

Fear

'Fain Would I Climb, But I Fear to Fall'

During tea this evening there were copies of a little notice on the tables. Paragraph 2 of this notice read, 'It has been asserted that every legionary is capable of making a good speech or writing a thoroughly good article. In actual fact few of them do so. If all legionaries could be induced to expand in this way, the advantages are obvious.' I think that little paragraph contains something of supreme importance from the legionary point of view. I was delighted when I saw it, because it constitutes an admirable taking-off ground for the observations which I intend to make.

The Destructive Power of Fear

Why is it that legionaries who possess, as we know them to possess, the capacity to shine in one way or another, make so little effort to use it or to develop it? Why, for instance, in the discussion we have just had about that most interesting subject of the spirit in sport, could only

one in fifty be induced to come forward and say anything? Yet everybody has ideas on the subject and is well capable of expressing them. What is it that stands in the way?

It seems to me the answer is Fear; and it is on that answer that I am going to base my talk. Call it whatever we like, the basic reason is fear, common fear. In the life of everybody without exception that very thing fear is playing a damping part and it tends to play a destructive one. In many cases that natural tendency is offset by circumstances which press in the opposite direction. Take for instance the armies of the world. Take our own Legion. In the armies it is largely overcome by discipline. In the Legion it is counterbalanced to some extent by the sum total of the forces, natural and supernatural, which we call the Legion system. But where these things do not operate to neutralise the action of fear, it exercises its baneful influence over people's lives and character. It leaves them like seeds which can expand hundredfold, but which, by reason of lack of heat or moisture, do not germinate. If that is a fact, it constitutes a tragedy. It means that mankind is only realising a fraction, perhaps a small fraction, of its possibilities. If so, what a loss! Conversely, it means that the life which could emancipate itself from the restraining grip of fear, would accomplish very great things in itself and for the world. That is an intriguing possibility. It is worth all the attention we can give it.

Courage

The Legion, as you will have gathered from the handbook, recognises the importance of courage and in the section on the duties of members it puts before us very prominently and very forcibly the need for that virtue. It insists that as the ordinary soldier must have courage as an essential of

his very soldiership, so must the legionary have courage; and that the legionary without courage is no use to the Legion. With its eye on the work usually performed by legionaries, the handbook stresses the importance of moral courage. It develops the subject of human respect and compares human respect in the legionary to rank cowardice in the case of the ordinary soldier. This is a justified comparison, for if human respect were permitted to work untrammelled, legionary action would for the most part be reduced to nullity. Therefore the Legion system sets out to counter the disastrous effects of human respect. In this, I think, it is supremely successful.

Life Flows in Courage

But there is an element of danger it seems to me, that from this stressing of the evil of human respect and the necessity for combating it, we might conclude that there is no need for courage in that particular form. We might think that once we get outside what I must for the sake of clearness call the religious or devotional part of our lives, then the Legion is not further concerned in demonstrations of courage – and in fact that courage is only a secular or worldly virtue. I urge that such a view on the part of legionaries would be a complete misconception and would in fact constitute a disaster for them. For there should not be to the Legion – any more than there is before God – such a thing as a non-religious or non-Christian part of the Christian life. The Legion peremptorily insists that we are always on duty and a while ago we listened to a discussion which has put that principle very strongly before us. The playing of games was the subject of that discussion. We were talking about something that many might think to be outside the ordinary legionary life. But

the Legion holds the contrary. It insists that those games are part and parcel of its sphere – and everything else as well as games; and that a legionary who is only a legionary during a few hours a week of legionary work is an absolute failure from the Legion point of view. Those few hours are really meant to be your school time, where you are taught principles for the purpose of putting them into universal practice. The other hours are really the more important in the sense that they are the more numerous.

You are not a Catholic merely during the time of your prayers. You are not a legionary only during your hours of legionary work. You are always a Catholic and likewise you are always a legionary – at least that is the legionary conception of things. You are a legionary during what might be called your secular hours, that is during your whole life. If therefore you are leaving out the courage which imparts virility to the secular part of your lives, you are not legionaries during that time. For courage is the soldierly, the Christian quality. It ranks first in the sense that it is the test of all the others. As the rose root must produce the rose and the lily root the lily so must the legionary life flower in courage. You may object: 'What about prayerfulness, what about sweetness?' Of course we must possess those things, but they must have the fibre of courage in them. Otherwise they are fictitious virtues. They wilt under trial. They can stand no test.

