

Contact

‘According to the laws that rule the
spiritual world,
the attraction of one soul is needed
to elevate another.’

Frederic Ozanam

The first purpose of the praesidium is to teach the Legion. If this is not done, your work is in vain. Nobody knows what to do or why it is done, so that the Legion either falls asunder or functions ineffectually. The second purpose is to teach Our Lady. But why put this purpose second? Because before what is to be taught, there has to be a teacher. The third purpose is the apostolate. Why not put this before Our Lady in order? Because she goes before apostleship, which is only the adding of ourselves to her maternal function.

Having stated these important principles by way of preamble, I now proceed to talk on the subject of Contact through which Mary, the Legion, the praesidium and the Apostolate pour themselves out. I define contact

as an encounter with persons which we must turn to spiritual profit. Of course, as Christians, we are really supposed to turn every contact with another person to that advantage. But here I apply the word a little more narrowly, proportioning it to our human weakness. I suppose it is beyond us to seek to turn every meeting with another into a spiritual encounter. Perhaps you may say: 'Why not?' Well, it requires a degree of courage which is not in us all to say suddenly to the postman: 'Don't you think that you should start going to Mass daily?' Or to the stranger beside you in the bus: 'Are you satisfied with your present religion?' Some among us have done this with fruit. But I acknowledge that such heights of daring are beyond the most of us. So I restrict my definition to the easier cases.

Obviously the slogan that legionaries must always be on duty applies to the general circumstances of our lives in the sense that we must be reasonably on the alert for opportunities. Many of these just throw themselves at you, and the thoughtful eye will see others.

Here I must make a distinction. I would not place in the category of difficult approach any work done by legionaries in their own district or during a Peregrinatio project. Those encountered expect the legionaries to deal with the question of religion. Therefore the legionaries are swimming with the tide and not against it. They do not feel themselves to be flying in the teeth of convention, and the approach is comparatively easy. Likewise a Peregrinatio team, going to a non-Catholic place, is expected to talk on Catholicism and so the proceeding is quite natural. But when you are *not* expected, and *not* supposed to bring up the subject of religion, then it becomes much more difficult. To some natures it would

be heroic. But remember the injunction of St Paul that in season and out of season we must push the cause of Christ. We should accept this text at its face value and believe that if we are divinely intended to make such a move, then the necessary grace to do it will *not* be beyond reasonable capacity. Furthermore, there is the inference that if we try, something will happen. God does not require us to perform useless manoeuvres. I give you some personal experiences.

You know that a group of us take our holidays on the bicycle in those parts of Ireland which are likewise an attraction to tourists. The great bulk of these are moving in cars and it is not possible to speak to them. Even when you would make a momentary contact with them at a particular spot, it would be too brief to utilise for religion. But wherever there is the chance of a conversation, we would avail of it, especially when they are staying in the same houses with us.

What is the result? It shows a strange position. It appears to amount to this: that none of those persons are satisfied with their own religion. Their invariable reply to the question on the subject is that it does not mean much to them. Some will say that they have no religious affiliation at all; others that they hold no religious opinions. Our standard method would then be to ask them if they should not have a good look at the Catholic Church. Very often, indeed usually, this wins the statement that they think they should. Frequently we secure a definite promise that they will. Here a peculiarity presents itself: that the Catholic Church is regarded by them as something apart and different from anything else. They are admitting that other things having failed, Catholicism should be tried! Note that their reply is *never* that Catholicism is only

the same as the rest. They are somehow making a clear distinction in their minds. This is intriguing. It proves that our questioning has hung itself on to a vacant hook; has fitted into their mood of dissatisfaction and perplexity. No matter what way one examines this, it is significant. It suggests that a providential situation has been created. As to whether these encounters develop later on, we do not know. But that is *not* the point. We are discussing the making and use of contacts. I stress the fact that our initial approach is never resented but is rather interpreted as denoting a kindly interest.

