

"I MUST BE ABOUT MY FATHER'S BUSINESS"

—*St. Luke ii, 49.*

[Somewhere off the coast of New England a submarine lay on the ocean bed, battered, broken, unable to reascend. In its hull five men were bravely waiting—their voices calm and devoid of fear. The talk reverberated from the metal shell which formed their prison.]

LIEUTENANT: What time is it now, Skipper?

SKIPPER: 4.15 a.m. You asked me that same question, Lieutenant, exactly six minutes ago.

LIEUTENANT: And why not? There isn't anything else to do.

1ST SAILOR: Whatcha kickin' about, Lieutenant? Submarine's the whole wheeze—nothing to do but sit down and draw extra pay.

2ND SAILOR: Join the Navy and see the world—with buckets of dough to buy yourself a good time.

3RD SAILOR (grumpily): Shut up, you guys—you're using up the air.

2ND SAILOR: Yeah! What air? My ole lady got me into this business because she said them airypalanes was fallin' all the time. She sure has got me down about as far as I can go!

LIEUTENANT: My head's just bursting.

SKIPPER: Easy on, easy on, Lieutenant.

2ND SAILOR: It's all very well for you to talk, Skipper—you haven't a wife and kid to leave behind. I'll go mad thinking of her. I can see her face now, when she hears the news.

SKIPPER: It's a good job the lights didn't go when the tub cracked up.

LIEUTENANT: Yes. I'd have lost my nerve long ago in the dark. As it is, they are nearly gone. My head is bursting.

SKIPPER: Easy on—easy on, Lieutenant.

3RD SAILOR: The Coast Guard will get through.

2ND SAILOR: Not a hope, buddy—they blokes is too busy chasin' dames!

1ST SAILOR: Bully for them! Wish I was chasin' one now.

2ND SAILOR: Yeah! And what about the brush-off you got from that last blonde you had?

1ST SAILOR: Gee, that baby was a hep-kitten—just my idea of a real classy dame!

SKIPPER: Dames! Dames! Dames! Do you guys ever think of anything else? I only wish we had Dinny and that mouth organ of his. It's the only time I ever really wanted to hear him play.

1ST SAILOR: He's playing the harp now in the other half of this tin-can. He was a great guy; always ready to slap a tune on top of our blues.

3RD SAILOR: That rescue party *must* get through.

2ND SAILOR: Aye! and so will the Marines.

[*Three sailors chat in low tones together. Skipper and Lieutenant do likewise for a couple of seconds, then the Lieutenant's voice rises—*]

LIEUTENANT: . . . at the Gardiner's party in New London, Skipper. You must remember her—she wore the white dress with the red trimming.

SKIPPER: Oh! I remember her now. She had a brother there, didn't she? Surly cuss that played contract so well?

LIEUTENANT: That's the one. The last time I saw her was the night before I went away. There's something about that girl that makes it hard for me to go now.

SKIPPER: She is beautiful all right, but I think she is too old for you.

LIEUTENANT: It's the way she wears her hair. Funny thing, I was reading a letter of hers when this crash came. She's sweet, Skipper. Gosh! just my rotten luck this should happen now.

2ND SAILOR: Any rum left, Skipper? My throat's awful parched.

1ST SAILOR: The only thing I want is a big glass of beer. Wasn't it a swell night we had before we put to sea! The booze runnin' like Niagara. And remember the singing! Wasn't Dinny hot on the mouth organ? We didn't think we'd never be on shore again.

2ND SAILOR: I wish the sea would bust these walls and wash away the pain in my poor dome. It's giving me gyp. (*He splutters.*)

LIEUTENANT: My head's cracking open, too. What time is it now, Skipper?

SKIPPER: It's half-past (*cough, cough*), half-past, past——.

LIEUTENANT: Funny, too. Always fancied myself as a family man—when I got promotion (*cough*). Funny the way everything works down to dollars in the end!

SKIPPER: O.K. for some guys. Never chanced it myself. This air stinks.

1ST SAILOR: Heck, Skipper, here's the water in! Look! the little leak over there!

2ND SAILOR: Maybe it will wash the air—(*laughs hysterically*).

SKIPPER: Steady, you guys!

3RD SAILOR: Save the air! Save the air! Save the air! Save the air! (*in a rising hysterical crescendo*).

SKIPPER: Pipe down, Sonny, it makes no difference.

LIEUTENANT: Yes, Skipper, I intended my son should serve Uncle Sam in the Navy. Wonder what he would be like?

1ST SAILOR: What about that rum, Skipper?

2ND SAILOR: It'll make you sick.

3RD SAILOR: That rescue must get through. I know it will, do you hear!!! It'll get through (*slightly panicky*).

