listened to but not acted up to. Therefore his plan was that no praesidium on the mission field should be engaged on anything but conversion. The domestic chores should be put aside, even the lapsed who had already got their chance and would probably get many more of them. In no other way, he held, could things be put into proper perspective but by that drastic procedure. If there happened to be a surplus of members after dealing adequately with that main department, they could of course be utilised for the lesser objectives. But the principle must be established: the main objective is conversion.

The good sense of all that is evident, but it has to be admitted that there are practical difficulties. One is that it would be impossible to effect such a revolution. Moreover very many would be deterred from joining the Legion if its only work were that of conversion. The ordinary Catholic is intimidated by the idea of that work, regarding himself as completely unequipped for it.

It has also to be remembered that the Legion has proposed to itself the wide aim of organising the whole Catholic people to apostleship and therefore that all spiritual needs must be dealt with. After some time in the ranks, confidence and discipline will have entered in and members can be pushed higher in the scale of works. So it is not the legionary programme that conversion should oust every other work. The Legion should continue to cater for every need which has relation to souls provided that this is not to the detriment of the primary work of the Church. Conversion work must be undertaken as the first priority. If this be not its recognised rating, it is probable that it will become in fact the last priority by reason of its supposed difficulty.

Conversion Work Psychologically Necessary

Conversion is the key-work from another point of view. It is vital in the sense that if it be neglected, certain psychological reactions are induced. These pervert the Catholic spirit and produce a disastrous effect on every department of life. The Catholic motive being impaired, the world, the flesh and the devil are not resisted; and each soul becomes a problem and not an asset. This follows as a remorseless consequence if one sees that those outside the Church are not being sought with intent to bring them in. For then the conclusion is inevitable that they must be safe enough where they are. That suggestion even though it may not reduce itself to a final analysis, has really knocked the bottom out of the Church. It would mean that God has established other channels of salvation in addition to the Catholic Church. Why then struggle desperately after souls who are in those other channels which may suit them better?

A Monstrous Suggestion

Suit them better! But such a suggestion is monstrous. It would mean that the Church is not essential and is possibly unsuited to those other souls. Yes, that is what such a proposition would work down to, and to our minds it would be outrageous. But it is what is being advanced in high Catholic quarters today. For instance, what is to be thought of the following which proceeds from one of the most important dioceses in the world: 'For *some* people God's message is *most* clearly conveying through the community known as the Catholic Church; to others through some Protestant denomination; to others again through some non-Christian worshipping community.'

That statement places the Church as being no more than one of the methods through which God imparts his truth. It goes even further and says that for whole bodies of men God's message is being given *more clearly* through their own non-Catholic and even non-Christian denomination than it would be through the Catholic Church.

This testimonial is given to those other Churches in spite of the fact that some of them permit their members to hold tenets that are utterly alien to Catholic belief and morality. That suggestion of an equality is a total negation of the Church. If it be accepted, it would render irrational any sacrifice or great effort towards conversion, for this might only be transferring a person into his *wrong* classification in which he would be receiving the message *less clearly*.

A protest against that statement sent to the high quarter in question brought back the reply that the statement represented a correct interpretation of the Decree on Ecumenism.

Now look at the apostles or at any one of their successors among the saints who were willing to struggle for a lifetime and to lay down their lives to convert a single soul, and judge how out of line with them that awful statement is.

But remember: Throughout the greater part of the world a mentality equivalent to that of the statement is in the ascendant and it has turned off conversion just as conclusively as you would turn off electricity.

Downgrade the Church and Faith Is Ruined

I repeat: What effect is that attitude having on the individual Catholic? I say it again: It is ruining his faith, depriving it of any influence in his life, leaving him a prey to every wind that blows. That is why it is so important to give the work of conversion its *true* place, which means giving the Church its *right* place. And this in turn would mean that the Church will be able to exert its full force in our lives. For this additional reason conversion is the work of works. So I place before you this great principle: Move an inch in belief towards those other Churches and you have moved dangerously away from *the Church*.

The crude fact is that our own Catholic spirit is at stake. It has to be toned up. We must see the Church as the city set upon the hill which cannot be hidden (Mt 5:14); that is as the authentic and only true revelation from God. That alone gives the Church its value, and then only does the Legion likewise become worthwhile. Many in the Legion see things thus and are impelled to live their lives accordingly and make big sacrifices. That spirit must be passed on to all. It alone makes life understandable and bearable.

