

## NERVES

I begin by quoting to you something from the *Handbook* which gives the keynote to my subject. That is the pair of sentences which appear over the name of the French writer, Duhamel, and which are as follows: "The majority of people seem to suffer from a sense of neglect. They are unhappy because nobody takes them in hand, because nobody is ready to accept the confidences they offer."

Those words are true. They might be said to be tragically true; for they specify the ailment from which the whole human race is suffering—lack of sympathy, insufficiency of understanding. It is accordingly, a supreme charity to respond to that imperative need of the human heart. Thereby, you pour a refreshing, Christ-like balm, and you may cure even more than you intended. For this sort of isolation, in which so many people live, produces of itself a great number of troubles, many of them serious.

*What is Charity?*

What *is* charity? It seems to me that we have come to this strange pass that we do not really understand what charity means. For instance, charity to our neighbour is almost universally conceived to mean the assuaging of material ills. It is a curious thing that even in the biographies of the Saints there is an over-stressing of that side of things. You find that when people turned to God, it was at once a case of seeking out the poor, and lavishing care and affection upon them.

You could easily get the impression that it was the thing that counted most. And of course the modern world goes further and exalts that narrow conception of charity to the point of excluding any other. Therefore it is a good thing that the Legion takes up a radically different line and resolutely puts forward spiritual charity as being mainly its domain. In doing this—you will remember—the Legion is very careful not to slight the other form of charity. It would be a rash and wrong thing indeed for anyone to do so. But at the same time it is necessary to stress a principle if there is a danger of its being obscured. For this reason, if there were no other reason, it is in the general interest for the Legion to turn its vision from the field of material relief and concentrate on the field of spiritual aid. For the truer charity has tended to be over-shadowed by its mere satellite—as if in a quaint manner the moon were eclipsing the sun. Charity, the supreme charity, is really the care of other people's souls. Moreover, this is the form of charity which is chiefly required in the present-day world. Only a small percentage of humanity is in need of material relief, while *everybody* is in need of assistance in the moral order. There is the Legionary mission. With our vision, and then with our work, we must take in the whole of the communities of which we form part, and eventually in great daring reach out to the entire world. We must see in each person a problem of love, an object on whom is to be lavished through our poor instrumentality the radiant love of God.

*Repair of Religious Neglect not the Legion's  
Main Work*

In the Legion you hear, until you almost weary of it, that you are supposed to be always on duty for souls. The same is the lesson to be drawn from Pere Plus' trenchant definition

of a Christian as one to whom God has entrusted his fellow-men. You must try to discharge that trust in respect of every person without distinction. It would be a crippling error to think that your work is mainly the repair of religious neglect. With all-embracing gesture you must take in every heart-beat of the human race and —I emphasise— its heartbreaks too. It was not for nothing that the first branch of the Legion bore the name of Our Lady of Mercy. Like so many of the other things in the Legion, that was without doubt planned from on high; those who thought they chose the title did not really choose it at all. That title should express the Legion's attitude towards the world, and should be deemed to have special application to the sores of the soul and mind, of whatever sort.

Legionaries will every place find material for such a mission of mercy. They will discover it among their own fellow-members. They will find it among those to whom the Legion sends them; but strange to say, less among the poor than among the better circumstanced; it would almost seem that as a matter of compensation for their privations, the poor have been spared sufferings which are really worse. But most of all, Legionaries will encounter these cases in what I might be inclined to call the non-Legionary hours—but for the fact that there are no such hours.

### *Minds on the Rack*

I would aver that every Legionary knows somebody whose soul or mind is somehow on the rack. I then go on and say: "There is your responsibility, Legionary." Should any Legionary say that such is no concern of his because that person is not a Legionary "case," he does but confess himself ill-taught, for in his Legion "first-book" it is written that the whole wide world is the Legionary case and concern.

Of course those trials of soul and mind are infinite in number and type. To each and every one the Legion will reach out in Catholic sympathy. But here I propose to single out a special and grievous sort of trouble, known to the scientific ones as "Neurosis" and to you and me as "Nerves." This trouble is a product of our complicated age, with its excessive pleasure, excessive smoking, excessive drinking, excessive everything—including the whole question of sex let loose, which is perhaps the greatest danger of them all. Out of all this conglomeration issues a weird brew—this problem of Nerves. It forms a baffling, bewildering study. It represents a sort of world inside our own world. That sub-world is inhabited by people who are nerve-ridden; subject to phobias of one kind or another; in the grip of queer and evil habits; devoured by fears and scruples, by awful temptations, and by fierce hatreds, antipathies and burning grievances. So much so that from my own limited contact with that class I am led to believe that it forms a fair proportion of the population. The souls of these sufferers are veritable battle-grounds or torture-chambers. So harassed are some of them that they regard themselves as mad, or going mad, or even as possessed by the devil.

