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EACH SOUL

*"Each soul, if it would live, must pour itself
into another soul"*

Church or Chaplaincy

It seems to me that the chiefest need of the day is to bring home to every Catholic that on him rests the positive duty of going out and seeking conversions to the Church.

What is the Church? The Church is a society in which Jesus Christ lives, and which exists for the purpose of bringing Him to all men. If in any place the Church were not leading that life, then it would be untrue to its mission. Were the Church in any place to do no more than to minister to those already in its own ranks, it would only be in partial being there. It would have turned itself into a chaplaincy; and Christ never intended His Church to be a mere chaplaincy.

But the Church is made up of its members; can only operate through them; and stands or falls in them. It follows that *from each individual member* the Church requires responsibility for and co-operation in its work. But one cannot say that such is being given in that primary department of the Church's action, the winning of converts. It is not realised by the rank and file that it is their bounden duty to bring the Faith to everyone—without exception—who does not possess it. That conviction of imperative duty being absent; and the difficulties—interior and external, natural and supernatural—being many and great, what can result but deadly inertia?

It would be a terrible thing, if from the successes we have had we were to gain the impression that we really have greatly advanced; because we have not. What has been done is only beautiful because of the hope it affords, not because of the actual achievement. Admittedly the fact that 110 non-Catholics attended our last Retreat* is a wonderful thing if viewed from the standpoint of seven years ago, or from the angle of complete inaction. But viewed in the light of the vast number of non-Catholics around us, it is only a notch above nothing. Therefore, this evening is not to be a time of self-satisfaction, but of consolidation of our gains, of taking stock, of planning a further advance which will in the end encompass all those who are outside the Fold.

Causes of Inertia

That inertia of which I speak does not necessarily mean indifference. Actually it can be found co-existing with real, downright anxiety to win people to the Church, just as in the heart of a paralysed man may be found an ardent anxiety for action which the physical conditions withhold from him. In many cases that inertia springs from a natural cause. If you study people, you will find what an extraordinary severance can be between the powers of cogitation and those of action, so that the most terrific action may take place in the mental department without ever being translated into physical action. That gap exists in everybody. It is narrow in what we would call the man of action. It is pretty wide in the average man. In a certain proportion of people it is a yawning, almost unbridgeable chasm.

Inertia can proceed from other causes—the fact, for instance, that people require to be shown the path, require each other's support. One may realise the need for action; one may

* *The Retreats for non-Catholics, inaugurated by the Légion of Mary in Dublin, set a pattern which has since been copied in many parts of the world.*

be capable of that action; and yet not know the way to go about it.

Remedy for Inertia

The remedy for that inertia lies in the application of organisation. In other words, you set up a system which bridges that gap and which pushes people over that bridge. The Legion itself represents an example of the effectiveness of such organisation. Before we came into the Legion we were all of us (except perhaps the supermen or superwomen amongst us, who were few) doing nothing. We would have persevered in that inglorious condition. But Fate operated to bring us into an organisation which held a certain idealism and which subjected us to a sweet pressure. Then in the measure that we submitted ourselves to that pressure we found ourselves doing things. The results that have come are heartening, because they seem to prove that it is possible to organise the entire community, and any community, in the same way and to get no less results. Consequently, the horizon of hope which stretches before us is illimitable.

Excuses for Inertia

Even inside such organisation itself we can take an incorrect view of our duty. You saw little signs of that cropping up amongst yourselves during the day—a certain lack of understanding of where duty lies. Considering that you have been in an apostolic mould and in a stimulating atmosphere for a considerable time, and if—in spite of that—there is hesitancy, what of those who have not had your advantages? I fear we can take it as an unfortunate fact that the ordinary run of unorganised Catholics do not recognise themselves as having any duty in this particular direction. In fact, some people go very

violently into reverse and conceive it even to be an incorrect thing to do anything. They make a virtue of inaction. They clothe it in sugared phrases: "We must not unsettle other people!" "If they are in good faith, let us leave them so!" "We must respect the beliefs of others!" and so forth. This phraseology is familiar to us all. In practice its effect is deadly. What does it mean but that we are to try to convert nobody except those who convert themselves?—which is called an "Irish bull." And like the same animal in the proverbial china-shop, that virtuous inaction wreaks havoc in the Church. It tones down its mission. It perverts its meaning. It turns to mere domestic purposes the infinite ocean of grace which is meant to irrigate the universal desert of unbelief. Then—extra tragedy!—that domestic stream tends to dry up. Actual experience proves that we do not hold even our own members. They slip away between our fingers. And what else could happen? Our practical indifference towards those arid souls outside had earned disaster for ourselves.

