

## THE FUTURE OF THE LEGION

I think that now it can be said that the Legion of Mary has arrived. The process has taken forty years. Those who have performed some of our pilgrimages to Lough Derg and Croagh Patrick on the Atlantic seaboard, which entail an all-night vigil, have had the experience, sometimes remarkable, of witnessing the sunrise. After the night come the signs of dawn slowly accomplishing itself. Then, in a rush, the daylight - and soon the whole firmament is ablaze! After a fashion, so it has been with the Legion. In the first year it gained four branches, and in five years it counted only nine. It took six years to give a second diocese; seven to give a second country; eight to give the first men's praesidium; and ten for the first branch in the New World. That was the dawning; and even then the sun seemed painfully slow in coming. Indeed, Legionary growing has always been deliberate, almost mathematical. An apparent rapidity has been realised by the operation of the geometric ratio. The Legion has not presented the feature of a mushroom growth.

### THREE STEPS IN GROWTH

We may perhaps distinguish three stages. At the end of the first, the Legion had implanted itself in the world in modest, symbolic way. The blessing of the reigning Pope, Pius XI, belonged to this phase, and represented an astonishing circumstance, considering that the organisation was still in the nursery. Also marking the emergence of the Legion from the first period of infancy was the International Eucharistic Congress of 1932, held in Dublin. That Congress might be styled the Epiphany of the Legion, for it provided a sort of manifestation. Looking at it from now, one finds it hard to withhold from it the adjective "supernatural." The Legion, for the purposes of its hostels, had got hold of a little city of ruined buildings. These are now in large part renovated. Then they were not. It was decided to hold a reception for the visiting Legionaries, and the buildings were furbished up. Amazing result! That reception caught the popular imagination as nothing else of the kind did. Three thousand people flocked to it, including almost every visiting prelate and dignitary. Epiphany!

The second stage was one of steady growing which set the Legion in most of the countries. It terminated in the events of China, and China marked for the Legion that sunrise which I have referred to. It had entered into a new phase. It was no longer tolerantly regarded as a growing, and possibly promising, Society,

perhaps a little too much given to "devotion"! It had "arrived." It had withstood the worst that could be given to it. It had produced members whose stature, according to the person best placed to judge, was that of the early Christians. It had helped to save the Church. That new orientation has been summed up by another great Church figure: "Ten years ago the name resounding in religious circles was one of menace, that of Stalin. Today it is the name of the Legion; it has brought hope into the air." Actually, that personage went on to say that he hoped that the growth of the Legion was not too fast and at the expense of quality.

### WAS GROWTH TOO RAPID?

So now that the Legion appears to be at the beginning of a new phase of life and possibility, it would be well to take stock of that latter misgiving. Growth at the price of quality would not be gain but loss, for it is not on the size but on the spirit that all depends.

Already I have shown how slowly was the rooting of the Legion accomplished, and how steady the uprise of branches. But has later success brought excessive speed - and mushroom quality? I comment on this. The only area in the world to which we ourselves were inclined to ascribe the idea of mushroom growing was - China! Father Aedan McGrath speaks of a letter which he received from the Concilium deprecating the rate of growth there as something to which it was not accustomed. Father McGrath's reply was that the rate was dictated by the circumstances and that nothing could be done about it. You will note that this was the very area which has had the opportunity of demonstrating ultrasolidity - and more.

Another comment. What seems to be the fastest growing Legion area is the Philippines. Roughly, a new praesidium is born there every day. Is it too fast? I reply by pointing out that it represents an increase of only *ten per cent per annum*. Secondly, Mr. Douglas Hyde has declared that the unspectacular work of the Legion in the Philippines has effected the greatest piece of spiritual building that he knows of. Those two facts would suggest that the Legion in the Philippines is not growing too fast; has not lost quality; is still growing steadily at a mathematical rate; and presumably will continue its "building operations."

Another statistic. The Legion is today in about 1,300 dioceses. Each week that number is increased by a couple. This would represent a *ten per cent* annual increase. Again that appearance of steadiness, of the mathematical, of a plan dictated from above!

Looking at the place where the system is at its oldest, and where its growth is the largest, and where one might accordingly expect to find some little diminution of spirit, I note that there the quality is at its highest, not merely by



## THE FUTURE OF THE LEGION

comparison with the other areas, but by comparison with itself: that is, quality has ascended or has not lowered as time has gone on. These things represent startling endorsement of the contention of the Legion Handbook that if the system be properly worked, the feature will be manifest of interest increasing with time, and quality with quantity.