After that and in the light of that we have to get down to the detail of our works with a view to determining

their due rank. If there are important works which are not being done at all, quite evidently we must take them on. If works are not vital enough or are unsubstantial, they should be dropped; it would be intolerable to assign to such things legionaries who would be fit for better. If works are capable of being done by grade 3 of legionaries it would be waste to employ grade 1 on them. There should be effort to transfer legionaries to better works of which they are capable. Should not every good legionary be looked at from this point of view of getting more out of him, not necessarily of time but in quality of work or organising power? Many legionaries doing ordinary work are capable of being pivots of vital new works.

Urging Members Higher

The handbook insists that one purpose of the Legion is to urge its members on. I would not say that this is being aimed at generally. Before us are members who are doing the same simple works which they were given when they joined up twenty or more years ago. That represents a very faithful and devoted transaction, but does it not contain an element of retarded childhood? For obviously such a legionary has acquired the quality for something better and should be used accordingly.

Then on the other hand we see members who are only just qualifying and sometimes not even that. They are irregular in attendance at their meetings and do insufficient work. Yet this is tolerated, presumably on the grounds that the praesidium could not stand their loss, or that half a loaf is better than no bread. It is not being taken into account that such members are drawing others into their own inferior ways and enacting in real life the

story of the rotten apple which in the end corrupted the barrelful of good ones.

Failure of Curiae

A praesidium can be so immersed in its weekly routine as to forget that its path should be ever onward and upward. Many of them do not seek to improve in any way. The Curiae exist for the purpose of seeing that the praesidia fulfil themselves. I do not think that on the whole they are doing this. Visitation of their praesidia is of inspection only. If a praesidium is putting up a good routine performance, it will pass muster. I fear there is not what might be called a higher level of thinking by the Curiae on behalf of the praesidia. I do not think that there is any running fountain of inspiration from the Curiae, nor from the praesidium to the Curia, as should be the case. In theory every praesidium should be giving ideas to the Curia, which the Curia in turn would be trying to get over to all its praesidia. It is to be feared that in many instances the utmost being aimed at is a mere efficiency. As a consequence the average Curia is neither warming itself up nor its praesidia, and this in theory should mean that it will tend to languish. If that happens, its role in the Legion will be reversed; so that if some of its praesidia thrive it will be in spite of the Curia. Sometimes the Legion signposts are turned askew so that no one knows the right way.

Too much in evidence at Curia Reunions is the desire to amuse rather than to present the Legion. Dancing threatens to submerge everything else, and there has to be an expensive meal. This latter contradicts one of the special purposes of the Legion, namely that every grade of the population, including the lesser ones, is to be brought into membership.

Could it be that the presence of these defects denotes an ageing of the Legion, a diminution of quality and ambition? I do not think that this is the case. The contrary is proved by other things that are happening before our eyes. Conversion and new works are essayed when they are pointed out. All over the world dynamic deeds are being undertaken for souls. Many of the legionaries are ready to face up to anything, but the mistake is made of not being able to see the abundance, the universality of this princely spirit. Not being discerned, it is not being catered for.

Mobilising All, Even the Infirm and the Very Busy

The Legion aim is the mobilisation of the whole people to apostleship. This idea must be applied with a full regard for its meaning, which is not that of a mere assembling of material but the finding of the best use for each individual. Moreover this must be a continuing process by reason of the growing quality of the members. The less exacting tasks should be assigned to the less young or less strong legionaries, or to juniors.

Again it is to be emphasised that the legionary mobilisation must reach out even to the infirm sections and that an appropriate task must be found for each one. Note that the Vatican Council declared that every Catholic must be apostolic and that it did not exempt the infirm or the very busy. Therefore the Legion must find jobs for them. The easier works must be reserved for them and not given to legionaries who are fitted for better.

I have been stressing the need for taking cognisance of the advance in quality of the legionary. But can such an advance be presumed? The first answer to this is that practice should bring proficiency. The ordinary tradesman

gains in skill as time goes on. But more is at stake in Legion membership than human skill. The member is all the time penetrating deeper into the life-giving doctrines of the Church: the Eucharist and the Mass, the Mystical Body, Mary and the Holy Spirit; and is linking up that knowledge with the practical working of the Legion. This has to mean growth in every way. It would be a grave loss to the world of souls if all that increasing power were not fully used. Yet we see legionaries being employed on petty little jobs. As a consequence the Legion is working at a fraction of its potentiality. Its great force is being misdirected. To this folly the handbook applies the verse of Byron as to uplifting the club of Hercules to crush a butterfly or brain a gnat.

I have just been reading the report of a praesidium whose sole work is to entertain the inmates of a home for the aged run by nuns. In that same town are hundreds of thousands of non-Catholics who are never approached by Catholics.