The Blighting Influence of Fear

Yet of such fair-weather fabric are our lives. Generally we live them in the shadow of fear – fear of every sort of thing, usually fear of failure. That is why we will not get up and talk. We are afraid of failing. We are afraid that we will be laughed at, that we may make fools of ourselves. Then

there is fear of criticism. Fear of poverty. Innumerable people live through their lives on a certain low level because they are afraid to face the risks that are incidental to climbing. That low level holds no possibilities of any kind, but of course, it is safe. Fear has many other forms. Fear of death – some are obsessed by such an abject fear of death that to them might truly be applied the title of that film: *Each dawn I die*. Fear of disease – people will not go into certain places or do certain things because they are afraid they may catch something. In the case of a vast number it is fear of disgrace – a particularly powerful influence. But in any case, fear, fear, fear – hiding itself under all sorts of guises, but at bottom common fear all the time. In some cases the things feared are so remote and so unlikely that what is at work is really nothing more than the fear of fear – as Seneca describes it. Thereby we are hedged off from our wide possibilities. Most of these dreads are purely imaginary. But real or imaginary, they are stunting growth. Innumerable fine things fear destroys in germ. On every life it exercises its blighting influence. Sometimes favouring forces enter in to neutralise that influence. In the Legion, for instance, you are experiencing such a force. It enables you to overcome the various fears and reluctances which beset the path of legionary duty. The system of your organisation lifts you superior to fear. If that be so, what a tragedy if you should narrow down the sphere of legionary duty, so that for a couple of hours in the week you are heroes and heroines, and for the balance just common fear-ruled folk. No, just as the legionary is *always* on duty, so likewise must that legionary fearlessness overflow the banks of the purely legionary employments and inundate the whole life.

Campaigning Against Fear

But it is not enough to make resolutions and to hope for the best. We must conduct a deliberate campaign against the operations of this fear. In its character as human respect we do understand it and we do campaign against it. All spiritual books suggest expedients to that end. I will mention just a few. One is the wearing of a religious badge. That is an excellent means of countering human respect, which – briefly defined – is the fear to manifest your religion publicly. Then there is the blessing of yourself at meals in public places, or in some similar place, where such an act is bound to attract attention, do not be afraid to bless yourself. One of the finest men I know has told me that the performance of that little act originally cost him an awful lot. Then there is the question of the Angelus; or the touching of your hat when passing a church, especially when you are in company with people who would look at you because you showed that little mark of respect. Note: you are afraid even of being looked at. In the life of St Philip Neri you will find some striking examples of his determination to root out that sort of thing in his disciples. He had many of the young nobles of Rome as his spiritual children and on these he used to impose the most bizarre things. For instance, he made one young scion of a noble family tie a fox's tail on behind and thus adorned perambulate the streets of Rome. You can imagine what a terrible experience that was for the victim. To that proud type of man death itself would almost be preferable. Therefore that victory over self was a very great victory – falling nowise short of real heroism.

On Begging a Penny

Here is another interesting example of that kind of heroism. It is not without its funny side, but it shows the way strong souls set out to deal with a great evil when they understand it is an evil. A close friend of mine, one of the holiest and most characterful men that I have ever known, was under the direction at one time of an eminent saint. That director had uncompromising ideas in regard to instilling the spirit of courage or virility into his subjects. The following was an order that my friend received on one occasion: 'You are to go out into the streets of your city and beg a penny.' Yes those were the unbelievable words he heard and my friend, who was a very well-known figure indeed in this city, nearly passed away. Try to put yourself in his place. Courage, I can assure you, he had. He had the courage of ten stout lions, but at the ghastly prospect even his great heart *almost* failed. But 'almost' is the saving word – he bowed to the command. Then for a day or two he *almost* sweated blood while he mentally acclimatised himself to the ordeal of going forth. He had fevered notions of donning a false moustache, or of otherwise trying to disguise himself. But he reasoned that such would not be playing the game in the Spartan spirit which was intended. So he put on his overcoat, turned its collar up, and pulled his hat as far down over his head, as he felt he might in accordance with the spirit of the game. Then off he went to the Church of Our Lady of Good Council in High Street – the Augustinian Church.