### *Trouble Shared Shrinks*

You will realise that for a person who is thus afflicted, it is most difficult to be faithful to religious duties. So, usually, he puts aside what would have helped him the most. So far, so bad! But that same is doubly-complicated and aggravated by the fact that these victims tend to seal up everything inside their own hearts. Further consequences are inevitable. If you lock up matter in the body, it will fester inside, multiplying ills there; and it may cause death. If you lock up poison-thoughts in your mind, they will make a fatal merry-

go-round of it, they will ruin your life. So it is absolutely necessary that sufferers should find someone to whom they can talk with utter freedom. If they can thus give their confidence, the result is sometimes striking—even though there is nothing extraordinary about it; for it is an elementary principle of psychology that trouble shared shrinks. Indeed—by reason of the fact that some of these troubles are largely unreal—they may actually die away altogether when talked over.

### *Inspiring Trust*

But there lies the difficulty—to get these poor distracted ones to confide in anybody! The circumstances of their cases may be very peculiar, very disgraceful (as they may think), incredible or ridiculous; and so they may feel it to be shameful to disclose their secret. Certainly they will not do it to anybody unless they sense that person to be very specially receptive, completely sympathetic, completely understanding, completely trustworthy. They are repelled by any tincture of superiority or acidity, or by a tendency towards a critical tone. So that if any one of you aspire to receive these ultra-confidences of others, you must, by your ordinary attitude, indicate that you are the type into whose ear they can safely and easily be poured. You may have the heart of a St. Vincent de Paul, but if at the same time you have a severe air, people will not look any deeper down. In their super-sensitiveness, they will turn away from you who really have the remedy they stand so much in need of. Few there are who inspire the right type of trust, and so these poor folk go along through life keeping their torture-thoughts to themselves; or else, in sheer desperation, resorting to the charlatans who have risen up simultaneously with this nerve-ridden class. Those pests reap a golden

harvest and take the money of their "clients" in exchange for weird and often disastrous advice. I know of one person recently who paid £46 to one such rogue for advice which could only be described as diabolical.

### *Dangers of Psycho-Analysis*

Psycho-analysis is the latest stunt. It has mesmerised the world with its jargon of mysterious-sounding, learned-looking words. Multitudes of its practitioners are now at work with crowds flocking to them. So far that system has unquestionably done more harm than good. If it has brought benefit to some individuals, it has done harm to the populace as a whole, by convincing the more unthinking ones that all these nervous disorders arise from "inhibitions" and "repressions"—words which are generally understood to mean moral discipline and restraint of all sorts. Thereby psycho-analysis has tended to reverse moral values. Thus it causes on a wide scale indiscipline and excesses which in turn germinate the very nervous disorders which it professes to set out to cure.

### *Work for the Legion*

So large and "distressful" does this field of nerves appear to be that it has been suggested that we should set up regular Legion machinery—say a Praesidium—to deal with such cases. That Praesidium would include in its ranks experienced Priests, Doctors and Legionaries, who between them would make a study of each case and try to bring remedies to bear. Such a Praesidium would form a sort of spiritual spider's web into which the flies would cast themselves, the word having circulated in their sub-world that the web was "interested," "understanding," "easy to talk

to." Later on, its attractiveness would be increased by some record of successes. Now some questions!

QUESTION No. 1: "ON WHAT BROAD LINES WOULD SUCH CASES BE DEALT WITH?"

I answer in a sentence: By a combination of the religious system of the Church, of medical science, of the Legion system, and of a general system of common-sense.

QUESTION No. 2: "WHAT HAVE DOCTORS GOT TO DO WITH ALL THIS?"

In the first place it must be established that a case is merely "neurotic" and not definitely "mental." In the second place, I have known a number of these cases where troubles died away under the influence of calcium or some other drug, or as the result of other forms of treatment. Troubles that appeared to be seated in the soul or mind were in reality the outcome of some physical maladjustment. Indeed this word "maladjustment" (whether of soul, mind or body) might be said to be our keynote and to indicate the *raison d'être* of our group. Upset the comparatively delicate human balance in any way, and complications more or less grave result automatically. But just as surely, you rectify these by a restoration of balance.

QUESTION No. 3: "SURELY THE PROCESS OF REMEDYING SUCH COMPLICATIONS IS IN ITSELF MOST COMPLICATED, REQUIRING DEEP KNOWLEDGE OF THAT PSEUDO-SCIENCE, 'PSYCHO-ANALYSIS,' OR AT LEAST OF PSYCHOLOGY?"

