

THE SPIRIT OF THE LEGION OF MARY

The Spirit of the Legion

OF MARY

FRANK DUFF



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Faith

*'With Faith o'ercome the steeps thy God has
set for thee.'*

I suppose everybody when reading the papers during this last momentous year,¹ has been struck by the seemingly small part the Catholic Church is playing in relation to the great disruptive happenings which are shaking the whole world. The Holy Father has been making his broken hearted appeals in the interests of peace but truly he may be described as 'a voice crying in the wilderness,' because no one seems to be listening. The Church has been just quietly elbowed to one side. That is a very perplexing thought, but it should be much more than that to you legionaries, it should be a galvanic thought, because you know that something must be wrong when such a state of things can be. And if something is wrong then something must be done about it. May I put a few thoughts before you on that subject?

The Legion as you know has been successful. It is growing rapidly. It is honoured by the confidence of the great people

of the Church. Its future seems to be very bright and from time to time we have wondered to ourselves if the Legion were not actually a hope of the world, destined to help in the ushering in of a new order of things. That would be a sweet thought. But at the same time there must be no self-satisfaction in it, just because a certain amount has been done and certain standards, which are not low standards, have been created. We must not foolishly think that we have done all that is to be done. And are our standards so superb? Consider this. That well known French writer, Père Plus, has defined a Christian as one to whose care has been committed his fellow man. That signifies that every Christian has a duty such as that which you have taken on yourselves – every Christian. Pius XI says, in a paragraph known to you in the handbook,² that Catholic Action is an elementary Christian duty imposed on each person by the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. And in another handbook quotation, St John Chrysostom warns us to this effect: 'Christians, remember that at the hour of Judgement you must render an account, not for your own souls alone, but for the souls of all men.' The foregoing quotations express a truth and that truth is this – the Legion life is not a unique life, and it is not a heroic life; it is common Catholicity as God intended it and as the Church sees it. Nothing more. And if people looking on at the Legion should acclaim it as heroic, that only means that their standards have sunk very low indeed and that the true standard of living, as expressed by those great authorities whom I have been quoting, is not understood. This fact therefore stands forth, that as the Legion is only common Catholicity, all Catholics and not merely the pick of them, are bound to be in the ranks of the Legion, or discharging their duty in some other similar fashion.

Shock the World into Seeing the Church

This truth will help legionaries to take a correct view of their own position. They must not assume that in being legionaries they have achieved a very special altitude, that they have climbed the spiritual peaks. The fact is that they have only established themselves in the elements of Catholic duty as understood by the Church; they are really only at the ground level and their climb has yet to begin. They must brace themselves to that climb, to the achievement of heroism. I say it again: we are only on the ground level at present. The climb is before us.

What are the possibilities of achievement offered to us in the Legion? Of late I have been made to think a little on that subject by viewing the fine bearing of legionaries towards certain happenings, not only in this country (arising out of the governmental declaration that a state of emergency exists) but still more in the neighbouring island in the face of grievous conditions. Now we know that legionaries can be trusted to stand out conspicuous amongst others for self-sacrifice, to be calm and reliable when all around is chaos, to be superbly on duty in the very worst that can betide.

Reflecting on all that with no small degree of consolation, the further thought suggested itself: Why should that heroic spirit only be in plain evidence amongst us when evoked by some sort of national crisis? Note it is not a religious crisis which has evoked that spirit, but national ones. Why should we only show ourselves in the full light of our possibilities when death and danger come along to bring the element of reality into everyday life? Is it not possible for sensible people to face realities without that special stimulus? Why should we only realise the fleeting character of this life and the futility of the things of this

world when danger comes along, when some national or social or emotional convulsion plants us right up against final things and thus brings us to our senses? I think if we were able to live always on this level which dire happenings have set us; if we could stabilise that sublime indifference to life and comfort, and throw that spirit into our ordinary life and work, we could simply tear asunder the existing faulty standards of the world and in their place set up entirely new standards appropriate to the Catholic Church. Those worthy standards would call down the Omnipotence of God and force him – very willingly I might say – to give us whatever we may want; to give us miracles of every description and thus to shock the cynical world into looking at the Catholic Church and listening to her message.

