

Reliability

I discuss with you the question of reliability. The handbook has something to the effect that without courage all the other virtues do not amount to much; for without courage they could not stand up to adverse pressure or hold firm when they are most required, that is at the moment of temptation and crisis. Presumably the very same could be said of the quality of reliability. What use is anything if it cannot be depended on? Unreliable virtue is a contradiction in terms. We might as well speak of an unbelieving faith.

Strange to say, this idea of reliability always bulked large in my mind because it figured in a phrase which my mother used in regard to me when I was young. I repeat it to you, not indeed by way of a boast for I am always nervous in regard to that truthful saying that pride comes before a fall. I quote it because it is close to my mind. Occasionally she used to call me 'Old Reliability' because I was always there, she said, when I was needed. She spoke casually and could never have imagined the extent to which her words sank in and gave my thoughts

an inclination. I valued that commendation and tried to act up to it.

We talk of the tail which wags the dog in order to express the notion of something which appears to be a mere appendage, or something minor, but which nevertheless can control the entire body of which it forms part. The image of the tail of the dog applies universally in human affairs, and we should always beware of disregarding lesser things on the grounds that they do not count.

If we judged everything by its visible size or strength we would end up being usually wrong. We could suppose the elephant to be more important than the man, or the stars to be more important than the soul. In this connection Pascal has said that all the stars and the entire material creation are less important than a single human thought. This seems pretty drastic but of course it is true.

Therefore it is essential that we not allow our attention to be monopolised by what we imagine at first sight to be the main factor. Do not neglect details, for one of them may really be the centre from which proceeds the motive power. For example, the prodigious modern oil tanker is driven by engines which represent a negligible proportion of the total ship. Remember too the old saying: 'Take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves.' And above all, the soul, which is the chief part of a man, is invisible so that it is possible to deny its existence.

It is into that general setting of the things that may seem to be minor, but which may in fact be predominating circumstances that I place my present subject of reliability.

The scheme of the Legion may be said to rest on this element of reliability in its members. If you examine the handbook you will find that reliability is presumed as a necessity. It is the connecting link between the

member and the system. The Doctrine of the Mystical Body depends on the inter-association of the head and all its parts. So much is the Legion an expression of every aspect of that doctrine that the handbook could be called a Manual of the Mystical Body. Legionary efficiency depends on faithful working in every particular; not deeming the superiority of the spiritual to justify the ignoring of the lesser items. In fact the higher and the lower may be so closely bound together as to be virtually one; the spiritual may depend on the other. The soul depends on the body.

Again and again in the handbook it is stressed that we must not pick and choose in the system; that successful membership is to be estimated from the aspect of fulfilling every duty which is laid down, irrespective of their apparent importance. This is common sense. If persons could assign their own values to items of the Legion system, and then neglect what they do not value, the next thing is that there would be no system at all. It would have reduced itself to a go-if-you-please. This fact has been made painfully evident by the should-be Church reformers of the day whose proposals would leave nothing intact and whose special inclination has been to exalt the humanistic at the expense of the spiritual, and to go on from that to despise all rules on the pretext that these fetter the individual initiative and genius. You might as well say: Take all the bones out of the human body and it will be more flexible.

Incredible though it may seem, that outlook has been dictating the course of the general apostolate. It has been esteemed a virtue to have no rules or regulations, and in fact to encourage each one to pursue his aims in the manner he thinks fit.

The latest is that from an International Conference proceeds the recommendation that the future of the Rosary should be entrusted to a guided diversity. What sort of diversity, and who is to guide it? Guided diversity sounds very like controlled chaos, and chaos has gone beyond guidance.

I sum up for you the final results of this school of thought in the words of a very eminent authority: He has just stated that the Legion of Mary is about to receive its full opportunity by reason of its total disintegration of World Catholic Action. He ascribed this collapse to the prevalent modern contempt for 'structure,' in other words for all system and rules. It is an extreme tragedy that forty six years of good intention and effort under the banner of Catholic Action should end so unprofitably because of want of method and good sense.

So from that sad contemplation and salutary lesson let us return to the question of reliability as not only the very characteristic and binding of the Legion system, but as occupying the same vital role in all human affairs. Reliability is the big word in all advertising. They are trying to persuade you that the product they are boosting is reliable. It will not let you down. You can depend your life on it. It is reliable.