Perhaps the objection might occur to some among you that the present time when the Church itself is in turmoil is not the ideal moment for inviting others to have a look at it. As to this, I would say that such an idea does not apparently present itself to those persons. Without perhaps any reasoning out of things they regard the Catholic Church even in its turmoil as a radically different proposition from any others. Malcolm Muggeridge has made this distinction in his TV talks. He makes no reservation in his assertions that the Protestant Churches are dead. He warns us that the same fate will be ours if we do not check the disorderly elements in our ranks. But he grants that we are still alive. He has even gone so far as to say that he thinks he would have joined the Church but for those disorderly ones.

The fact is that, whatever the misbehaviour in the Church, it is only misbehaviour. After a little while and a little chastisement things will settle down; the Church will emerge from the latest of its periodic winters and enter on a happy spring. On the other hand outside the Church there reigns an absolute chaos of faith. No one knows what he is to believe or what he is to do. This is realised

clearly enough, producing painful feelings in those who have a proper notion of religion as a revelation and an authentic teacher and a support along the way. If that is the position; and if it is so comparatively easy to establish contact with absolute strangers in such disadvantageous circumstances as roadside or hotel encounters, then emphatically you should be getting full value out of the people who are so to speak in your care, that is those who are the subject of ordinary legionary visitation. Is that full value being realised?

What are we to think of a query by a praesidium at a recent meeting of the Concilium? It asked advice as to what should be aimed at and what should be said in home to home visitation? My own comment on this was that I did not understand the mentality of that query. That praesidium is discussing its visitation in detail each week and yet apparently it does not know what the visitation is for. It looks as if they think they have to have a topic to discuss and that they have run out of topics. Truly it must be a terrible ordeal to do visitation without having anything to talk about and without an objective to aim at!

But why bother about minor topics when we have the big one of the meaning of life, and where the imperative purpose is the leading on of people a step at a time? Those doing regular visitation have none of the difficulties that the street workers or the Peregrini or the holiday makers have to face. I repeat that those being visited expect the legionaries to talk religion. That means they are receptive, half ready to do what is put before them. In such conditions it is a little short of tragic that the legionaries should not know what they are there for.

Surely the analogy of a war should be present to the mind of every legionary. In the modern conflict there is

a total mobilisation. Everybody is inspected with a view to securing the maximum degree of service. The able-bodied man goes in to the fighting ranks, and after that the human material is sorted into its appropriate levels of potentiality, until the nation is giving of its best.

Should not the legionary mentality be facing its problem on similar lines? Its war is truly a holy one, that of aiding the woman to crush the head of the serpent and to rescue the souls of men. So we should bring to that warfare no less degree of intensity than does the ordinary state. Like the state, we should survey souls with a view to developing each one to its maximum capacity. That being so, we should at least *try* to gain everyone for active membership; only compromising on less when we are satisfied that we cannot get the whole. And even then we should only accept a lesser degree on the principle that we may get to the top of the stairs one step at a time.

Will not that first step of suggesting active membership produce enough to talk about? Imagine the protest and excuses which will be poured out when you tell the average man or woman that they should be in the Legion. 'I am not suitable. I have not the time.' This means that the very idea of active membership of the Legion has never been placed before them, so that at first sight it looks preposterous to them. Well, the council proclaims in no ambiguous terms the universal Christian obligation to be apostolic. It grants that it is not obligatory to fulfil this duty through membership of a society. But the council goes on to say that it is most effectively fulfilled in the organised form.

That objection about having no time is met by the handbook argument as to priorities. Those persons have no time because everything else ranks before the

apostolate, whereas the apostolate should have first claim on their free time.

A more valid objection would seem to lie in the person's inability to see himself in apostleship. He cannot imagine what he could do. But as the Christian duty to be apostolic extends to all, then a sphere of apostolate must be found for all. Johnnie Fortycoats might legitimately plead that he would be no good for visiting Buckingham Palace, but who is going to send him there? Could we not send him to some den into which he alone could penetrate?

