

LEGIONARY FORMATION

Years ago I contributed an article to the Capuchin Annual on "The Future of the Legion."* [*Reprinted as the last chapter in this book – Mary Shall Reign.] In it I ventured to say that the Legion seemed to be moving towards some epochal situation. It looked like an army which was being steadily mobilised for a great clash which might be nothing less than the death struggle between religion and atheistic materialism. The army of this latter force is, like our own, growing rapidly – even more rapidly than we. The two appear to be taking up position in opposite battle-lines which already encircle the whole world. You know what happens when armies are thus making ready and squaring up to each other. Sections tangle and there is a series of local battles which represent a preliminary warming up for the decisive encounter. We may be in that stage. We have had a few of those fierce skirmishes and we have done well enough in them to cause us to look ahead with confidence. I say a word about each one. Understand that they were only skirmishes by proportion to a world position. They were large enough and agonising for those who bore the brunt of them.

CHINA, KERALA, CONGO

China, in the first place, which left the enemy in possession of the battlefield and us in possession of the laurels. Our soldiers there have shown a degree of spirit which could not be bettered and which has not been exceeded in history. The Internuncio to China, Archbishop Riberi, discussing that point, compared those gallant Legionaries to the first Christians. He said their status was no less high. Many thousands have been martyred; countless others have suffered atrociously. In an audience granted recently to the French Legionaries, the Holy Father paid a touching tribute to those persecuted ones, declaring that he directed to them his prayers and his affections.

The second encounter has been Kerala India, where we were left in possession both of the battlefield and of the honours. It was the first time that a Communist Government was routed and driven from power.

Now the Congo crisis is affording another aspect of Marian versatility. The Legion has so rooted the Church into the native soil that there is no danger of its being marked down as a piece of colonialism to be expelled with the Europeans. Catholicism has domiciled itself and is the chief religion in the Congo.

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Where lies our next encounter? Perhaps in Sri Lanka?

But here let us put things into perspective. The purposes of the Legion are wider than the warfare with the anti-God forces. It is as much at home and far busier in the ways of the common apostolate, i.e. the building up of religion and the making of conversions.

A VITAL LEAVEN

An article in a secular weekly has suggested that one of the major tasks facing the Church is the regularisation and the encouraging of the lay apostolate. It has shown such striking power in recent years as to cause the authorities to think that it could be used to make the next era the most fruitful in history of the Church. That is an intriguing contemplation but a reasonable one to us who have been regarding in detail what the Legion is doing throughout the world.

The Legion aims to be a leaven in the body. The idea of the leaven is that a spirited nucleus works on the mass, which in turn imbibes the quality of the leaven. But what is not sufficiently understood is the vital principle that the nucleus must never cease to raise itself. Otherwise that first output of virtue by the nucleus ends the transaction and the mass merely enters into a higher stagnation. This would denote failure, because a Christian leaven should as part of its very life have the power to lift itself always, thus continuing permanently the function of developing the general body.

The more one sees of the Legion, the more evident are its possibilities in that respect. Its horizons are never final ones. When we reach the one which is before us, we find that there is another one beyond it, and so on apparently indefinitely. This is only another way of stating that the Holy Spirit is responsive to our efforts, ever opening up new fields, interior and exterior, to those who continue to strain after them. But there must be no resting on existing standards. We must be filled with what the poet calls divine discontent, which impels us to do better, to press endlessly on. At no lesser price can we maintain ourselves as that lasting leaven which draws the populace upwards but always manages to keep just ahead of it; so that finally one can hope that the whole Church will be filled with fervour, rendering it possible to reach out to the unconverted four-fifths of the world.

A CONVERT EXPLOSION

Bishop Henry of Korea in a remarkable article in *Maria Legionis*, goes into the question of creating and using that leaven. He defines a leaven as a single-minded, disciplined, devoted, principled, enthusiastic minority. It has to be worked all the time at white heat, pushed to its limits. It has to be maintained

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as a revolutionary thing. This is lofty thinking, but Bishop Henry has brought it down to earth in Korea. By using the Legion, he and his missionaries have been able to set off what he calls "a convert explosion." The converts have poured in in such numbers that the handling of them has become a sub-problem.

But what has been accomplished there could be done in every other place. Because they are under no particular advantages there. The people are simple; the conditions are typically missionary. Apply the same methods elsewhere and the same results would flow.

Perhaps enough has been said to prove the need to take the Legion seriously and encourage it.

Here are some dangers. Reference has already been made to that of resting satisfied with current performance. The opposite danger would be that of introducing elements which though good in themselves would be incompatible. The Legion has its own distinctive character. One might say that it is a delicate moral mechanism. It is not difficult to alter the character of such or to disturb its balance.

The ultimate aim of the Legion is the mobilising of the whole Catholic people. But it must not be thought that this entails the turning of one's back upon high quality. According to the thought of Cardinal Montini, the Legion draws into its ranks the multitude of the "little people." Yet by a seeming anomaly it is found producing experts, leaders, idealists, and much holiness. It exhibits a bubbling fertility of works and methods. It preserves a youthful spirit and every day there are new aspects of adventure. So let us be chary of taking liberties with an apostolic formula which grace is so obviously using.