2ND SAILOR: Aye! and so will the Marines.

SKIPPER: No harm in hoping anyway.

LIEUTENANT: Skipper! (*splutters*), my head is horrible (*raises his voice*). I just can't stand it.

SKIPPER: Hold on, son, hold on!

LIEUTENANT: O.K. I'm better now.

2ND SAILOR: What day is it?

3RD SAILOR: Sunday, you dope.

2ND SAILOR: Me ole lady and the kid'll always do Central Park on a Sunday. Gee! I hope she won't let him join the Navy. Junior's a fine kid. Wonder if he'll miss me much. (*He splutters.*) It can't be long now.

SKIPPER: Well, there'll be no one to mourn me. Can't remember my father. Mom passed over years ago. Wonder why I was so keen on the sea. Don't regret it though—it was a good life though tough in spots. Never keen on dames either, since a girl I was fond of gave me the hard knock.

1ST SAILOR: Water creepin' up, Skipper.

LIEUTENANT: Say, you guys, what about getting it over quickly when the water rises?

SKIPPER: Not for me, while there's life there's hope. Life to me is a series of sensations, some good and pleasant, others bad, but I don't mind whether they are good or bad. I just want to experience them; even this headache, for as long as possible; and so I would rather die a lingering death than be snuffed out at a moment's notice.

2ND SAILOR: Golly! what a slant on life you have, Skipper. Me! I don't want to live unless there's something good cookin'.

1ST SAILOR: Sure! life's only worth living where there's plenty of dames and tin.

3RD SAILOR: Well, there ain't no dames here (*cough*)——.

LIEUTENANT: What time is it, Skipper?

SKIPPER: Well, Lieutenant, we'll never again know the time—my watch is stopped! It stopped at. . . (*cough*).

[*All hands cough and splutter, and then there is silence.*]

* * *

What is the idea of the foregoing strange dialogue which rings so out of tune with what you are accustomed to in *Maria Legionis*? It portrays five men in a submarine on the ocean bed waiting for the coming of Death in grisly form. He is near: actually in the punctured, poison-filled "tin-can" with them. Already his fingers touch them, probe their vitals.

The scene is adapted from a much longer episode in a current novel in which there are forty men instead of five. The necessary compression into much smaller compass squeezes out most of the characters and a lot of the colour and effectiveness of the original.

In the latter, all the forty men did some talking. They reacted in different ways but all reproduced the same general note as in our less vivid presentation—that is, not a single one spoke of God, and so far as the narrative gave any indication, no one was thinking of God, or of a hereafter.

Fervent meditations on Dames, Dollars and Drink forms a fantastic preparation for Death.

You say: "Only a story!" No—more than a story. It is the projection into print of the mind of the author, depicting men as he has seen, heard and known them. That is how he figures that men of his world would deliberately occupy their last few moments on earth. Admittedly—or at least we would insist so—his picture is not balanced. It does not mirror *our* world. But it does represent *his* world. As he is to some extent typical of other writers and other men, so to

some extent is his picture typical of the real world. (Not that we need labour this point, for we all know how bad things are.) Therefore, it forms shocking contemplation. For if there be a gleam of faith, it would be fanned to flame in those decisive moments. If there be in the soul any fear or love of God, it would then betray itself. Certainly that would apply to the vast bulk of Catholics. But I have known a few who made their exit in the manner of the crew of the submarine—and worse!

Souls at Stake

Now transfer that process of thought to the world at large. Run the eye of your mind over the great cities. In each of them are multitudes living *that life*; in which God has no part; which no ray of faith or hope or true charity illumines. They are born into the great adventure of life and their pilgrimage towards eternity proceeds. But according to what principles? Nothing better, nothing else than the principles of the moth facing a line of candles. Dames, Dollars and Drink are all they know about or care about. Then enters Death, and here in charity we must refrain from adding a fifth alliterative link.

Surely some one is to blame? Surely we are not intended to be spectators of that spiritual chaos in the same helpless way that we would eye the mad churnings of the ocean? Those multitudes are typified by the five poor souls whom the above paragraphs have staged for us. Their spiritual darkness is more intense than that of the ocean bed outside that wrecked machine. Either they have never been taught to know Christ; or if they once were taught, they have not been retaught or rewarmed. If they were sought out, they would be terrifically different; for even the slightest contact of grace works hidden wonders, and may mean the difference between a soul's loss and its salvation. But they have not

been sought out with intent to effect those things. They have been left forlornly to the process of action, interaction and reaction with other victims or agents of evil like themselves. And how right thoroughly that process does its work!