The immense fact is that as everyone is supposed to be mobilised into the Christian army, so a job must be found for everyone. Thought will find it.

Then after that, all the members of the family, who will not immediately become active members, have to be talked into accepting some other level of service. And what about that long delayed Legion Breviary which offers such rich opportunities on the prayer side?

Surely in what has been said, there lies an infinite programme and a corresponding opportunity to talk about it? So I enquire: Why has that puzzled praesidium a difficulty in solving its problem? It is true that when they try along the foregoing lines, they will not get response. But that was not the question. The question was that they did not know what they were to do upon entry to a home. When they have honestly tried, they cannot be blamed for having caught no fish. In any case the poor haul of fish will have shown them the grim position that hardly anyone is willing to serve the Church.

I leave visitation and go on to the other big category where souls cross our path. Many of these almost bang into us and it would be great neglect not to give them attention. Then there is the further classification which

I have discussed with you previously under the head of 'Divine Pattern'. These are cases which attract our attention by their very unusualness. I have urged that it is advisable to assume that you are called to invoke Symbolic Action in regard to them. That following up has been justified by many triumphal conclusions. In order to keep your minds on that Divine Pattern principle I describe a current case. I admit that it may be only pure fancy and may work out to nothing.

A letter comes to me from an unknown German Protestant woman in America. She begs me to write a letter of consolation to her brother-in-law in Italy who is apparently dying and is in extreme pain. She tells the story. He suffered under Hitler, narrowly escaped death and fled into Italy where he prospered. His family is Catholic, so that it would seem that his wife is a convert. You will agree that this stages a strange position. Why write to a total stranger about it? It struck me fitting into that category of Divine Pattern. So I have just written off to him, giving him our legionary ideas about suffering in the Mystical Body and proposing that as a support in his grievous plight. Simultaneously I write to the lady in America. I again speak of the doctrine of the Mystical Body through which we bear each other's burdens, and I say that it appears to me that her brother-in-law's old and new sufferings are definitely not for himself; that I think he is earning for her the supreme grace of conversion which her sister had already received. Then, just as if I had proved the matter, I ask 'What are you going to do about it?' I have not the slightest notion as to what will happen. But I felt that the legionary outlook dictated that this apparently fantastic letter of mine had to be written. If you think you see a pattern, you must follow it up.

We must not restrict our efforts to what we think is required. Such judgements are on the surface and may be as wrong as can be. It is the essential legionary principle that maximum effort be always employed irrespective of prospects. Here is an interesting current proof of the wisdom of that.

Six months ago a legionary brought up two Maoists to me. They were nice young people but apparently very far gone. They adopted the ultra-revolutionary line and declared emphatically that they had finished with the Church. Though I regarded the chances as nil, I gave them the whole evening. Having done all I could, I did not feel discouraged at the lack of success. Now comes the sequel. Last Sunday I heard with infinite pleasure that the two had returned to the practice of their religion.

In the act of contact do not attach importance to the visible result of your words. Most people will conceal their reaction if you are impressing them. They regard the encounter as a contest and are unwilling to concede victory to you. Perhaps too, as in nature your words do not take root at once while the heat of battle is on. When things cool down, what you have said will unquestionably stand out in their minds.

Especially at first approach, or where people are taken by surprise, their initial reaction may be that of resistance. Even kindly people stiffen up like that for the purpose of getting time to think. Up go the defences and you are repulsed. Do not take this as final. Give the surprise its chance to die down. Then try again. *You* may be the surprised one this time – by being apologetically received.

I remember a case where a man was living with a woman. She told the visiting legionaries the circumstances and asked them not to approach the man – who by the way

never even spoke to them. She said he was very difficult and would only be rough. Getting instructions from the praesidium to ask him to settle up matters, they obeyed. His reaction was violent. He rose, took each of the two by a shoulder, propelled them to the door and threw them out into the basement hall which was in blank darkness. Told to return the following week, they did so in fear and trembling. The man was there. Though he did not even look at them, he showed no hostility. Sometime afterwards he did speak to them and it was, amazing to say, in regard to settling up his position.