So I discuss that central characteristic of reliability.

As we look around us in the Legion we realise that we can make a very rough division of our members into two camps, those who are reliable and those who are less so. One finds oneself viewing the latter with perplexity. What is the matter with them and what is the value of their membership to themselves and to the Legion? If one is tempted to think that the Legion would be better without them by reason of the bad example which

they set, the counter-reflection presents itself that they would fall asunder if deprived of the Legion. And so one swings between those poles of thought, undecided, and permitting the harm to go on.

That instability is the feature and phenomenon of the day. Engagements do not mean a pledge of any kind; people only mean to keep them if nothing more attractive offers. Punctuality has no footing at all. Is a meeting or function ever held with all present at its beginning? In the case of the legionaries this assumes a particular gravity by reason of the fact that they are late for an appointment with Our Lady and that the prayers are being despised. Then inconsistently they pray at the end of the meeting for constancy and steadfastness.

Why do so many Presidents keep a watch before them on the table when they do not let it govern the proceedings?

Admittedly – and we may take pleasure from it – the Legion performs better in those respects than the world at large. For example: one weekend when a bomb scare was on in Dublin, only thirty of a booking of one hundred and sixty in the Four Courts Hotel showed up. The following evening a similar Legion booking realised its full number. But the Legion is not usually that good. We keep each other waiting at street corners and when we turn up, the excuse trips lightly off the tongue: ‘The traffic’ – whatever that means. Did they expect the streets to be empty of traffic? Or did they make allowance for it? A miscalculation can always be pardoned but when the traffic is always pleaded one sees that it is but a pretext.

Legionaries take on the duty of corresponding with a Curia somewhere. This entails the maintenance of an exchange of letters with it, and also some other obligations. Frequent examples of neglect of this duty

show that some had assumed it light-heartedly and those Curiae are suffering. So do not make promises without reasonable determination to fulfil them.

It is related of the Duke of Wellington that a little girl of eight asked him to tell her about the Battle of Waterloo. He looked at his watch and said to her: 'I have an appointment in ten minutes and that would be too little to give you what you want. But I will come to you this day week and I will give you a full account.' He kept that promise, but it transpired that in order to do so he had to decline a very important invitation.

Surely we owe it to our character, as much as Wellington did to his, to honour our obligation. The additional ingredient enters in that if we are steering according to spiritual principles, our promises and appointments are made with the Queen of Heaven

Legionaries make much of Chapter 25 of the Gospel of St Matthew in which Our Lord enunciates a consequence of the Doctrine of the Mystical Body: What you do unto others you do unto me. According to what you so do, you shall receive eternal life. This is a double-edged sword. What if he says to one of us in that final judging: 'You were always unreliable towards me; why do you now rely on me.'

It is not usually a guilty business when people show themselves unreliable. It is rather that their ideas are in complete disorder. They have no priorities. They have no proper method of weighing one thing against another. Emotions have too much play and duty has too little. What happens when this mental mix-up tries to sort out a situation? Well, it is only an accident if the right thing happens. I give you an example.

At a Reunion of the Russian PPC one girl described the awful fear which took possession of her as they were

about to enter Russia. It was such that but for the fact that she was in a party which carried her along she would have turned and fled.

In this there are some reliable lessons. First, that the ordinary person requires discipline or the team spirit to hold him firm. A man on his own is a prey to conflicting ideas and it is not certain that the right will prevail. The emotions, like the waves and the wind, can sweep the ship off its course and perhaps onto a rocky shore.

That could have happened to the girl on the Moscow party. She had abandoned herself so much to fear that she had become irrational. Under the influence of panic her brain had ceased to act; she had allowed herself to be swept into a purely animal condition. Immediately after she had spoken, another girl stated that she had felt the onset of that fear, but that she at once said to herself: What am I afraid of? What is the worst that can happen to me? Then she recalled some briefing which the party had received before setting out in which it had been pointed out that they were not facing real danger; that the worst which could befall would be to be sent home – and that this would only follow on some serious misdemeanour. At once that unreasoning fear vanished. A logical argument had restored the mind to balance.

