

## THE LEGION OF MARY . . . FOR MEN

The first legal men's praesidium of the Legion of Mary met in December, 1929, or rather two of them met. One had been carrying on unofficially on an experimental basis for three years before that. But it must not be supposed from this that "the Legion for Men" represented a new thought. No, it was part of the original idea; and though it took time to realise its fulness, nevertheless the germ was operative from the first moment. Let me explain the foregoing.

### HISTORY OF THE IDEA

With the exception of the priest and a layman, the first praesidium was composed of women, fifteen of them. But with a sureness of touch which was a fitting part of the strange confident gaze into the future which characterised that meeting, it was stipulated that the new society would not be for women alone but equally for men, and that men would be accepted at the appropriate moment. The belief was that they would come along soon. But therein those planners were mistaken; it was going to take time. But from the very first, in the membership of that solitary man and in the making of a certain rule, the principle of joint membership was asserted. The rule was to the effect that each branch should have a male member who would assist it in its work. In what way? Well, in the miscellaneous directions that a man can be useful in. Chiefly in view were such things as liaison with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and other agencies for relief and social benefit. This aspect of things was peremptorily in the minds of that original band by reason of the fact that the Legion was cutting itself off from that particular field of giving material relief.

That rule was acted upon, and each branch of the Legion which came into existence for a considerable time afterwards, provided itself with such a man, called the tribune, who was in fact given the status of an officer. In the later days of ordinary male membership, that officer-status was abolished as anomalous. Here and there one finds branches with tribunes, but nowadays there does not seem to be much purpose in the office. For why call single a man-legionary a tribune instead of just a legionary? So possibly in the future the tribune may go the way of all flesh, having justified his existence by maintaining the principle of male membership in those vital moulding years.

When the men came in, they came in with a vengeance. This was indeed surprising, for the Legion had by that time gained for itself the name of being a



## MARY SHALL REIGN

women's organisation. Historically there must be few cases where societies started among women were subsequently taken up by men to the extent of being as much for one as for the other. The fact has to be faced up to that men fight shy of women's societies.

### THE LEGION APPEALS TO MEN

Why did this not apply in the case of the Legion? Leaving out the big reason that Our Lady was raising her army for both, and in due course brought in both, we might suggest the human explanation that the Legion in its "women's days" had established itself as an instrument of courage and enterprise, tackling tasks and problems which men had been holding back from. The fact of the matter was that men were very pleased to be let in. Then they went through no period of shyness and excuses. They had come into a tough fighting force and they knew it. And outsiders knew it too, and so the men flowed in as through an opened sluice-gate.

What sort of men? A distinguished person, writing to the Legion governing body in those earlier days, had contended that the title of organisation and the setting of its meetings (i.e., altar of Our Lady, Rosary, etc.) would effectively keep men out. No estimation could have been more astray. The appeal of the Legion to men has been dynamic, one of its chief features. Nor has that appeal been confined to the more devotional type of man whom the cruder ones of his sex would call "sissies." The contrary applied - and drastically so.

That first men's branch, which had worked experimentally for two years, set itself to the most difficult and actually dangerous work that could be essayed - the running of the now world-famous Morning Star Hotel for down-and-out men. No more virile body of men could be assembled.

By a circumstance which must be regarded as significant, the very first praesidium in the New World was of men, and here again that note of toughness was struck. The branch was composed mainly of miners in a primitive settlement in the U.S.A. Those men, who responded so unhesitatingly to the call to Mary's Army, were not pious. At the initial meeting, the priest, surveying them from under his eyelids during their unaccustomed exercise of saying the Rosary, saw that his first occupation would have to be the regulating of the irregular religious condition of most of them. This accomplished, an era of sensational apostleship was entered upon.

The first praesidium in Canada was likewise of men. It was in British Columbia and was of Indians, most of them illiterate - a new important note. The first praesidium in all Africa was of negro men on the Calabar coast. As if to signalise the importance of this inaugural step in that continent, several miracles graced its work.