Your speech and your manner are your instruments of contact. Therefore as the handbook pleads, they should be unassuming and deferential. In approaching others on this most intimate of matters – their conduct or religious opinions – you are on more than thin ice. You are walking on the water itself. So you have to disarm that person by charm and humility and by the note of apology in your speech. In argument avoid any word which suggests that you are battling with the other person, or anything that sounds like a preaching at them, *or* a laying down of the law, *or* anything showing superiority. I remember once giving a litany of phrases which we should never be found using, such as: 'That is nonsense; that is untrue.' Or 'You have not given much thought to this question.' Such expressions are like blows which kill the very thing that you are seeking, that is conversion in some form or another. There must be no aggressiveness or show of irritation. Even if insulted, do not protest. Be satisfied with having stated the truth, which we are assured is mighty and must prevail. The worse you are treated, the greater the grace, and also the greater the confusion of your opponent when later on he thinks things out. He

will have a revulsion of feeling which might swing the pendulum over.

St Francis de Sales declared a manifest truth when he said that you cannot attract a single fly with a barrel of vinegar, but that a drop of honey will draw them in from all around. So do not deal out any vinegar. Mix in a little honey with your assertions of the truth and your denials of error. Such as: 'I grant some of your argument. But what would you think of this comment of mine?' Or, 'That is good, but here is what Cardinal Newman says on the subject, and we cannot just push him on one side.' Always keep on the wave length of listening attentively, and then almost hesitantly submitting your counter argument.

In approaching a non-Catholic, do not of course open up by asking if he will join the One True Church. Such bluntness will not lead the other towards the Church, but will antagonise him. Recently it was suggested that an inoffensive approach would be the following: 'By any chance has the thought ever crossed your mind of entering the Catholic Church?' No one could object to that; it is respectful. It may bring a balanced answer. In any event, it will open up discussion in a satisfactory way. If the reply is: 'Well, I have to admit that once or twice I thought that way,' then your road is wide open. If on the contrary the answer is a decided 'No,' then your own reply is: 'Would it be a trespassing on my part to enquire why you answer so decidedly?' Then he gives his reasons; you listen attentively, and you only speak when he is obviously finished. Do not on any account break in while he is talking. The longer you have to listen, the better. Common fairness dictates that he will have to give you an innings and to extend to you the same respectful hearing that you gave him. Then comes your chance.

Never be afraid to say: 'I do not know the answer to that; my theology is rather thin.' This is disarming. It has the appearance of your admitting to a personal inferiority without in reality your having yielded an inch. For obviously you cannot be expected to know everything. Remember that retort of a brother: 'I cannot answer that one; I am only a plumber.' Then go on to say something of this kind: 'But I could get you the right answer. Or perhaps if you do not mind, I could try blundering into it myself, like the bull in the china shop.' Then give your own explanation which may indeed be quite good, and which would have gained immeasurably in force by reason of the fact that you are only proposing it as hardly worthwhile.

In every department of your great adventure for souls, give Our Lady her due place. The Legion has always been telling you that she is the mother of all souls whether inside or outside the Church, an idea derived from Pope Leo XIII. Now the council has proclaimed the same. Mary is the Queen of Apostles in the sense that she is necessary to apostleship in the double capacity of helper of the apostle and mother of those being approached. Without her mothering, those to whom the apostle goes will not receive. This is doctrine. Put it into practice. Believe most firmly that she is almost infinitely anxious to make your apostolate fruitful. She gives weight to your weakest word while at the same time softening the hard soil in the other person. But it is a condition that you remember that she is there in that amazing maternal role of hers. So do not let the thought of her drift into an ineffective background in your mind.