I do not think so. Or rather I would say "No"—that is in relation to the precise sort of experiment I have in mind. I am initially contemplating something far less intricate or expert than this question has in view. Legionary methods would primarily be related to the formulae of Charity rather than to the theories and rules of science; though I do not exclude the possibility of our group accumulating much

novel, even essential knowledge, as it goes along, and even possibly evolving a characteristic technique of its own. But this would represent a growth and an addition—even without which I am reckoning on great good being done to *every* case by the application of basically simple ideas. Note, that whenever for convenience' sake I say "psychology" I imply no more than these "basically simple ideas."

QUESTION No. 4: "WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY BASICALLY SIMPLE IDEAS?"

I mean certain primary rules of health (spiritual, mental and physical) aiming in general at the imparting of right balance to lives that are acutely out of balance. The policy would be to operate from every possible direction at once, even though the preliminary researches indicated that a particular defect was in question. This latter defect would of course receive chief attention, but effort would be made to tone up in all other ways as well, on the principle that a number of small things taken together often amounts to something portentous; that is, they rather multiply up than add up. Indeed, our capital principle may be thus stated: An all-round attack, relying on the aforesaid "multiplying" or cumulative process rather than on the virtues of one drastic stroke or brilliant diagnosis.

### *Some Basic Principles*

Now, here are some of the other "basically simple ideas," on which *as principles* the group would found its procedure:

#### *1. Sharing Confidence*

I have at the outset referred to the psychology of sharing confidence as a valuable asset. Add to this the tonic effects of sympathy and anxiety to help.



## 2. *The Power of New Motives*

Commonly, the interior disorder has come from incorrect motives, or from a false standard of viewing quite a common trial. This results in a state of rebellion against the latter, with consequent embitterment, aggravation, etc.—in onion-like layers—so that the final product is out of all proportion to the original “core.” If, for instance, the victim in such a case could be reasonably induced to accept the view that this thing, which looks to be such a calamity or unbearable injustice, is a *necessary* part of union with Christ—that sufferer’s part of Christ’s Cross, then at once you have radically changed the outlook—or inlook!—of that person. A new motive has been supplied which works interiorly but surely—as when an additional active ingredient is added to a chemical mixture.

Under the head of “motives” I would include any consideration; natural or supernatural, big or little, which appeals to the reason and sets it against the disorder. Even when that new motive is not such as could be described as “dynamic,” still it plays *some* part; and our main principle holds good, i.e., the creation of a tendency towards balance or adjustment. As insisted above, this tendency would be enhanced by each additional “motive” or influence, however slight in itself.

## 3 *Control of Panic*

Much of the trouble in these peculiar cases arises from sheer panic or desperation. Note that these latter are not part of the central deposit of trouble at all, but represent a fungus-like and fatal addition to it. The parent trouble might by itself have been capable of control, but panic came in and reason went out. Take an everyday example: it is ordeal enough trying to steer a speeding car which is skidding on a greasy surface, but it becomes impossible if under the strain

one's nerves go haywire. The victim jumps to the conclusion that things are hopeless, and makes no effort to control them. Then anything may happen. Even minor ills can overmaster one if they are not fought against.

#### 4. *Remove Fear of Insanity*

The special torture of many neurotics is that they fear themselves to be insane. Naturally enough, the mind, seeing some of its processes unaccountable or out of control, finds a ready explanation in insanity. Then panic enters in with other ingredients of mental turmoil in its train, producing a state which can counterfeit insanity, yet is only equivalent to the mental state of a swimmer, overwhelmed and demoralised by a heavy sea. Here, the only hope is the establishment of confidence in someone else, and then in the attempting to follow a set of rules. Thereby, the chief disturber, panic, would be restrained, and the sufferer stimulated and supported in the attempt to breast those emotional waves.

Left to ourselves in time of turmoil, we are but poor judges as to our mental position. By what standards are we then to judge? Suppose, for instance, a person in such a state were to be authoritatively assured that he was fifty per cent abnormal. It is certain that the statement would cast him into despair. For it appears to certify that he is "half-mad." Yet it does not do this at all. It but uselessly compares him with an *ideal* standard, without at the same time telling him how much the *average* falls short of that *ideal*. If the average mental integrity were denoted by the figure 100, then the falling short by 50 would—as amounting to half-insane—be grave in the extreme. But if in fact the average man were 25 per cent abnormal—and it is certain that everyone is to some extent abnormal—then our victim is only 25 per cent further

down the scale. In other words, he is only 25 per cent removed from average or practical normality. This is a very different problem for him to face to that of being "half-mad." Realisation of this has at once a steadying effect, panic and despair losing their stranglehold. Furthermore, it is probable that if such a person submitted wholeheartedly to a discipline of thought and action, even that existing gap of 25 per cent would be bridged, and possibly in the end such schooling given to his life as to render him a more useful member of society than one who had originally possessed greater stability and who was accordingly satisfied to leave it unimproved upon.