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So much for the story of the entry of men. Now they are in, as much part as the women; and necessary too - not merely because both sexes are being mobilised but in a higher sense. It has become manifest that each has its own distinctive contribution to make, without which the character of the Legion would be incomplete. And it is not merely a case of two necessary ingredients side by side in the one organisation, but a mixture in which each has reacted happily on the other. Without either, the total would not be the same.

Every day since those beginnings has demonstrated the unique suitability of the system as a medium for the mobilising of men. Whole sections of the population, previously undreamt of in connection with apostleship, assemble under the Legion standard wherever it is raised. During the last war, many of the armies had praesidia in their fighting lines. Many prisoner-of-war camps had praesidia. Peace swept away the latter but not the former. Great numbers of praesidia exist today in the various armies, navies, air forces and police forces. Stranger still, the feature is common of branches in the prisons, composed of prisoners themselves. The accomplishments of some of these latter praesidia sound like a fairy tale - but it is not a fairy tale.

Surely, there is shown in all this working out of things a unique appeal to men and a special ability to direct, inspire and mould them. Has anything like it ever before been seen in the department of ordinary lay activity? It seems important to exploit that capacity.

### APOSTLESHIP FOR ILLITERATES

Mention has already been made of the inclusion of illiterates. Than this feature there is nothing more important in the Legion, for it forms a corrective to a prevalent false tendency, i.e., the notion that education is a necessary foundation for apostleship; that apostleship is teaching which, of course, requires not only literacy but formal knowledge and a fair degree of intelligence. This conception would rule out a universal apostolate, and would in fact limit it to such small dimensions as to deprive the Church of apostolic character. To point to a handful and say: "The Church is apostolic" would be an unreality. Unquestionably it is the men in the Legion, rather than the women, who have afforded the great demonstration of the fact that all Christians whosoever are not only called to apostleship but are capable of it. At the present time a very large proportion of the Legion membership is illiterate. This is mainly in (though not confined to) the less advanced countries, and in these the majority of the Legionaries are men. So we see that even if the men did come in later, they were not to play a less important role than the women.

But that is not the only demonstration of vital Catholic principle staged by the men-legionaries. There is another which is proper to the very essence of the



Faith. It is that men in number, who could not be induced to practise the Faith, have been willing to take on Legion membership and fulfil its requirements in a worthy way. This fact that men give much where previously they had refused to give little, is a phenomenon which must be analysed with a view to determining what is at stake.

### THE LEGION OFFERS A WORTHY STANDARD OF LIVING

I would think the explanation to be that "practising Catholicism" is not a comprehensible gospel to the rough and tumble or average man. And perhaps we might say . . . all men. But why men and not women as well? Because women have something in their mental equipment which is able to give that "practising formula" a meaning and an attraction which it does not possess for the men. Perhaps, too, it is that women practise more from tradition.

Men look on that "practising formula" and are not satisfied by it. It tells them to go to Mass on Sundays and to the Sacraments occasionally. They find it hard to believe that such a poor degree of performance, which would not be worth any reward according to human standards, is all that Christianity boils down to. And they reject that formula. That is why religion over so much of the world's surface is despised, regarded as the least of all the causes; with the result that the normal man is not found to be practising. Those who do practise in those places are looked down upon as untypical of their sex, as sub-normal. This is fatal to the cause of religion.

It is essential that religion be rescued from that low estate. Obviously this can only be done by setting up something that men will accept as a worthy standard of life. And we see that men are prepared to accept the Legion as virile and worthwhile and to conform to its difficult requirements. The lessons of all this would seem to be that an adroit way of causing men to cease practice and eventually lose faith itself is to propose to them some minimum formula.

On the other hand, if the aim is to make men love, honour and obey their Catholicism, be sure to put before them something much higher than that minimum formula. Let us try what has worked everywhere it has been used - that is, the Legionary formula.