AN ACCUSATION OF DEFICIENCY

This brings me to a critical issue. A whole school of apostolic thought charges the Legion with defect in the matter of formation. That school has worked out a special form of handling its members which is mainly based on a lecture system. This would provide a comprehensive range of knowledge and conduct, suited to the purposes in view. But because the Legion works along other lines, the accusation is levelled against it of neglecting formation altogether.

This does cruel injustice to the Legion which was in existence long before those other systems and which certainly does produce a distinctive formation. Yet that idea has been spread assiduously with the result that some authorities have been influenced against the Legion. Moreover, that clamour occasionally stirs up an echo in the Legion itself. I mention two current cases for the purpose of showing what is really at stake in those light-hearted proposals for altering or adding. I suppose it would not be too much to say that there are twenty different ingredients blended in the Legionary formula. Such must be treated

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delicately. The doubling of one ingredient may destroy the formula. In medicine it might kill the patient.

One prominent Legionary writes from a missionary land that a great Religious Order has been insisting to him that the Legion is not attending to formation. Swayed by that breeze, he wonders if we should not put our Legionaries through certain courses. He goes on to specify some of them, and it is to the tune of half-a-dozen. Replying, we pointed out that his list of subjects was not complete - that even a casual glance indicated others that would be equally desirable. For instance, what about courses for the technical duties of the officers: President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer? And would not specialised instruction seem to be needed for each different work? But all this would impose a burden; it might even amount to another day per week on Legionaries! Having regard to the magnitude of the programme, those talks would go on for years and indeed for ever, if we take account of the influx of new members who would likewise have to be "formed." That would radically increase the requirements of the Legion.

LECTURES ARE NOT THE ANSWER

The second letter is from a Spiritual Director. He writes as one completely convinced about the Legion. He recounts the considerable duties of the Spiritual Director as set out in the *Handbook* and he exclaims plaintively: "How is this tremendous task to be accomplished in five minutes per meeting, namely through the Allocutio?" Something extra has to be provided! You will see the allurements of that notion that formation is a verbal process. You lecture people on what they are to be like and on everything! In that way is the apostle made!

If that idea is unduly relied on, it can do untold injury to the Christian apostolate, which it would turn into a select thing for an elite only. Moreover, such a complex process as the formation of people is not effected by merely addressing words to them - no more than a statue is carved by words alone.

There may also be at stake another error, namely that of proposing that the active apostolate should not begin until the formation has ended. As to that, there is a valid contention in the *Handbook* to the effect that a preparation of mere study can end by intimidating the members, so much so that they never undertake the work for which they were studying. As oddly typical I quote from the letter of a Parish Priest in Portugal: "I have never been able to make my Catholic Action understand that formation must end in apostleship."

I supply an impressive - one might call it explosive - comment on that censure as to Legionary inadequacy. It is the case of the Congo where the Legion and those other apostolic agencies have been side by side. Incidentally these latter were unsparing in their criticism of the Legion.

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Then came the revolution. Summing up what happened, the Bishops of the country have said that the Legion of Mary was the only lay organisation which had stood up to the conditions. It had proved its capacity to form its members and to produce leaders. Further, those other Societies had failed to do these things, so that if ever they were to be revived, it would have to be in a completely recast form!

This proves that in one case at least the Legion has done quite a pretty job of forming its members. I do not claim that such a single test is final, but I do add that there have been many others in which the Legion has produced similar form.

THE LEGION SYSTEM OF FORMATION

Now let us inspect the Legion idea on the subject of formation. While it has necessarily to instruct its members verbally to a considerable extent, it has always believed that talking to people, taken strictly by itself, is of very little use. As a drastic example of this, weigh up the years of ordinary school, shooting knowledge at young people every day and many hours every day, and yet how little is retained in the end. Some come out of school knowing apparently nothing, and you would wonder what the whole thing amounted to in their case. One is compelled to think that it is the system which is a fault rather than the pupils, for these have far greater intelligence than the results suggest. I venture to think that the disproportion is due, firstly to inactive minds on the receiving end of the transaction; and secondly to a lack of connection; the words of the teacher do not convey what he intends or what he thinks he is expressing.

In order to bring home to you how great a problem this is, I show it operating inside the Legion which does not rely exclusively on that verbal communication of knowledge; where the verbal and the practical work together as a team; and where one can usually "see" whether the members have grasped ideas. What, then, can happen in those systems which merely teach and take for granted?

THE INEFFECTIVENESS OF TALK

We are incessantly telling our Legionaries that they must give audible reports and, nevertheless, inaudible reports are, as the song says, in point of fact too many. The *Handbook* and the officers harp on the fact that the report which cannot be heard is worse than no report. And yet there are the inaudible reports! Is that a deliberate disregard of words that are addressed to them? It is not. It springs from another cause, which is that in spite of all those admonitions, the individual member imagines he is making himself heard. He is not counting himself in among those to whom the appeals are addressed. There is not one Legionary who says to himself: "I am going to deliver a report that will not be

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heard.”