### 5. *Few Cases are Unique*

Another aspect of the application of false standards lies in the idea that one's case is unique and one's sufferings special, when in reality, one may be little enough removed from the common categories of nerves. I gather that the general line adopted in handling such cases is to encourage them in their view that they are altogether singular. But I would imagine that this represents bad psychology. For one reason, as I have just said, it is not usually a fact. Another reason is that it is calculated to develop in them a perverted sense of vanity which then stands in the way of improvement.

The conventional routine in such cases is to delve into the past until some happening or circumstance is unearthed which can plausibly be related to the present aberration. Result: The sufferer is rooted in his notion that he is "unique." A unique case will feel that he is proof against everything except a unique remedy. This is logic, it seems to me. Then, as the unique remedies are few and far between, similarly will the cures be rare. For, the mind of such a person, settled in the conviction that his case is quite exceptional, will automatically take up an attitude of

contempt and hence of resistance to the simple lines of treatment which in the end are those likely to be effective.

In fact, few of these cases that hug the belief that they are "unique" are really so. Abnormal they may be, but falling into broad enough classes of it—sufficiently broad to debar them from the title of unique. Once they are convinced to this latter effect, they are in a receptive state for treatment along common lines; and this is half the battle.

### 6. *Insist on Reasonable Grounds for Hope*

It is obvious that in dealing with persons whose trials are being aggravated by despair, the note of hope must be consistently struck. Therefore, grounds for hope must be discovered and kept before the sufferer. But at the same time those reasons for hope should be not so magnified as to make them unreal. This is a mistake which is persistently made in such cases. Indeed, one method of treating them lies in that very form of exaggeration, i.e., various methods of auto-suggestion. In these, many people are taught to assure themselves incessantly that there is nothing wrong with them, whereas the fact is that there may be something quite seriously wrong with them. It seems to me that exaggerated methods of this kind are incorrect in principle. In the first place, there is the likelihood that the "patient" will lose confidence in a guide who proceeds on lines of denying the existence of actual defects. In the second place, you cannot cheat the intellect in that way. It is certain that the mind will instinctively reject this sort of verbal chaff, despite its profusion, and will only absorb such assurances or auto-suggestions as it reasonably feels to approximate to the truth. The purpose of those "grounds for hope" being to bring conviction to the mind, they must therefore be essentially reasonable and unstrained. For the mind is

attuned to the truth and responds naturally to it when it is stated. "Great is the truth and it shall prevail."

### 7 *Antidote for Introspection*

Introspection—and the having on hands of time to indulge it—being a prominent element in nerve ailments, it follows that one antidote should be the effort to turn the mind outwards, and preferably on to objectives of a "neutralising" character. By this I mean that if these sufferers could be induced to minister unto other sorts of suffering (such as would be found in a cancer hospital, or in a Legion Hostel, or in other places where sorrow in grim shape will be met), it must have a counterbalancing influence—sometimes even a decisive one. In other words, if you could bring your neurosis subject into membership of the Legion or kindred organisation, you would have brought him no small part of the road towards amelioration.

### 8. *Ordering the Day*

Part of the same process would be the methodising by good works or prayers of a day which is formless. The taking on of some Office would have a force not only spiritual but psychological. Many layfolk could with little difficulty say at least part of the Divine Office. The sense of futility can exert a disintegrating effect on a day or on a life. Psychologically, a day will not be futile, which has included some major spiritual act (such as Mass, Holy Communion, or Office as aforesaid), even though that day was otherwise a waste, a woe, a sorrow, a despair.

### 9. *Emphasis on the Spiritual*

Here, where I have been suggesting the possibility of developing a sort of science, is likewise the place for issuing

a warning and for a reiteration of Legionary first principles. The Legion strives for results that are super-normal. It appreciates that these are the gift of God through Our Lady. It tries to draw them down by giving to each task such effort and skill and finish as are in its power to give. It is from this combination and inter-dependence of the spiritual and the human forces that fruits will issue big and abundant—including the gracious fruit of interior health, peace, and balance. But ever the emphasis must be on the spiritual. Every Legionary work must steer by this principle. No less than any other Legion workers, those must do so who would seek to navigate the tempestuous uncharted sea of nerves. So if Legionaries should work out a technique which is good and of which they are justly proud, they have need to guard themselves against the natural tendency to lean on that technique as the real source of their confidence. True, the better the system, the choicer the offering it forms to God, and therefore the more they may expect from Him through it. But if they lean unduly on it, they will be left forlornly to the system for their results, and then purely human results would be forthcoming.