He stood in the porch and to everyone who entered or went out he spoke the conventional beggar's formula: 'Spare a copper for a poor man.' As he afterwards declared, he went through the tortures of the damned for fear (as was quite likely) he would be known. Consider how

someone having recognised him would hurry off to say to others: 'I did with my own eyes, I saw him. He must have gone stark staring mad.' That would make his position in the city very difficult – to put it mildly. It added to the torture of this thought that some abused him, telling him he ought to be ashamed of himself, an able-bodied man like him to be begging. Eventually one woman gave him a half penny. But that did not fulfil the contract. At this stage he eased his nerves by seeking fresh fields and pastures new. He moved to James' Street Church and took up his stand in the porch there. After he had suffered there for some time, a very poor man sidled up to him and said: 'I am poorer than yourself, but here is a penny for you.' With fervent thanks – and clutching that hard earned penny (subsequently cherished as a precious memento) my friend went off home. Think that out in all its bearings and you will find in it an act of heroism which I do not think many of us here would be capable of.

Holiness Means Defying Fear

Now that very same sort of attitude that we realise to be necessary towards human respect – that is the universally aggressive attitude, the determination to face and fight it down for the sake of God and for the sake of religion – must also be adopted by all in the 'secular' part of their lives in regard to the appropriate sort of fear that shows itself there. That becomes imperative in the case of legionaries, because courage has become your profession and because you are not low-road people. The very fact that you have stepped into the Legion ranks lifts you out of the common category. You are a high class of people. I do not say this just to please. I merely state a fact. You are – or at least I suppose you are – aiming at sanctity. The

definition of sanctity is heroic virtue and heroism means the defying of fear, the rising superior to fear. Therefore if sanctity is real sanctity, it must show itself in the form of courage. If it does not then what looked like sanctity is not sanctity – it is a fictitious thing. If someone you know prays the skies down, but is not prepared to show courage when and where required, then that sanctity is unreal.

Bravado and Bravery

But here we must make a few distinctions. Heroism is the setting aside of fear when it stands in the way of something that must needs be done. Must we always stamp on fear when it rises up in us? Are we bound by our Catholicism to do so? Of course we are not. For fear is an elementary human instinct. It is a signpost, a warning, and it is a very important thing that we should possess that instinct. If we had it not, we would all be killed in less than no time. Fault only lies in giving into it when we should not give in to it. Suppose somebody defies you to swim across a tricky, current-swept channel which is more or less outside your powers. Are you supposed to go ahead in the teeth of your natural shrinking? Needless to say you are not. Or someone challenges you to go in off a twenty foot spring board. You have not got the skill for that dive, so at once the danger signal of fear shows itself. Are you obliged to disregard that signal? What does your Catholicism tell you to do? It tells you to do nothing of the kind. Again, supposing someone wants you to loop-the-loop in an aeroplane, and you are afraid – are you supposed to throw that fear to the winds in every sense of the word? Of course not. Or take a topical example. During a bombing raid, are you supposed to walk out in the streets merely in order to prove your courage? You

are not. That would be without purpose. It would be sheer bravado, foolhardiness. It would be a nobler act to ignore that challenge and all others like it. But the very moment that duty and principle step into the transaction, things become quite different. What was bravado before is bravery now. That foolhardiness has become fine living. Dangerous living may be a duty and then you must not be held back by fear from doing what that duty tells you should be done, however awful its aspect may be, and though the danger signal of fear flies at top mast. You may retort: 'Why pick out these extreme examples, such as bombs, aeroplanes and such like?' Well when Our Blessed Lord was talking of a test, he picked out an even more extreme one. He specified the laying down of one's life as the acid test of quality and love. Are you prepared to lay down your life for duty?