I add that here the severely practical is the only demonstration. One explains unmistakably what an inaudible report is by refusing to accept it.

Again, members are told that their reports should be interesting. Yet the uninteresting reports are many. If you talk to them privately on the subject, you will find them under the impression that they have told an interesting tale.

It is insisted that the report should not be too long nor too short. Having listened carefully to that, they proceed to err in one or other of those two ways. Again they are satisfied that they are doing the ideal thing.

They are to be tactful, a phrase which goes over their heads, for everybody thinks that he is tactful. There is not one of us under the sun but is satisfied that he is tactful. The same in regard to prudence. So you will see that the mere telling of people to display those qualities is waste of words.

Take even the case of those reasonably experienced Legionaries, our correspondents with our related Councils. We are all the time impressing on them that they must write worthy letters. Then you look at the files and find that some of the letters which have issued are little more than bare acknowledgments, almost useless. But the writers imagined those letters to be models!

So you will see how words do not connect and how unwise it would be to set up a system which depended on those spoken words and thought that what was said was all being taken in. Words bring one so far and no farther.

MASTER AND APPRENTICE

Believing this, the Legion relies on the Master and Apprentice system, where you show what you mean after you have spoken what you mean. You watch the pupil trying to put that instruction into execution. To the extent that he falls short, he is corrected. And he makes a fresh attempt. To the extent that defect continues, there is an additional, and indeed a continual chain of correction and explanation until finally a sort of perfection is achieved. That is the Master and Apprentice system.

Now, let us apply this principle to the case which we have previously mentioned, namely, the Spiritual Director and the five minutes' Allocutio. The Legion replies: "No, you have not five minutes per meeting for that task of forming your members. You have ninety minutes, that is, the entire course of each meeting."

For why should it be assumed that the prayers have nothing to do with formation; nor the Spiritual Reading? Actually, it is the Legion ideal that every item in that meeting, however small, should play its part: the Minutes, the Reports, the comments on the Reports, the assignments, the helpful suggestions

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that should be proceeding from everybody in the room. Each of these avenues of procedure is supposed to contribute its mite of education. Every one is necessary, and everything in the end adds up to a powerful, moulding influence. Every meeting contains much verbal formation but always, so to speak, rooted in the soil, that is linked up with the practical and with action so that the words may never remain mere words.

The Spiritual Director, and of course the other officers, are active even when they are not speaking, just as the engineer on a great ship is active when he is only walking around casually looking at the machinery. The officers have to see that the meeting is going according to plan; that each member is fulfilling his due part; that the rules are understood and conformed to. The raising of the members to Bishop Henry's "white heat" is not accomplished by imparting to them a vigorous technical polishing. The process has to go much deeper, mainly consisting in the planting in those members of a living appreciation of the great Christian doctrines on which their apostolate depends. Each detail of their action is to be more or less consciously viewed according to the analogy of the root and its flower; the one without the other would lack either purpose of life.

THE QUESTION OF TIME

We come to perhaps the paramount consideration. We must not overlook the vital question of Time. The lay apostolate should not be made a contradiction of terms; that is it must not deter the ordinary person, but must cater for him. That ordinary person is a working person. He has to spend many hours every day at work, and after the evening meal there are only a few hours left over for rest, recreation and other purposes, including the apostolate. Two of those evenings are seized by the Legion. To insist on more would not be proper. It is true that there are many people who are so full of devotion that they want to give everything, and the Legion expands its arms welcomingly to that generosity. But that is a voluntary transaction and no Legionary must be forced on to it. We must not act violently towards those hours of leisure which everyone has a right to. In addition, to demand more than is required under the rules would defeat our special purpose, which is the mobilisation of the whole Catholic people. Take more time from them, as these courses would do, and we have lost the multitude from our banners and have retained only that devout class. In the name of perfection of an alleged formation, the Legion of Mary has been supplanted by something different. Will that something else reap the tremendous prospects that the Legion has in it for the world?

Therefore, as a first principle, accomplish the process of formation inside the existing Legion framework. It can be done. There is of course plenty of defect in the Legion. One might perhaps exult in that, for it shows that it is enlisting

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the average and even weak human material on which it has set its heart. It suggests too that the ranks are full of recruits whose natural condition is that of defect.

DEFECTS YIELD TO THE SYSTEM

But that defect will normally yield in the measure that the system takes grip on the member. For this, two things are necessary; a little patience and a reasonable working of the system. It takes no more time to yield oneself fully to the system than to offer a listless membership.

I conclude with most eminent words. The Holy Father, speaking to the officers of the Concilium, has said: "From every word which has come to me from every part of the world, I have gained a conviction as to the excellence of the Legion system."

There is praise. That statement of the Sovereign Pontiff sets a seal upon what we have been calling the Legion system. There is no suggestion in those words of His Holiness that it is a system full of defects or that we are not training and handling our members properly. The reverse is to be inferred, i.e. that the system is working satisfactorily; that it is not merely an excellent system, but that it is operating well.