### LOYALTY, OBEDIENCE, UNITY, SPIRITUALITY

Just another doubt to settle. It has been said: "The Legion of Mary is becoming a very powerful affair. God grant it will not repeat history, i.e. be a case of another such organisation going off the tracks."

The special feature of the Legion is its very spiritual character - which tends to unity. Loyalty and obedience are inculcated and generated. These things point the opposite way to "going off." But there is also a practical consideration. The Legion is not a purely centralised organisation. It contains the central principle, but also a strongly developed local one. The members, the works, the administration, are local, built into the local ecclesiastical system and controlled by it. The central principle concerns itself with the observance of rule, maintenance of spirit, stimulation of standards, recommendation of works and methods, and similar things.

If a local section went radically and incurably wrong, the central principle would suppress it. If the central principle went radically wrong, the local systems, under ecclesiastical impulse, would repudiate it. It is impossible, therefore, to visualise the central principle going off into incorrectness and drawing all the sections with it.

### CENTRAL OR LOCAL CONTROL?

Also it has been said: "Why a central principle at all?" Or "Why so assertive a central principle? The genius of Catholic Action demands a total local control."

There are two points here. Firstly, it is not correct to say that Catholic Action implies a *total* local control, for that would mean that no standard or international society could be recognised as part of the Catholic Action of a diocese, whereas it has been the insistence of the Holy See that worthy external organisations should be incorporated into the local Catholic Action systems. Secondly, the sundering of that central principle in the case of the Legion would mean the speedy destruction of the Legion in all save name, even though the idea and determination in each local section was to retain the Legion *as it is* with that exception of the central principle. Why! You have but to sit at the central point and you would see. Above, the central principle has been referred to as "assertive." It is much less assertive than the local principle. The latter, deprived of its necessary counterpoise, would go clean off balance. It is the

peculiarity of each locality to claim that it is unique and that it has to be specially catered for; that its people cannot be got to do this or will only do that; they won't have this "exaggerated" devotion to Our Lady; and, apart from that, it is absurd to say so many prayers at an active-work meeting; weekly meetings are too frequent; people are too busy or otherwise unable to do two hours' work each week; and so on *indefinitely*.

You see! Without a strong central control, the disintegrating tendency would wreck the common rule of the Legion just as the frost - or dynamite - rends the rocks. So I repeat: the Legion would soon survive only as a name. Local bodies bearing that name would continue on. Let us hope they would do good. But the history of such local associations is not encouraging. Surely no one would be found saying of them that theirs was a name of hope in the world today - having exorcised the fatal name of Stalin.

#### THE BATTLE-LINE ENCIRCLES THE GLOBE

So, having tried to clear up those points, let us resume at that point where we branched off: the conclusion of what we might call the mobilising of the Legion, and the opening of its newest phase. After a multitude of preliminary engagements, the battle-line has formed and encircles the globe. We are now able to glimpse what is at stake and to measure the immensity of the conflict.

In each sector we have before us a different foe or problem. There they are in their unending arrays, comprising numbers that make us dizzy. We must not allow the mind alone to measure those hosts, for loss of courage would be the sequel. We have to remind ourselves that the Lord is with us and says to us: "It is I, be not afraid."

Let us survey the prospect: (a) Protestantism, in regard to which we seem to hold a special commission, inasmuch as we are the first large society to grapple with it and make extensive inroad; (b) Orthodoxy, to deal with which we have been equipped with special permission - only little used so far; (c) Mohammedanism, which we face in so many places but only to the point of initial skirmishes and scattered conversions; (d) Hinduism and (e) Buddhism, from which we are already making many conversions, and from which are heard cries of distress and demands for "non-aggression pacts"; (f) Materialism and its great sub-problems; lapsing, prostitution, dereliction - on which the Legion has from the first been busily engaged; (g) finally, Communism.

#### THE LEGION AND COMMUNISM

May I single out Communism for particular mention? It presents itself as the special foe of religion, and it is, so to speak, the natural adversary of the Legion. There is a strange parallel in the two histories. The roots of each lay in 1917; the



## THE FUTURE OF THE LEGION

birth of each in 1921. There is a similarity in names, type, methods, even the official colour of the two is the same! For some time there was a preliminary facing up to each other; then suddenly, unexpectedly, there was a fierce clash between them. I have not to tell you that it was in China. It has been the Legionary glory. Who won? Mao-tse-Tung and his lieutenants would no doubt say they did. They hold the reins of power; they are able to kill, imprison, enslave, and have done so unsparingly. Then why are they afraid of the Legion, as they are in a strange way? It is as if they realise in their hearts that they have not won at all; as if they know their own weak spot and sense the fact that the Legionary sword points straight at it!