The Exploratio and Other Toning-Up Methods

As means of sending legionary spirits soaring, apart from the precious direct results, nothing could be more potent than the Peregrinatio and its miniature edition, the *Exploratio Dominicalis* (which may be translated as the Sunday Search for Souls). As a newcomer the latter requires a word of explanation. It is a mini-Peregrinatio which proposes that every praesidium should at least annually go as a body to a place of spiritual need at some distance and spend a Sunday or perhaps a weekend dealing with the problems. The travelling should not consume an undue proportion of the time available. With the best of goodwill only a proportion of legionaries will be in a

position to undertake the Peregrinatio. The Exploratio would be within the reach of all.

I proceed to some suggestions as to works:

1. First and foremost is to be placed Conversion. Sufficient has already been said in regard to its key place.
2. Next, the Preservation of the Faith. Shaking faith has always been with us. Now the multitude appears to be unbelieving. Many of those encountered hold the philosophy that one religion is as good as another. The approach to people on the streets has proved itself to be easy and most fruitful. It must be expanded. This apostolate seems to require some premises on the spot to which contacts can be brought for more intensive interview, or even for Confession. A hut or caravan would serve this purpose. Indeed by its very informality it would strike a novel note and would appeal to difficult types who would not go to a church. Good legionaries should be thrown into this wonderful way of getting to grips with neglect and unbelief.

That primary use of the hut or caravan would be in the evening. During the daytime it could possibly be employed for other legionary purposes, such as to sell religious literature, rosaries, scapulars, medals, etc. The staffing would provide a suitable work for elderly and less active legionaries.

3. The conducting of branches of the Pioneers, which is a temperance society under the care of the Jesuit Fathers, is recommendable under several heads. Drinking probably represents the most dangerous aspect of life at the moment. Everything seems to be geared into it. Women and the young are caught up by it. And once the habit is formed little can be done. The Pioneers operates especially by way of prevention and at the

same time nibbles away at alcoholism itself. It provides the proper motive for abstention, that is self-sacrifice and reparation, and it keeps this motive in evidence by the wearing of an emblem of the Sacred Heart.

4. Propagation of the Brown Scapular which is so strongly recommended in the handbook. Every Legion centre should run a periodic enrolment in the way that some of them are doing at the moment. Again, this could be used to lead on those contacted.
5. Despite manifest evident of its effectiveness, praesidia continue uninterested in the Patricians. One might enquire if the subject is ever recommended at Curia meetings. If it happens to be, is it a nerveless reference which almost demands inaction, something like the mention which is made of *Maria Legionis*?

The number of pages given to this movement in the pages of the handbook shows the seriousness with which the Legion regards it. The assertion is made that by an intelligent – or what we might call a scientific – use of the Patricians, a whole district could be not only instructed in the Faith but energised.

6. The conducting of every Legion work should embody the purpose of recruiting for the Legion. The fact that a person has been induced to take a step forward in his Catholicity suggests that he can be induced to take a succession of them – just as one almost automatically mounts a stairway.
7. Hospital and institutional visitation should be inspected with a view to seeing if it provides substantial work for those engaged on it. As a work it is certainly in the lower bracket of need. Would it not be an excellent way of providing for our elderly members and for intermediates? It must be justified. There

is no justification for something which reaches no higher than harmless little chats, the comforting and consoling which has taken such a grip on the Legion.

8. Club work should be examined in order to determine if it is repaying Legion effort. Is it serving a definite religious purpose? If it is merely humanistic, it should be dropped.
9. Book Barrows seem to have been dropped. Can a valid excuse be offered for this? Surely a book barrow in a street is a religious lighthouse, a jolt to the non-religious, a reminder to the passer-by that religion exists, a claiming of attention on behalf of the Catholic Church?
10. The juniors continue with us not as an asset but as an unsolved problem. We are not drawing proper dividends from them. We are using them on inferior occupations and this harms them. Generally speaking, they should be used for spiritual approach to those of their own age. I specify one case of a praesidium of twelve members aged about 12 which worked among non-Catholic children in a state school, bringing five of them and one adult into the Church in six months.
11. Could Juniors not be substituted for Seniors in dealing with institutions, works of service etc., it being understood that there would be senior supervision? Newspaper work should be discontinued as junior work.
12. Are our praesidia, our legionaries, our works, our Legion houses being adequately used? Each one of the above should be analysed from this point of view of justifying themselves. Similarly, each good legionary should be studied from the angle of better utilisation. Can a new work be built on him or her?

I sum up. Mary, the Queen of the Legion, has the office of mothering mankind. We have the privilege of helping her and she depends on that co-operation. It is woeful if in such wonderful circumstances we only take in hand the things of lesser consequence, leaving multitudes in real deprivation.