Toughness and Gentleness

When we want to excuse ourselves for weakness in the face of fear, we take those references to venturing and laying down of life as a kind of pious talk or as counsels of perfection which do not apply to us all. That is not so. It is absolutely essential that we be prepared to stand up and face whatever may betide when there is a duty to be done. And there is more than a personal duty. There is a duty on behalf of religion in general. It is of extreme importance that religion be a virile thing – a tough thing in fact – though most people do not think that way in regard to religion. Religion must be the toughest of things and the people who are practising religion should be tough, essentially tough. I do not mean tough in the modern American sense of the word. The toughness I mean includes in their proper proportion ingredients

like sweetness and gentleness. These latter must of course be there, but they must be founded on and fortified by strength of character. I cannot but feel that there is an oversteering in religion of the importance of sweetness and that the impression exists that the strong things must yield to it. Not so. Take those people Br Nagle¹ mentioned a while ago. He picked those two saints, St Jerome and St Paul, because they were both hot tempered men, strong of temper and strong of speech. They were tough men and yet – because they were great saints we can be assured that sweetness was a significant part of their make-up. But toughness had to be there. If we do not see to that, then we are earning for religion the reputation of being a soft thing that only softies practise. We are creating the impression that the legionaries of Satan are the really virile people of the world; whereas the opposite should be the case. Imagine how destructive to the interests of religion such a popular misconception would be. Its first effect would be that upstanding young people (who place special value on courage) would look on religion as effeminate and would only practise it by stealth if they practised it at all.

Pressing on to Fear Barbed Duty

If in your ordinary life you set yourselves to do anything worthwhile, fear will automatically rise up in front of you. If fear does not present itself, you are either a freak or you are leading a low level existence; very probably you are shirking the grim and worthwhile things of life. I take it that there are not many freaks here before me. Therefore if you are not constantly encountering fear on your road, you are not trying to lead a high level life. If you start to climb a mountain, the atmosphere becomes

rarefied as you proceed. Your breathing becomes difficult and your heart starts to labour. A painful sensation takes possession of you. In the same way when we start moving upwards in the spiritual life (by which I mean the whole life lived from the Catholic angle), we run into the rarefied atmosphere of fear.

What is to be our rule of thought in those moments in which both body and soul are chilled, resolution falters and excuses swarm? It is that we must try to exclude every consideration but the one. Where lies the path of duty? Is it our duty to go ahead? If it is and if we be virile people then we will go ahead. We will crush within us that instinct of fear to which most people yield. We thereby press on to our destiny, while those others that shrink back from fear barbed duty, miss perhaps the main road of their life.

When minor fear presents itself to you, counter it in a wholesale way by comparing it with the worst. Say to yourself: 'This is not a life and death matter. But even if it were, it would be my duty to see things through. I must accept death or I play false to my soul.' Confronted in that powerful, challenging way, that fear is almost extinguished. Thus reduced to the realms of the ridiculous, it no longer has the hold on you that it had and you go boldly on. It is an excellent thing thus to contemplate the worst and then deliberately devote yourself. Face up to your duty in the extreme, then the minor timidities shrink into insignificance.

Courage and Public Opinion

In all that I have said I am not talking in terms of physical fear alone, but in a wider sense. I am thinking of all sorts of fear. There is another type of fear that has a great intimidatory power – what I may call human respect in

the secular sphere, that is fear of public opinion or mob rule. This is a peculiarly hard thing to stand up against in this mass production world of ours. It requires abnormal force of character, especially in those who are placed in positions of government or control. Usually such persons play up to the mob spirit (which is not a good spirit) instead of trying to educate it and master it. Moreover how the very best amongst us are dominated by the herd instinct of our own particular class or trade, or by some code that we happen to be in thrall to. Some things in these codes are commonly enough very wrong – things which only consider the benefit of that particular class and which are directed against the common good. Yet we conform to them on the grounds that all the others are doing it and therefore that it is excusable for us to follow suit. We do not see in that yielding to fear a betrayal of honour – which in very fact it is. Various examples will occur to each one of you. Every calling has these black spots in it and many estimable Catholics yield to these things. It is that case of sport all over again. You play football as a man, not as a Christian; and in your trade you are the tradesman, not the Christian. Thereby both sport and profession are debased to the level of thought and conduct of the natural man, so that eventually they become corrupting influences. Always you excuse yourself by the argument that all the others are doing it - an argument which you should resist because it is not right and because it is but fear that argues in you. Evils are only removed by people bravely standing out against them. It always takes one man to stand out – and that man may be victimised. He may be boycotted by his fellows and no harder thing exists than to render oneself a pariah in one's own class. Cast your minds back in history and you