What could that weak spot, that Achilles heel, be? Communist domination depends on general non-resistance produced by fear. A few control the multitude by sheer determination. But this is a feature which can work both ways. Another few can match the Communist few. Every multitude is inert, a ready prey for any group that can be called a force. Look at the immense liner about to commence its voyage. It does not initiate its movements by its own engines; a little tug takes it in tow. Despite the scurry of the tug, there is no motion for a while; then the ship begins to crawl to open water, where its own power takes over. Every multitude has its little tugs, but pulling in different directions, finally it would be the greater force which would win.

### THE LEGION COULD FAIL

Pitted against Communism, the Legion is the most powerful because of its supernatural character. A first-class Legion against a first-class Communism will easily prevail. Even a second-class Legion will prevail against a first-class Communism, if we presume our inferiority to consist in technique and not in determination and faith. But what we may call a third-rate Legion will not prevail against Communism, because that category must be held to point to lack of faith and earnestness.

But also, the Legion can fail in spite of itself. I mean that an element can be missing which is necessary and which the Legion cannot itself fully supply. That element is mobilisation. It is not enough to look benignly at the Legion struggling to recruit and mobilise. It must be helped to assert itself - as Communism is helped where it is in the ascendant. Sometimes a Catholic community stands on the side-lines and watches the Legion carry on its warfare, as if the latter was something apart from itself; and its neutrality can even shade unpleasantly.

At the moment, in many places, Communism is in that ascendancy, and it menaces the whole world. Where it does not hold power, it looks like seizing it. It imposes its absolute will. It strikes at the ardent few who do not yield, and its

fills the remainder with terror so that no one will resist - or at least none but he possessed of the martyr-spirit. The Legionary has given some proof that he is in that classification. But there is the Achilles heel of Communism: *those who resist*. But it must be a resistance unto death, so that the dying hero inspires others who crowd into the breach - and then others in ever-increasing numbers. The struggle of the early Church must be re-enacted. Then pagan Rome thought itself to be victorious. Like Chinese Communism, it could persecute, and it drove Christianity out of sight. But Christianity did not surrender and was destined to convert the empire.

In China, the Legion has held out indomitably. It has succeeded to the extent that Communism has given up killing, because *martyrs must not be made*. It is policy to kill a few, because ordinarily that terrifies and produces the acquiescence of the many. But it is not policy to go on making martyrs, for soon enough the whole people possesses the martyr-spirit, and then the tyranny will be deposed.

### IS THE LEGION OF MARY THE HOPE OF THE CHURCH?

Is it fantastic to put the Legion in that setting - a supreme hope of the Church, an army in battle-array against the hostile forces of the world? Perhaps it looks fantastic. But remember: thirty years ago it would have been absurd to forecast the growth and the accomplishment which have actually been realised. There has to be a proportion between the past and the future. Unless there is the startling phenomenon of suddenly suspended animation, there has to be more growth, far bigger enterprises, immensely greater achievement. The building which has been done thus far is but a foundation; a Providential preparation for something infinitely greater.

In the unfolding of the Legion - from the beginning, when it took nine months to produce the second branch, to the present day when one is not audacious in measuring up that opposing battle-array which encircles the world - we seem to be witnessing a display of Mary's motherhood. She is, according to the Popes, the Mother of all men. She reaches out yearningly to them through an agency attuned to her, and she operates her maternal miracles. She works in those united to her, and then through them. The Legion is exhibiting this process. Its membership is not of the select order. It is just common, human material, typical and weak. Yet, before our eyes in that material, the very characteristics of Mary herself declare themselves, including her strength, her love of souls, her instinct of conquest. So notable is this and the actuality of conquest achieved, that it constitutes an obvious, spiritual manifestation. But it is one which is at the disposal of the whole world by virtue of the fact already stressed, namely, that the Legionaries are typical human material. Therefore, the material for its ranks

## THE FUTURE OF THE LEGION

is abundant and lies everywhere. What has been done in one place can be done in all, provided the will to mobilise that force exists.