What do we Want with Miracles?

When I talk in this way about the miraculous, you may be inclined to say: ‘Well what do we want with miracles?’ My reply is this: The Catholic Church is the carrying on of the life of Our Lord in its every aspect and a most prominent feature of Our Lord’s life was its miracles. He worked miracles as part of his ordinary mission; He spoke of them as the attendant of faith. They represented his chief way of awakening people, of attracting their eyes to himself and shattering them out of their indifference and worldliness and making them listen to him, follow him, believe in him. There is just as much necessity today for that sort of dazzling doctrine as there was when Our Lord was living. In fact there is more, because we live today in a blasé world - a world that pays no attention to mere talking – that cannot be stirred out of its indifference by any force that is less than dynamic, a world in which such

a state of affairs has arisen that an organisation like the Legion (where it is not despised or disgraced) is looked upon as a truly heroic organisation. I have already insisted that such a conception of the Legion is not correct.

Miracles: Supreme Challenge to Unbelief

I stress this question of miracles because they are desirable; they are needed. They are the supreme challenge to unbelief. They are the endorsement of our Faith shown as such in history, shown as such in the New Testament. The preparation for the Church was miraculous; the establishment of the Church was miraculous; the spread of the Church was miraculous. It was all miraculous. And having regard to the fact that the Church merely carries on Our Lord's life, the miraculous should be part and parcel of its everyday work. By the miraculous I do not necessarily mean (nor do I exclude either) the moving of mountains, or the raising of the dead, or the stilling of the tempest. I say I do not exclude these for they are possible and desirable now just as ever they were – the Arm of God has not shortened. But I particularly mean the stilling of the tempest of problems and passions, the raising of the morally dead, the moving away of the mountains of unbelief. These are all things that we know are just as possible today as ever they were in the history of the Church. And yet they are not being realised! Why? Because our Catholicism has not sufficient body in it; it is only a shadow of what it is supposed to be. Even we here who represent a sort of upper stratum in the flock have ourselves intolerably low standards; we are prepared to rejoice and be content when merely modest results come along, instead of having at all times a heart for the impossible.

Nothing Impossible with God

For that word 'impossible' is only a human relation. With God no word shall be impossible. And to us, things will range from the impossible to the possible exactly in the measure that we enlist the grace of God in our service. If we can call fully on the grace, then all things whatsoever are within our grasp. There is no problem we cannot solve, no person we cannot convert, no community we cannot win over to the Faith. There is nothing we cannot accomplish if we can but call upon the Omnipotence of God to help us. You will say I seem to suggest that as things are we cannot count on that Omnipotence and you demand, 'why not?' My answer is that we do not go about the business of claiming it in the right way – our faith is low and poor and weak. Let us venture to give a little examination to that problem.

Real Faith calls on Omnipotence

What is wrong with the quality of our faith and conduct that we do not get the results which were forthcoming in the earlier days of the Church? When we read in the Gospel about having the faith of God, the faith that moves mountains, what exactly is meant? Does it mean just a pious belief in God and in his power to do all things? With respect I say it means nothing of the kind, because that sort of faith is possessed by every single person sitting here before me in this hall; in fact it is possessed by even the most easygoing and thoughtless in the Catholic world outside. But none of us here are working that type of miracle, nor do the people outside work it either. The faith that is meant must be of an entirely different quality from that which is our common possession, and which goes no further than what I have already described as a pious

belief. The faith that is wanted; the real faith does not mean an empty sentiment, but an action. It very definitely means action – seeing God and souls and hardly seeing anything else; then pursuing those ends with absolute determination, with complete forgetfulness of oneself, of one's own interest and one's own safety; prepared to press after them, even if one's own destruction be entailed. You may say this is a very extreme conception; you may ask does it literally mean that one must be prepared to lay down one's life, or be destroyed or ruined in some way or another, in the search for the interests of God? My answer is that it does. It is true that a much less noble degree of faith will save us. But it is not going to move away the mountains of the difficult and the impossible and to call freely on the Omnipotence of God.

