

A Great Legion

'I hope for a great Legion of valiant soldiers of Jesus and Mary to combat the world, the devil, and corrupted human nature in those more than ever perilous times which are to come.'

St Louis Marie de Montfort (1673 – 1716)

The handbook says that the starting of the Legion was not a work of human premeditation. It just happened and with an absolute minimum of discussion, such that everything had almost the air of being cut and dried. But when afterwards in the light of its great development, one scrutinised the event minutely, it became manifest that that it was the work of Providence and that every detail was precisely arranged. This minute-ness, moreover would go infinitely beyond anything which we could imagine. But is not this painting of the Legion in too high a colour? No, because God goes into that unlimited detail in absolutely everything he does. Look at the eye, or any other part of an insect, through these new electronic

microscopes and see the sheer wonder of it. If that applies to the insect which is destined to live for a day or two and whose purpose is obscure to us, why deny the same sort of preparation and perfection to the Legion of Mary which has already figured as a major item in the Church?

To see God in his works is an act of adoration. Also it is one of his most incomprehensible aspects that he takes pleasure out of our admiration of what he does. But in this case there is more at stake than that. There is the question of trying to ascertain what God had in mind as the Legion of Mary. Was his design fully implemented by his human instruments? Because their co-operation was a real thing; it was not automaton-ism. Man has a responsible part; he can make or he can mar.

Did God Have His Way Completely with the Legion?

I would like to think that God had his whole way with the Legion; that it came into the world as he intended it to. I base this on the fact that the persons interfered so little with what was placed before them. They could hardly be said to have added in anything. The one new ingredient was the full understanding of Mary. It could not be said that this was forced in; it entered so unobtrusively that it was the subject of no comment at all.

If that was how things really happened, can we not reasonably allege that God had his whole way with the legionary scheme? And can we claim any more for the Legion than that!

Furthermore can we, from our present evaluation of more than half a century of experience, say that the original Legion design has been adhered to faithfully? Archbishop Downey of Liverpool once said that every

Catholic organisation should be suppressed on its fiftieth birthday; that by then it had grown old like a person and was past its best. It would be melancholy to regard that as representing a general fact. It has not so worked out in the case of the Legion which looks as if it has only reached adult status and is only now really beginning its working life. But it would be terrible if the archbishop's words were justified to the extent that the Legion is ageing and weakening. Things that are supernatural should not wear out like that. The sacraments have not deteriorated in twenty centuries. If the Legion were truly a work of God, why should its span of life be only half a century?

But definitely the human agencies can introduce a defect. Or a small divergence somewhere along the line can prolong itself and end up almost as an opposite as time goes on.

Going Back to Our Roots – 1917

Therefore the work which this conference has set itself to is to examine most closely the Legion as it was born and then try to see if it has developed truly or if there has been deviation.

The roots of the present lie deep in the past. Assuredly the preparations for the Legion go back afar, too far for glimpsing. But its pattern became very distinct in 1917. Incidentally that year contained Fatima and the Russian Revolution which had important consequences on religion. It was in that year that Myra House came into the possession of the St Vincent de Paul Society, and this in turn led to the spacious premises being generously made available to various activities directed towards women and children. By 1818 these had produced a governing

body. This must be described in detail because in regard to the Legion it is almost the case of the child in the womb.

The 'Council' – 1918

The governing body which I will call the council met monthly at 4pm on Sunday. The various workers attended. The Spiritual Director was Fr Michael Toher and it had the four other officers. Procedure was modelled generally on that of a Vincent de Paul Conference with some modifications. One of these was in regard to the opening prayers. The St Vincent de Paul Society began its meetings with the invocation and prayer of the Holy Spirit followed by a Hail Mary and the following ejaculations: Sacred Heart of Jesus, Immaculate Heart of Mary, St Joseph, St Vincent de Paul and St Patrick – the latter being the conference under which these new activities germinated.

In those prayers the council made one vital alteration. It substituted the Ave with the Rosary. This was remarkable because nowhere was the Rosary incorporated in any committee or work meeting. On the other hand this did not prove the existence of the present Legion outlook. I will develop this point later.