Excuses for Inaction

If people knew of that submarine's plight, what frantic efforts would be made to help it. In a flash the whole world would be aware of the tragedy and in a sort of agony would follow its developments. Every material aid would be mobilised and men innumerable would be willing to place their own lives in jeopardy by desperate attempts at rescue. But when it is only souls that are at stake, what a different tale there is to tell! Most people, even the good Christian, appear to feel for souls at large no sense of responsibility whatever. Or if they do admit some responsibility, they then proceed, by pleading difficulties and special circumstances, to dilute that responsibility to such an extent that it ceases to be a real one at all. Obviously, responsibility must not mean something which is the opposite to responsibility. Neither must it terminate in mere feelings, study, writing, reading, radioing, or that sort of "preparation" which never gets down to the job. The approach to souls must not be made so scientific a technique as to be generally impracticable, or so indirect as to by-pass its objective, or so gradual as never to reach it. Approach must be nothing less than the sort of straightforward, wholesale going to souls which the pages of the Gospel picture for us. For, despite surface appearances, the conditions of to-day are much the same as those of the Gospel times, and the Gospel is not otherwise out-of-date.

Anything to do with us? In words well known to you, St. John Chrysostom asserts it has everything to do with us: "Christians, you will render an account not of your own souls alone, but of the souls of the whole world." What a

shock for us if we were to take that seriously! But perhaps the saint meant it to be taken seriously, as reflecting the mind of the Lord and echoing His words. For that is precisely what the Gospel seems to say: that on the shoulders of other men, jointly and severally, lies the responsibility for each of those almost infinitely numerous poor folk like the five—or forty—who are now living their godless lives and who will in due course pass through the Dread Portals in that “tin-can” spirit.

Those sailors are far from being the worst in those great populations. (Though possibly one or two in the submarine may be as bad as they come—real bad!). But mainly their sins are those of ignorance and passion—which does not, however, alter the fact that those sins, like a reeking deluge, cover the face of the earth. And their sort of wrong-doing shades into worse. There are the multitudes whose motive-power is malice; the perpetrators of enormities; the exponents of the Black Mass and other dealers in the Black Art; villains whose villainy has paid them; those who would commit a murder for a modest sum; the doers of wholesale cruelties and injustices which would make blood and tears run in rivers.

Then there is the uncountable world of those who are respectable but who have no faith—which is to be worse off than the greatest criminal who has in him some spark of the supernatural.

Then the others who have some faith, but not The Faith; no Mass, no Sacraments. By comparison with those other grimmer specimens, this class looks good and we even find ourselves applying the word “holy” to many among them. But do not ignore that “hard saying” of Our Lord’s which includes such persons: “Amen, amen, I say unto you: Except you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you shall not have life in you” (St. John vi. 54).

In many places over the world, the foregoing categories would comprise as much as 95 per cent of the population.

Even to us, with our blunted sensibilities, all that is painful to visualise. What must it have been like to our beloved Lord—who saw all and felt fully—when He allowed that same awful contemplation to overwhelm Him in the Garden of Olives. “A very appreciable time passed before He could subdue the instinct of holy horror and submit Himself to His Father’s will. All the tragedy of the Agony is summed up in this desperate struggle. Sin was about to close with Him. He foresaw the hideous hand-to-hand fight, and He was afraid. Presently, as soon as the abominable contact is brought about, the strife will be so cruel and the effort to resist the embrace of evil so frightful that He will sweat drops of blood. Then, vanquished, outflanked, invaded, steeped to the very marrow in the infamous torrent, He will bow His head in the shame and unbearable disgust of His condition.” (Bolo: *Tragedy of Calvary*).

Am I My Brother’s Keeper?

Now suppose St. John Chrysostom—and the Gospel—are right! And that we, arrived at the Bar of Eternal Justice, are accused in respect of the distressing manner in which those poor sailors, and the millions whom they typify, spend their last moments?

What are we going to reply to that terrifying interrogation? Should we try boldly bluffing it out: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” That cry sounded fine during life, and all the hard-boiled ones mouthed it and acted it. But if we do, it will not serve us. For the answer will be simply, “Yes,” stripping away all pretence and defence and leaving us without a word to say. For all the time we knew in our hearts what the Saint has put into words. We were aware that Our Lord depended

on us, who had Him, to bear Him to those who did not have Him. Without the ministry of one man, He is not given to another. So that indifference and inactivity on our part end inevitably in that Submarine Cameo and its like.

But perhaps we are able to give a more respectable account of ourselves: "Those things constitute an impossible situation. I deplore it. But what more can I do about it? I am working for souls in my own place, and thus through the 'machinery' of the Mystical Body I am reaching out to the souls who are inaccessible to me!"