The Miraculous on Tap

Now that is the kind of faith that is required to face the gigantic and grim problems of the day; and difficult to nature though it seems, it is by no means an impossible or unknown degree of faith, for I have seen many individuals in your own ranks facing up to situations in that very spirit. I have known a fair number of cases where legionaries in the course of their work came to a point at which they had to decide either to stop or to go on. The going on apparently meant their own ruin. The stopping meant the abandonment of a prime work for souls to which they had committed themselves. I am happy to be able to boast (is it wrong in the circumstances?) that in all the cases I have in mind those legionaries pressed on – I do not say they did it undauntedly, but I do say they pressed on. And what was the sequel? Well amazing to say, in every one of those cases they gained their objective

completely. Surely for those legionaries it was a setting of their feet upon the waters and walking! Reflecting on those happenings and making more than due allowance for coincidence, one could not but be convinced that a regular law was operating whereby the miraculous stepped in at the point where human effort and goodwill had done their utmost, could do no more, and could but cast themselves appealingly on the Omnipotent. We do not realise that the miraculous is, as it were, on tap for us like that. We get the idea from what we have read or heard that the miraculous is something altogether out of the way, something unexplainable in its incidence, subject to no law, experienced at specially designated places like Lourdes, or as manifestations of God's singular predilection for special souls, but certainly something not to be realised by common people like ourselves. That is a complete error. From my experience, such as it has been, I would say that the miraculous in its different grades is absolutely on tap for anybody that requires it and is prepared to pay the price.

Shaking the Power of Faith

I would really fear that the ordinary faith which is current even in estimable Catholic communities, and even in a fairly select band like the legionaries, is more natural than supernatural. Herein I seem to be voicing a contradiction; faith being supernatural, how can it be natural? What I mean is that we may use supernatural power after natural fashion, which almost amounts to not using it at all. As a parallel consider the case of a bird which has powerful wings and yet is satisfied to walk the ground like the common hen, or worse still to waddle along like the duck. Our faith, like the bird, is meant to fly and reach the

higher regions, but does it fly. It keeps to 'the level and the low' and walks the ground like the hen or duck.

Such a use of faith means that nothing is attempted unless it can be justified from the natural angle as well as from the supernatural. Then when we run up against an obstacle, instead of seeking to fly over it by the miraculous powers of grace, we allow it to bring us to a complete standstill. We regard the natural difficulty as final. We do not exactly rule faith out, but we harness it and subject it to natural considerations. The result of that conception of faith has been disastrous. Do Catholic communities emerge in bold relief from among others by their mode of life and by their standards? Sometimes it is not so easy to distinguish them. How often have we to take refuge in saying, 'Oh yes we may not ostensibly be living different lives but we have the Faith?' That is a mighty poor defence. Yet too often it is the best that can be made. Look for instance at the continent of Europe, in previous ages the fount of Catholicity, the furnisher of missionaries, the nursery of saints. Today Europe in the gospel phrase 'walks no more with Christ,' does not want to walk any more with him and appears not to be convertible. And we, shackled by our weakness of faith, stand looking helplessly on!

Conversion by Direct Attack

Again, so dominating is that merely natural attitude of Catholics towards their faith and the powers of their religion, that there is the very considerable danger – which has to a large extent become an actuality – that we may regard the Church as being limited in its activities, in its possibilities and in its accomplishment like any ordinary earthly institution is limited. In practice we assume

that what an ordinary institution can do the Catholic Church can do and what an ordinary worldly institution cannot do the Catholic Church cannot do. Is this an exaggeration? Well read the papers and see. Or listen to our own conversation and judge if we have not erred into that line of thought. I give you an example. No doubt you have noticed the consoling articles which have appeared of late in the Catholic Press proving that in the year 1987 or so the Catholic Church will have a larger membership in a certain country than any other religion. Why? It is because the Catholic birth rate is higher than any other in that country. You see it is by that we are going to have more Catholics in such and such a year! I ask you if that is not looking on the Catholic Church as a purely human institution? I do not mean to say that God does not use that way of adding souls to his Church. But is he limited? Did God ever intend the increase of his Church to depend on the marriage rate and the birth rate only? You know that the very suggestion is ridiculous.