Prayer no Substitute for Action

There is another phrase which many use to soothe the holy pang which they may feel from hearing those repeated references to the reaching of *all* men. They say: "We pray for those outside the Church." We pray for them! Of course that is to the good, if we *do* pray for them. Sometimes that is no more than a conventional phrase. But even when it means something, I wonder who told these people that their prayer alone suffices? We are in the world, and action is called for from us. And to the extent that we do not act along with prayer, we do not get results. Again, what do those persons who talk about praying actually mean? Are they going to spend two or three hours of an evening praying just as you have to spend two or three hours in your laborious Legionary efforts? No. Those people mean a *Pater* and *Ave*—perhaps only an *Ave*!

Qualifications for Action

Then there is that other plausible but crippling thought which whispers that you are not *qualified* to make an approach to others, and accordingly that you are exempt from trying. But who is qualified? The priests, of course, are. But they are the very class which is the most cut off from the non-Catholic. But surely knowledge, ability to argue, etc., are essential? Here you must distinguish between the instruction of converts and the seeking of them. The former demands knowledge; the latter only zeal. Read what your *Handbook* says on this subject. Also recall what happened in the early Church. If this is going too far back for you, reflect on what took place last year in Nairobi—where our Legionaries brought in 1,000 catechumens.

So beware of those opium-like sayings which pull with inertia instead of against it, and which neutralise the programme of action which fell from Divine lips. I do not say that those cautious phrases are *always* wrong. Sometimes they may refine your action. But doubt them when they tend to paralyse it. Remember, too, that even a fine plan of action may cause inaction. For the ideal may not immediately be practicable. Then we piously hold ourselves excused from doing anything, instead of working bravely at the second-best—which would eventually bring us to the best. As has been said, the ideal is often the enemy of the good.

Effort is Paramount

Action is paramount. You may challenge this and say that Grace is paramount; and, of course, it is, inasmuch as absolutely nothing can be accomplished without Grace. That is a fact about which we in the Legion have no illusions whatsoever. We realise fully that everything depends upon the

Lord. But in a sense, too, it does not; because that grace will always be given if it be properly sought; then its action is automatic; we can take the gift of it for granted. What is in doubt is our own co-operation, not God's. Thus we can hark back to what I have already said and once again urge on you—that effort is paramount. Simple effort must come first; after that, supreme effort, after that—and only after that—enlightened, artistic, brilliant, genius-like effort. Nothing is expected of anybody except what he has got. A man who is not a genius cannot elicit qualities that are proper to genius. Nevertheless, his mis-directed, clumsy, stupid effort will be equal to the effort of the genius, if it is all that he can give, and if he does not fall below the genius in the faith and love he puts into it.

Grace follows Effort

If the maximum of effort is forthcoming, then grace will come, overflowing, conquering, miraculous grace, like any of the highlights of the past. We have a current example of that in the case of an air-raid shelter in Liverpool where Legionaries were saying the Rosary. A land-mine fell beside the densely-packed shelter; yet in circumstances that were patently miraculous the people all escaped unscathed. The Legionaries had finished the fourth decade of the Rosary when the mine dropped. Then when they pulled themselves together and realised that they were still on earth, their first thought was to give out the fifth decade in thanksgiving. The sequel was that twenty persons handed in their names for instruction. I suppose many believe mass conversions to be impossible at the present day. Not so. Make the proper claim on the Lord and He will respond with big things.

The Gospel to Every Living Creature

Another principle is that the *number* of your contacts should be the main consideration, and not the emphasising of *quality*

or *promise*. This sounds very odd, I know, but it is logical. It seems to me that the concentrating on quality and on alleged promising people is a dangerous mirage which will lead you astray. Who are we to judge as to who are the promising? Sometimes things work out very differently indeed to what they promise—sometimes the very opposite. The eligible and the promising never fructify, while the unpromising often yields rich fruit. A multitude of eminent cases attest to that. Only the Lord can judge the heart. None of us should venture to do so. Our job is to seek out all, and to bestow on all unbounded, heroic effort.