After the prayers there was a spiritual reading. Then the minutes of the previous meeting were read. Then a report was taken from each member.

The works were various: individual cases, the teaching of Catechism in the Church after 12 o'clock Mass on Sundays; recruiting for the Pioneers and the League of Daily Mass; the interesting of families in the Enthronement of the Sacred Heart; the running of children's groups of different kinds. Finally, this has a special place in the economy: four brothers were incorporated who under the title of the

St Camillus Guild were visiting the patients in the Dublin Union Hospital.

At some point in the meeting an allocution was given by Fr Toher. He was an extremely spiritual man with a pronounced Marian turn.

Again suggestive of the Legion to come, the meeting had an automatic closure. When the Angelus rang out in the Church of St Nicholas of Myra almost opposite, the members rose to their feet, recited the prayer and the meeting terminated. Then the ladies adjourned to the kitchen and made tea for the company.

That meeting was a happy, stimulating affair. It foreshadowed the Legion meeting. Its methods of proceeding might have continued. It was good so that it might have been expected to expand. But it did not. It gained members but in the course of nearly four years there was no need to divide. Probably this was fortunate because it might have interfered with the path which led to the future Legion.

Catholic and Devotional but Not the Legion

I have said that the meeting was not Marian in the legionary sense. It had the Rosary but that was universal in the country then. It was devoutly Catholic and it had taken the big step forward into apostolicity. It utilised the Miraculous Medal and interested itself in the enrolment of people in the Brown Scapular. Its outlook was spiritual but emphatically it was not the Legion and this fact must be recognised in these present discussions.

De Montfort Enters in – 1919

Somewhere in 1919 some of us had encountered the St Louis Marie de Montfort's book on *True Devotion to Mary*. It

depicted Our Lady in a devastatingly different dimension to what we were accustomed to. The Catechism had never shown us anything even remotely like that. De Montfort exhibited her sharply as the mother of the Christian life, absolutely indispensable, concerned in every grace. The vastness of the role which he attributed to her and the very vehemence of the way in which he described it, gave the initial impression of gross exaggeration. Nevertheless he gripped the mind and forced one to read and enquire. At some stage in this process the conviction was gained that the book was justified and that the common presentation of Our Lady was not.

The seriousness of this was like an electric shock. For virtually it meant that we were leaving Mary out. Then we began to talk about it around us. As we did not rightly understand it ourselves, explanation was not easy but people somehow became interested.

One Sunday at the council meeting someone brought up the subject. He said that many were interested but did not understand it. Would it be possible to hold a special meeting which would be exclusively given up to that topic? The meeting accepted this suggestion and appointed a Sunday mid-way between that one and the next normal meeting.

That meeting took place. The prayers and spiritual reading were included but no other item of the customary agenda. I had been deputed to open the proceedings with a talk. I have often wondered what it was like. It was followed by what we would today call a Patrician discussion which was lively. This was terminated in the usual way by the Angelus at 6pm.

It seemed to be just an interesting session. There was no enthusiastic advocacy. No one got worked up in the

slightest. No one declared themselves as won over. It was a matter-of-fact explanation and discussion of the True Devotion. There was no decision come to and no resolution passed. The whole thing had the complexion of unfinished business, to be continued in our next – as it were. This note would tend to attach in any case by reason of the sudden shutting down of the meeting by the Angelus. And yet there was no intention on the part of those present to hold a continuation meeting. They regarded themselves as having transacted the business which had brought them together, and so they really had.

They had spent a couple of hours contemplating the real Mary and in giving an assent to what they saw. Though they did not realise it, this had changed their spiritual conceptions. As their future was to show, this attitude had apparently qualified them for a greater adventure. They had pulled a switch which set the wheels of destiny spinning.

The Spark That Caught

A fortnight later the next ordinary meeting of the council took place. The minutes contained no reference to that True Devotion meeting, nor did the latter come in for any present mention, but something else of novelty and importance did take place.