We boast that birth control is more prevalent in non-Catholic communities than in ours, that therefore our numbers will eventually predominate. But what about the loss of souls in the long interval of waiting while our numbers grow? Is there to be no question of the conversion of men by direct attack? What about the days when our little bit of a country sent its missionaries out over Europe? For what? It was to convert men, to convert masses of men. Are these days altogether gone? Yes under present conditions of faith they appear to be. Think of the conversion of England as it was once accomplished. Could it be won to the Faith once more, as was done in those early days? Again I suggest not under present conditions. Numerically we are not going ahead there at all. For the

10,000 or so conversions a year are counterbalanced by the leakage. In all those newspaper surveys of the position I have not seen a word about the miraculous converting power of the Church. And what of the greater problem of converting France – and the still greater one of Russia?

Looking for Mass Conversions

With the persistence of this wholly natural attitude we work largely on natural lines. The idea of getting miraculous help from God is absent. If we get impatient at the idea of tedious extension through the birth rate and aim at direct conversions, then again our planning follows purely human lines. How often have we heard something of this kind: 'The future lies in our getting hold of the children. We cannot spend time on the adults because they are hopeless.' And the attempted conversion of a country resolves itself to this, that we endeavour to educate the children and we leave the adults practically alone. We have little idea of looking as of old for mass conversions of men, no idea of forcing – by a faith that does not stagger – the Omnipotence of God to sweep down and gather whole continents into his Church. Our thinking is done along natural lines. Even the choicest types of people are inclined thus to let the natural dictate to the supernatural. One such person for instance in the early days of Sancta Maria³ – the first year I think – proposed an extension of the work. It was to open a little house and take a group of five or six of our most promising girls, who would be subjected to a more intensive process of development. We approved of the idea in general but we asked: 'How are you going to pick the "promising ones"?' A selection was named. It included all the nice and trim young ones. Our comment was: 'We do not think you can pick so easily as that.' Now it is an

interesting fact that the very ones named fell away; which shows how incapable the best of us are of judging these things and the great danger of applying our own opinion to something that belongs to God. That person slipped into the human fallacy of supposing that what was naturally eligible and likely looking, was precisely the same in the supernatural order. Such may be far from being the case.

Now another example – and mind when I quote these I am not picking out an unusual thing here and another there to bolster up a strained argument. You know that these examples are absolutely typical of the experience of ourselves and of everyone else. They illustrate unfortunately our ordinary mode of thought. An influential and good Catholic in the position to give employment was approached recently about a girl and asked to give her a chance in a job. This girl had been misconducting herself some time before and the fact was mentioned. The reply to the request was that the only remedy for anyone of that type was to lock her up permanently in an institution. Study that sweeping assertion with its implications and you are shocked to find that it reduced the divinely guided Church precisely to the level of the ordinary prison system. It suggests that the Church, like the prison system, is unable to secure a conversion other than by locking up the person sought to be converted. I feel that every legionary heart will instinctively repudiate that suggestion as utterly intolerable. Moreover I point to the working of Sancta Maria Hostel as a practical demonstration of the untruth of such a gospel of hopelessness. In that hostel we have seen how people of that particular type have been induced – not in ones or twos but wholesale – to turn over to a life of goodness and of persevering goodness.

Aiming at the Impossible

Yet despite our contact with so many experiences of wonder working grace in our Legion activities, we ourselves have no reason to feel superior. For we too will usually fetter by worldly reasonings the illimitable powers of faith. So long as there is dry land we are prepared to walk the rough road that leads to souls. But the moment that land ends and the water begin – is there one amongst us legionaries that will set his feet upon those waters and go on though he knows that a soul is the price of his doing so? Rather will he not weigh himself and that soul in the balance and nearly always it will be his side that goes down and his own interests that will win the day. Is it strange then that we are not able to call upon the Omnipotence of God in our various works? Do not take me as suggesting that we are not ever calling upon and obtaining graces from God. Manifestly we are, but we are not drawing upon his Omnipotence, by which I mean his capacity to do what is impossible to nature (including the splendidly miraculous). Yet in the greatness of our ambitions and our efforts we should aim at nothing less than the impossible.