I repeat the following examples which history records of unlikely-looking people who entered Christ's Church:

The Thief on the Cross.

W. H. Mallock.

Oscar Wilde.

On the other hand, there are rather notable examples like Gladstone, or the late Lord Halifax, who stood on the border and appeared to be about to come in, and yet who died outside the Church.

Moreover, the Morning Star* men, or the Sancta Maria women, would not appear to present the most promising of material. Yet—without having worked out figures, but with a certain degree of confidence—I venture to assert that they exhibit a higher ratio of conversion to the Church than other sections of the population. Another striking case: Some time ago an able young Mahomedan Indian stated at a meeting of the Overseas Club* that the remedy for the divisions and antagonisms of India was to take a leaf out of the Russian book and to atheise the country. I reflected to myself that of all who

* *The Morning Star and Sancta Maria are the Legion of Mary Hostels in Dublin for down and out men and women.*

* *Another work of the Legion in Dublin.*

were there he afforded the very least prospect of conversion. Now consider this: He was the first of all that body to come into the Church! So much for human judgments!

And here is another example: A group of us were the other evening discussing a distinguished man. He had come to us labelled, so to speak, by a person of great discernment as an outstanding soul who was very near to the Church. Our group could discern very little of the spiritual in him at all. Who was right? It only shows how impossible it is to form an accurate judgment of people's qualities—let alone of their souls. Therefore, we should be slow to indulge in that sort of classification.

The Church Must Reach Every Soul

The more numerous the contacts, the more numerous will be the conversions. There is a mathematical ring about that, but it will work out true. But there is a higher principle than that which requires the multiplication of your contacts. It is the one I have already mentioned—that through you the Church must reach every soul. So it is the case of the carrying out of a mission, not the following up of anything that may seem promising. And even if those contacts seem vain and worthless and barren, and even if by some prophetic glance you *knew* them to be vain, still you are to follow them up. Why? Because God has said so. I was much impressed once by an account which I read of a French Missionary in China. He had been a very distinguished layman in France. He left all, became a priest, and went out on the Mission to China. Apparently he was working in a bad spot. He did not accomplish much during all his time there. Somebody asked him if he were getting results. He said, "No." And the inquirer with an eye on his past brilliant career, suggested to him that he was wasting his talents and that he should seek a more promising field of labour. His

answer was: "I am not here because of past success nor because of prospective success. I am here because of the command that the Gospel be preached to every creature." That noble remark contains a lesson for us all. Incidentally, it puts the mission of the Church in a nutshell. Clutch that nutshell to yourselves, and note that when that commission was originally given by Our Lord, there was no suggestion of any process of selection, or of promising contacts, or of non-approach to those who had beliefs. The commission was made comprehensive. Approach was to be to *all*.

Casting the Net

If still you have any misgivings regarding those to whom you are to go, or the way in which you are to go, and if you find yourself thinking in terms of selection and circumspection, then think of that other command: "Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, into the highways and hedges, and compel those you find to enter in." There is not much of the element of discrimination there. We would be topical in calling it a "mopping-up operation". Furthermore, there is even the note of capture and compelling. Where are the niceties in all that? There are none. What is painted for you is someone burning with zeal for the Lord's Kingdom going out into all sorts of places, getting after all sorts of people—many of them queer enough, and with a gentle insistence inducing them to come in.

And again, the image of the Church that is put before us in the Gospel is that of a ship. It is a fisherman's craft, and the fishing therefrom is done by nets—not by rod and line; nor is it directed to the princely salmon or trout alone. That casting of a net is the indiscriminating gesture that the Church must always make, and that we, as units of the Church, must imitate. The net is cast, regardless of what is going to be brought up in

it—big, little, good or bad. We must even throw it out where there is little or no prospect of anything coming in. For you will remember the incident in the Gospel which is commended to us—the casting of the net in faith where all previous castings had been fruitless. You know the sequel. The net was filled to breaking-point with great fishes.