That is better. It admits responsibility and shows willingness to shoulder it. But is that degree of shouldering sufficient? How can it be? For if it were, it would sanction a localising of faith and Christian effort to the places that already possess those things. It would mean the leaving of the more needy places for ever in their existing state.

Prayer—Prelude to Action

Then there is that other rejoinder: "What can I do but pray for those unhappy places and people, and that I do." You assume that such praying completely discharges your responsibility because of the difficulty or—as you would put it—the impossibility of reaching farther out. But I suggest that you cannot thus emancipate yourself—and for two reasons: one practical and minor; the other of vital principle. The former is: How much prayer? For do not speak of prayer at all in this connection unless you mean something serious. Prayer is commonly treated as a soft way out of a duty. "Let us pray" is either a pious formula—not meaning recourse to prayer at all; or else it is a disproportionate, insignificant contribution. But even if it be substantial, does it discharge your responsibility? Except that you are specially consecrated to the life of prayer, I do not think it does. For

that, again, leads logically to the standing off from physical contact with those places and problems, an attitude very different to that of the Gospel, which is essentially an attitude of *going* and *doing*. Our tendency—almost irresistible—is to fight shy of that physical contact because it can be so difficult, or as we tell ourselves—so impossible.

Prayer must never represent escapism. Prayer is not supposed to be an excuse, or something into which we relax. It is the prelude to and necessary accompaniment to action. It is the dynamism behind action. If rightly used, it will lead to action and bring action to fruitfulness. It is like the electric current which is made operative through a mechanism. But action is that mechanism. Action in human affairs might be compared to the necessary place of water in Baptism or of bread in the Eucharist. So, action no less than prayer, is due to all those problems. We are human beings, made of body and soul; and both body and soul must strain towards those sinful, necessitous souls. Prayer is the operation of part of our being. The remainder of our being *must* co-operate appropriately. There must be some tangible act or touch, that can be called physical, between us and those Christ-starved souls. Naturally, that action must be pitched to maximum intensity and display itself in effective ways. But in the event that effective action does not appear to be possible, then *some* action is called for; in the last resort even a feeble gesture, even an unconnected or in itself futile physical reaching-out, or such a symbolic act as the preaching of St. Francis to the birds and fishes.

Symbolic Action

Does this seem utterly ridiculous? Possibly it does. But there is method in its madness. Because it will save us from what would otherwise happen in almost every case, i.e. total

and largely inexcusable inaction. For, having established it as a first principle that we must do something, our sense of the prudent and economical will shape our action into effective forms; so that we will not have to continue for long that type of action which I call "symbolic."

It is not enough that all the Confessionals and altar-rails should be open to all Catholics, and that the tough ones have a chance of being dealt with in prisons and hospitals. That is only thinking in terms of the Catholics. Moreover, it is but the minimum approach to the latter, and rather amounts to their approaching us. To encounter us, they have to come to our territory; whereas the essence of approach is that we go to theirs, and there seek them out one and all; into the depths and the dangerous dens, even into their more inaccessible places, such as into their palaces.

Oh! but all that is rank impossibility in this modern world!

Impossible! In saying so, you forget to speak and perhaps even to think as a Christian. Our attitude to the "Impossible" must be conditioned by the following: Firstly, the spiritual, which tells us that "*with God no word shall be impossible,*" and that by faith and effort we can reverse the natural impossibility. Secondly, the psychological, which would teach us that if we grade something as impossible, we virtually make it impossible. The third consideration is that the Divine command to seek out every soul was not limited by a sub-clause about their welcoming us or being amenable.

So the idea is *approach* on any terms, at any cost. If we leave any loophole, even though it be smaller far than the proverbial eye of the needle, our ingenious weakness will enable us to wriggle out through it. So there must be no loophole—which means that even in the face of situations which seem genuinely hopeless, that action which I call "symbolic" must be staged. When that step, which seems so futile, is taken, it will place a more effective one within our

reach. And then another one. Just as each new peak which the climber scales shows him a higher one; until the ultimate one stands up ready for conquest.

Marian Action

But I must not take one ingredient of Action so much for granted as to omit its mention. For it is essential; it is the Marian element. Without this latter, it is possible to act prayerfully and energetically, and yet to accomplish nothing of worth. For Our Lady is part of the principle of fruitfulness. Our Lord does not please to be fruitful by Himself. He did not come on earth without Mary. Likewise He insists on her action as the condition of His revolutionary entry into souls. Without Mary, accordingly, the greatest strivings will only end in sterility. With her, on the other hand, every effort brings its due fruit; while heroic acts effect the miraculous and therefore can reach out to and solve the pitiful things that the Submarine Cameo stands for.