All our hostels I would say are exemplifying in a modest way the truth of the statement I made earlier on, when I claimed that the miraculous is more or less always on tap. The establishment, the continuance, the general results, and the accompanying circumstances of all these three hostels are unquestionably miraculous. Not spectacularly miraculous, I grant you and therefore, possibly veiled or unnoticeable to the ordinary person who contemplates their working. But the legionaries who ventured greatly there, albeit nervously, have felt the water grow solid beneath their feet. Impossible situations

were solved, intricate puzzles resolved themselves, utterly hopeless people were converted and persevered in their conversions. Closed doors were opened, many unsuspected ones leading to fresh sources of help or wider opportunities. When in contact with these hostels you see that going on, not once or twice, but every day, as part of the ordinary routine of their life, you could not but see in it the miraculous. Being acutely conscious of it myself, I ask what is not possible if the spirit of those legionaries who work in the hostels could be extended to the general community; if their spirit of faith-mingled determination could be applied to the problems of the world? I would imagine the result would be the same veiled miracles – batches of people capitulating and being converted; big unsolved problems being readily solved.

Shaking the World Out of Apathy

But in what I have said do not misunderstand me. Do not take me as claiming that the legionaries in our hostels are leading lives of heroic faith. As I said before, I say again to you frankly that none of us are. The best of us are trying to work with one foot in each world, by which I mean compromising the supernatural with the natural. I have particularised hostel workers because I see a great devotion to souls there, a very determined devotion and readiness to suffer dire things in the following up of those difficult souls with whose care they are charged. Though there are higher things than that hostel spirit, yet it is a dynamic thing. I believe if it were to become common among us, we would be in a fair way to bring back on earth again those miracle-working, all converting days of the Church. We should pray for signs and wonders and divers miracles, and try to bring them by meriting them. For they alone

can shake the world out of its spiritual apathy, can compel its attention, can make it go on its knees and listen to the doctrine of Christ.

Sensational Triumph of Mass Conversion

I will conclude my argument by touching on the events which are described in the September 1940 issue of *Maria Legionis* that is, the attack on Bently Place.⁴ According to the human eye that first haul secured the absolute refuse and rubbish of the area – people that by any standards were impossible. They were not sober for one thing; indeed there was not any natural groundwork for conversion. But you will remember the startling sequel: their conversion accomplished, not one of them ever looked back.

That group represented a sensational example of mass conversion. How was such a miraculous result achieved? This was the reason: when the legionaries attacked that enterprise, they morally laid down their own lives. They were convinced that they were going to their own destruction. To quote the phrase in the journal, they came to a signpost which said, 'There lies your duty and your destruction'. The result was that their very first draught of fishes consisted of nine great ones, nor did their net break, for that miraculous haul represented the first movement in a two-year drama which led to the cleansing of that place utterly and absolutely, not by human devices but by grace; not by driving forth but by converting; and not alone converting the girls themselves but the organisers of the place as well – all were gathered into the net. If that is not a miracle equal to anything in the ages of Church history down through the centuries, then I have misread all such history.

Applying the Rules of God

Since those early legionary days other similar happenings have been seen, many wonders which must be admitted as miraculous. I am satisfied that such miracles are available for any who resolutely reach for them. But that word 'resolutely' is the difficulty. If you want them, you must act and act with faith-centred determination. Remember this: our religion, if it is to accomplish anything, must be supernatural. That means it must break to an extent with the purely natural. It will in consequence pay scant attention to the claims of worldly prudence. Heroic faith represents the application of the rules of God and only the rules of God to your work and your everyday life; the unwavering, unconditional application of his rules. I repeat you must break with the natural, for if you try to balance one foot on the natural and the other on the supernatural, you will in practice believe that it is the natural that supports you and not the supernatural. So believing, you may ask, but it shall not be given to you; you may knock and it shall not be opened to you.

Endnotes

- 1 1939.
- 2 The official handbook of the Legion of Mary.
- 3 One of the Legion hostels in Dublin devoted to work for the women of the streets.
- 4 The pseudonym for a district in Dublin where prostitution was rife. Mr Duff led the apostolate of the area, which resulted in its complete conversion – Ed.