But the mind must be always kept on balance. It should never be allowed to fall under the influence of pure emotion.

At the same time we must not reduce reliability to a mere psychological process. It is correct to use all means to urge us along the path of duty, but the way we walk is a way of faith, and faith must govern our steps. A purely logical approach to a problem might banish emotions like fear but might replace it by a cold self-interest which could

just as much send us on a wrong course. Our weighing up of a situation must be on spiritual scales. We must apply our spiritual principles. We must refer everything to Jesus and Mary.

The effect of doing this can be remarkable. What was confused is seen clearly. What was intimidating becomes very attractive. This simplification is not a miraculous display. We have merely put things into right relation with each other. The perplexities were due to the fact that the ingredients of the situation were being given incorrect values in our mind. Nothing was in proper adjustment and the emotions were running riot. But – like throwing in the right gear in a car – we turn to Jesus and Mary and all is transformed. It is like the case of stumbling around an unfamiliar room in total darkness; it becomes like a nightmare. But our hand encounters the electric switch; then what a transformation.

The handbook draws your attention to the fact that Mary is the very symbol and embodiment of courage. The Liturgy calls her the Valiant Woman. This must not be held to apply only to the peak point of Calvary but to every episode of her life; it was her characteristic. The Lord had said to Satan: 'I will set enmities between you and the Woman, 'that is in every possible respect she was different from him. Along with her child she had been appointed from all eternity to be Satan's adversary. In every quality and in every event – or rather as a continuous sequence – she would be the opposite to him and on the opposite side.

In other words she is the authentic model of reliability. While utterly gentle and feminine, no force, no terror, could cause her to deviate from her path of destiny. There was never any flinching in her, not even at the foot of the Cross where she endured everything with Jesus except

the act of dying itself. Through all that unspeakable torment her resolution never failed, so that the Church has disapproved pictures which show her in a state of prostration.

But the same sort of dependability would mark her every act. You can discern that in her tremendous interview with the Angel Gabriel. He speaks words to her which are humanly impossible to believe and devastating in their implications. She, though unwed, is to have a child and the child is to be the Lord. What vistas of complications with St Joseph and everyone else this calls up before her! But there she is: the one on whom God could rely. Out of all mankind, past, present and to come, she is the only one who possesses the immensity of faith and the universal valour which is required for the Incarnation.

Then there is the Visitation: The Scripture tell us that she went in haste, which does not mean that she worked herself into a flurry, leaving everything in disarray behind her. No, it means that she put everything into order and set out at the first possible moment. St Elizabeth needed her. She was there.

Or the Flight into Egypt – a time of terror but not on her own account. The babe depended completely on her and so did St Joseph. It was no trembling, shivery, weeping creature that set out with him in the dead of night to traverse the cliff paths. We know that she had not to be comforted and petted. She was a source of strength. If Joseph had faltered for a moment – which we cannot think – he had but to glance at her and all was well again. She was agony within but she was calm without.

Or that worst of all the mysteries, the loss of Jesus in Jerusalem. Oh who could tell what woe she felt in those

three days of separation? To that event likewise we could apply those words: 'All ye who pass, look and see if there is any sorrow like unto my sorrow.'

We could continue with those episodes. Every one of her mysteries and dolores tell the same story. In each one of them she is manifested in the same guise of sweet strength. She will not fail. Everything is safe in her hands.

Perhaps a final picture may be taken which exhibits her in a simpler, more commonplace role, but where things are made to depend on her. I speak of the Marriage Feast of Cana. She was the one who had her eyes open, who was watchful in regard to every detail. She saw what others missed and she came to the rescue. Then, as is the way with divine transactions, the great was caused to pivot on the small. The marriage feast opened up the mission of Our Lord. The making of the wine was his first public miracle. His disciples were made to believe in him. Mary was the Mediatrix of those mighty events of salvation. Mary can always be relied upon.

When Our Lord wished to commend in an expressive way the spirit of St John the Baptist, he described him as no reed shaken by the wind (Lk 7:25). Far more would he apply the same image to his own mother. What a sorrow it would be if the category in his mind for any legionaries would be that of reeds shaken by the wind.