will realise what that has oftentimes entailed – one's life reduced to hell – in many cases death. It takes a very noble person thus to stand up against the mob. But if you do not stand out, do not disguise the issue by fine phrases or in any other way. The real issue is fear: fear versus honour, fear versus duty, fear versus religion.

Bearing Persecution for Principles

You may say: 'Surely if I am going to lead a life of that kind, always taking the higher level and always fighting fear, morning, noon and night, what a terrible life that is going to be.' That is true indeed and remember too that fear is not only a present thing. Fear casts its shadow far ahead – over whole years. It can be a dreadful thing if you are making a fight against it. I know that only too well, because I myself have lived in an atmosphere of fear for whole years. It will corrode you mentally and physically if you set yourself to fight against it. It is going to mean a very, very hard sort of life – surely as you say, an intolerable existence. But were you sent into this world to have a sort of sweetmeat existence? On the contrary, you were sent to tread hard ways on to the highest possible things – to suffer persecution for your principles, even to lay down your life for them – and you must be prepared to do so.

Mary Model of Courage

A model we have in all these things and what better model for a legionary than Our Blessed Lady herself. But let us understand how, for no person was ever so little understood as Our Blessed Lady. We are far too much inclined to think of her as just a sweet, amicable sort of person, possessing incredible sweetness and beauty and gentleness and love and all such delights. But make no

mistake about it, Our Lady was very much more than that. Of her the handbook says that of all woman, of all men, she was the most strong. She was the strong woman. The Mary of the Gospel, the Queen of the Legion, was no shrinking miss; and if all your reading has given you that impression of her, you are very grievously astray. The whole character of Our Lady was a character of strength. She was the Tower of David. She was the Tower of Ivory. She was the army set in array. Do not let us misunderstand her.

Now what was the characteristic of her whole life? I would say respectfully that she lived throughout under the shadow of intolerable and ever present anguishing fear, a fear which reached down into her very marrow and rendered every single second of her life one of unutterable torture. That dreadful instinct of fear was certainly with her from the time of the prophecy of Simeon. You must remember that of all people she was the most versed in the prophecies of the Old Testament. Moreover, with her keener intellect she saw these things in a way that no other person could see them. Therefore she understood all the horrors that were awaiting her son and of course everything that he suffered she was to suffer. Her compassion meant her son and herself suffering together, almost in the one flesh – two people nailed to the one Cross in the end. That meant agony surpassing comprehension. All the sufferings of the world put together were as nothing to hers. The thought of all that the future held in store was ever-present to her. In proportion to that clearness of vision and to her unparalleled strength and courage, she must have felt the weight of fear to an awful degree. Did it ever relax its torturing grip on her Immaculate Heart? Yet from the outset, unshakingly and imperturbably, she goes

ahead. Never does she falter either in her step or in her look or in her soul. Yet in her is no admixture of hardness, or truculence, or of resisting for the mere sake of resisting – all of which things would be contrary to charity.

Such is our model. So when we find that the same icy hand of fear pushes into our life and tries to press us back from duty we should turn our thoughts to her. Thereby we do two efficacious things. Thinking *with* Mary, we see our duty ultra-clear; thinking *of* her we challenge fear in the arena of our minds and that challenge is half the victory. But more than that, Mary is the mother of our souls and our legionary leader. In her gifts are the graces that will enable us to crush down that fear and manfully to march the path of duty – lead where it will – on to the realisation of our destiny in Christ – even on to a Cross!

Endnotes

- 1 Jack Nagle, an outstanding Dublin legionary who has for many years been either the president or another officer of the Concilium, the supreme ruling Council of the Legion of Mary.