Matt Murray, who had that very morning been engaged on the visitation of the Union Hospital, was called on to give his report. It was an overwhelmingly impressive account, producing on everyone the same moving effect. That report was destined to spark off the Legion of Mary.

Immediately after the meeting when the preparations for tea were starting, two of the ladies came to Fr Toher and me and spoke of Matt Murray's remarkable report,

then going on to ask if it would be possible to organise the ladies to do the same work. The answer was given that it would be possible if a number could be obtained. They went away and soon returned with half a dozen who were willing. It was agreed that a first meeting would be held on the following Wednesday night at 8pm in a room at the end of the hall.

First Meeting – 1921

That evening was the Vigil of the Feast of Our Lady's Nativity; a circumstance not adverted to at the time. At 8pm fifteen persons assembled, thirteen women nearly all young, Fr Toher and myself. What in the circumstances we could justifiably call a portent met our eyes. For on the table stood the Legion altar as we have it today, but of course without the Vexillum. This was due to the initiative of one of the early comers, Alice Keogh, who later was the first vocation of the group.

It is notable that this particular statue had not previously played any part in the affairs of Myra House. It had been transferred to the house in 1916 as part of the property of a work which fell through, but which the Legion of Mary would absorb later on. In the meantime the statue was lying unused waiting for the day when it would be put to such dramatic use.

That altar produced a transforming effect on the bare room. It supplied the precisely appropriate setting for the meeting. It made Mary the principle visible idea. The new members did not come together and then invite her in. She was there before they assembled and they only added themselves to her. They were not merely going to form a society but to love and serve a person. There is a superior force in this idea.

I do not repeat the details of that meeting; they must be well known to you. I confine myself to the peculiarities which bear on our present subject. In a way those members did nothing new. They were only applying their old methods to a new work. They said their usual prayers. And yet everything was different; it was like as if a new personality had entered into the group and made itself felt in distinct ways. The strangest thing was the confidence with which they set themselves to plan, as if they were sure of the future. Just now they would attend to the hospital situation which had brought them together. Later on they would take in hand other works. Now they would not seek the membership of men because of certain difficulties, but they were not going to be a woman's society. Later on men would be brought in. They were not going to give material relief – either now or later. And so on with that singular assurance which characterised them and yet which could not have proceeded from themselves.

True Devotion Connection

Perhaps the most peculiar feature of all was that they were not projecting the atmosphere of the monthly meeting out of which they had just issued. They seemed to be throwing back to the True Devotion of seventeen days before. And yet they did not refer specifically to that meeting. It was taken for granted. It was almost as if what had been discussed at it had been formally enshrined in resolutions (which I have already explained was not the case) and were now formally declared to be the spiritual foundation of the Legion of Mary – not the case either. There was no discussion on this latter subject. It was as if everyone was so completely convinced by the True Devotion meeting that there was no need for

any more to be added on the subject. The principles of their relation to Mary were simply outlined. They were entering into a union with her on which everything depended. She was their mother. They would not only be subject to her care but would also try to help her with her other children.

There was no question of declaring Our Lady to be the patron of the new association. Her relation to them went far beyond that idea. At a stroke the spirituality of the monthly meeting was superseded and surpassed. The new association became the main thing and instantly began to grow. It produced four branches in its first year whereas the council had not produced one in four years. Little by little it took on the purposes of the parent group which then shrank into being the Pioneer Council, previously but one of its functions.

It has been said that the Legion was born fully grown. That is not completely accurate. For instance it did not possess its name at the outset. The Vexillum and Tessera, the Promise, its Patrons, the Catena, the Legion Prayer were hidden in the future. Its own primary doctrines such as the Mystical Body and the Holy Spirit were imperfectly grasped in the earlier stages but they were there – just as the baby has organs which it does not as yet comprehend. But that baby image is completely effective in one respect. The baby concentrates on its mother and the infant group did likewise in regard to its mother.

Love of Mary Enjoins a Pastoral Apostolate

Unquestionably the infant Legion knew its mother in a way far higher than the general community. Then it set to work to make that knowledge practical. It understood a pastoral apostolate at a time when such was not even

thought of by the laity. The motive was the helping of Mary to give Jesus.