The foregoing statement of dry principle calls for the refreshing oasis of a real example. So I give you one—not indeed instancing action of the symbolic type, but very definitely action of a type which normally would not be forthcoming; and which was used by Providence to plant the Legion in a new continent.

Example of Symbolic Action

In November, 1930, two Legionaries went to Paris in the first effort to achieve the long-desired starting of the Legion in that influential centre. Arriving at First Vespers of the Feast—actually the Centenary—of the Miraculous Medal, they naturally went straight to the Convent of the Apparition in the Rue du Bac. That evening, and on some other

occasions during their stay, they met Ma Soeur Reeves, an American, and discussed the Legion with her.

Some months after their departure, there came to France for a Chapter of his Congregation, the Rev. Dr. Joseph P. Donovan, C.M., Kenrick Seminary, Webster Groves, Missouri, U.S.A. The Chapter finished, he took a holiday in England and Ireland during which—strange to say—he never heard the name of the Legion mentioned. Then, a week before the date of his sailing for America on a French steamer, he returned to Paris. On his first day there, he called to see his compatriot, Ma Soeur Reeves, who spoke to him about the Legion and gave him a copy of the *Handbook*.

Let us ask ourselves: What would ordinarily happen at that stage? I think that—at best—the *Handbook* would be carefully placed among the “for use on the voyage” luggage, and then read attentively as the liner nosed its way westward through the Atlantic breakers.

But no. Dr. Donovan read it right away! He tells us his impressions: Is this a real organisation? Or is it merely a resplendent ideal set down on paper? The fact that people had indeed been so silent about it seemed to point to the latter. But if it were real, what then? Nothing less, he argued to himself, than that the long-awaited Church Society had arrived.

At this stage, let us again put the question: What might we now expect Dr. Donovan to do? In all but the case of the millionth man, the *Handbook* would be studied during the voyage, and after settling down at home, a correspondence would be entered on with a view to settling the problem: Reality or Dream? and the equally vexed question of the suitability of the Society to American conditions.

Such would be the conduct of the million, of the ordinary man; and we may fear that it would end—as usually ends the conduct of the ordinary man—in petty, minor achievement.

Dr. Donovan was travel-weary. He wanted to relax mind and body in a deck-chair. He wanted to get home.

BUT WHAT DID HE DO? He acted dynamically. Without a moment's delay, he repacked his bag. He took the train and then the boat and then the train—back all those weary miles he had so recently travelled—back to Dublin. And there he stayed until the last moment compatible with getting back to France in time to catch the liner. During that time he went around inspecting branches and works, and putting innumerable questions. By a happy "coincidence" the President of the Legion in England, Philippa Szczepanowska, was in Dublin and was interrogated by him.

Then all those miles again from Dublin to France!

Symbolic Action took the Legion to America

When Dr. Donovan was finally back in Kenrick he put down his thoughts on paper and sent them to the *American Ecclesiastical Review*. Soon after, the article appeared under the title: "Is this the long-awaited Church Society?" For the third time I ask: "What would normally happen at that stage?" I answer with another question: What is the usual fate of articles in magazines?—a little swirl of interest; then no more!

Wrong again! The article created quite a sensation. From very many and widely scattered places (speaking well for the circulation of the *Review*), there poured in requests for information about the Legion. The sequel followed soon; the first branch of the Legion in the New World. It was started at Raton, New Mexico, by Father Nicholas Schaal. The date of that important event was the 27th November, 1931—the Feast of the Miraculous Medal, a fact not adverted to by those Raton Legionaries. Observe the significant "coincidence": it was the first anniversary of the visit of those two

Legionaries to Ma Soeur Reeves in the Rue du Bac—an act which was symbolic and futile in the sense that it was to fail in its objective, which was the starting of the Legion in France; but yet was made supremely fruitful. Who can doubt that the “coincidence” represented in fact a delicate compliment paid by the Queen of Heaven to Dr. Donovan and to the other members of the human chain who one and all *acted* their due parts.

Now, one further pointing of the moral! If Dr. Donovan had *not* gone back to Dublin, but *had* read and prayed on the ship, and then had written that identical article for the *Ecclesiastical Review*, would all that solid interest have been enkindled? Would Raton have followed, and the subsequent great growth of the Legion in America? I venture to think those things would not have happened: in other words, that they came out of the dynamic *action* of Dr. Donovan—which had asserted itself against a cramped time-table, against bodily and mental weariness, and against the temptation to take the easy way out—in other words against such an assembly of natural reluctances and valid excuses as to constitute what men would dub an impossibility.