No doubt it has picked up much additional knowledge since then, but the vital point which arises is whether this has been universal in the Legion. If only a minority possessed that full knowledge, it could not be claimed that the Legion has advanced. It would mean that the Legion on its first night knew more than the worldwide Legion today. That would mark a terrible failure at a time when the world has reached its lowest depths and needs the Legion most.

However, it seems impossible that this defect should exist. At every Legion meeting of any kind the system is explained by every means, through the handbook, the *allocutio*, the spiritual reading and the reports. It would seem to be impossible that this would not teach the true Legion to every member. But then when one surveys many of the praesidia, one is made uneasy. How could poor practice issue from good theory? So I repeat with not a little anguish: 'Could it be possible that the Legion as it came into existence on its first night was better than it is today?'

Today the Legion is famous and infinitely bigger but gain in those respects at the expense of spirit would be no gain. You will recall Newman's phrase that a material extension without a corresponding moral manifestation is almost too awful to contemplate.

Coincidence or Design?

I go back to that monthly council meeting. It existed for nearly four years before bringing forth the Legion. It was very successful and its tone was good. Yet its purpose would seem to have been to produce the Legion. It did

not grow during that time. It faded away afterwards. It possessed the same type of members, many of them actually the same individuals. It engaged in the same type of work. In those years nothing interrupted its ordinary routine until the holding of that special True Devotion meeting, and then in the twinkling of an eye something happened which led on to a new order. Within seventeen days the Legion of Mary was in operation.

It is impossible to believe that the connection between the True Devotion meeting and the immediate emergence of the Legion from the next monthly meeting was a coincidence. There was too much higher design and too little human contriving. Nearly four years had gone by without incident until the next monthly meeting was held. The moment it established in minds the true stature of Our Lady in the Christian system, things were ready for the Legion. The question of 'when' appeared to solve itself along lines of the convenience of the future members. But here again we are caused to discover the operation of a higher idea. The Legion came into existence at first Vespers of the Feast of Our Lady's Nativity, a fact not adverted to until sometime afterwards.

As you know, the Legion was for some years known by the name of its first branch, Our Lady of Mercy. I would say that the adoption of the name Legion of Mary had stimulating effects second only to those of the True Devotion meeting. The organisation started putting on its plumage. The name brought in its train our Latin terminology and the Vexillum.

Mary and the Holy Spirit

The Vexillum must be regarded thoughtfully, less because it is a beautiful emblem than for its spiritual significance.

The amazing circumstance is that it was history and not theology which designed the Vexillum. It was the name Legion which pointed to the Roman Vexillum as the Legion trademark. But of course it had to be made Catholic. By simple adaptation the eagle became the Dove. The emperor became the Queen of Heaven, and so on. The final evolution places before us the legionary conception of itself: the Holy Spirit gives himself to the world through Mary.

The Tessera picture, setting out to render the Legion pictorially for the purposes of its prayer card, reaches the same result from a different angle. Paint and brush are better able than metal to represent the closeness of union between the Holy Spirit and Mary and their members. She is portrayed as the biblical pillar of fire, and he is the fire which fills her. Around the chain border are the great texts which define Our Lady's role: the Woman of Genesis, the Co-Redemptrix, the Mediatrix of all Graces. Thus early did the Legion begin venerating her as Mediatrix. The feast was only approved by Rome in June 1921.

When the Legion Promise came, it continued the process of expanding things which had seemed to be lesser or in shadow. Even though its first word of prayer had been devoted to the Holy Spirit the Legion babe had concentrated on its mother. But in the promise the Legion has gained maturity and sees Mary in the light of the Holy Spirit. The Legion has to be absorbed totally in Mary before it can be used fully by the Holy Spirit. Though not fully understood at the time, all this was implicit in the first meeting of the Legion of Mary and was contained in its first words of prayer when it addressed the Holy Spirit.

Mary is the wings of the Heavenly Dove on which he comes.