

ROME AND ITS LEGIONS

OF late we have been striking a note strongly in the Legion. It is the one of total mobilisation. Such a possibility has been opened up by the tendency towards a general acceptance of the Legionary ideas and by the swelling of our ranks. But one thing we must not lose sight of when we thus appeal for great numbers is the element of quality. Greater numbers must not mean for us any process of dilution, a mixing of water with wine. We must get the numbers and at the same time we must not only maintain quality but aim determinedly at driving it up. In this respect the history of the Legion has been rather interesting. It has shown that we have been able to gain numbers without losing quality. Such works as the *Peregrinatio pro Christo* afford remarkable demonstration of that fact. It would seem that if our leaders preserve that idea of constantly pushing up standards—after the manner that one would mount a flight of stairs, every step upwards and onwards—there is no height to which that quality cannot attain.

I talk to you on the subject of quality and strength in the Legion. In the Handbook there are a number of items which endeavour to justify the Legion's choice of its name. Appendix I exhibits the Roman Legion as a miracle of its own day, a model of military quality, and as might be expected in such circumstances, a prodigy of success. On that the Handbook bases the argument that our standards must not fall below the pagan standards, but ascend as much higher as our cause is higher.

An impressive reference appears on page 5 of the more recent edition of the Handbook. It is from the Epistle of St.

Clement to the Corinthians. Its force proceeds in part from the eminence of its author. St. Clement was the third Pope. He was a convert of St. Peter and a fellow-worker of St. Paul. He belonged to the purely apostolic era. The things which he spoke were obviously taught by the Apostles. He holds the Roman Legion up to the early Christians as the model for the Church—a conclusive endorsement of our use of the name. He regarded it as showing a headline to the Christians of order, discipline, unity, obedience, loyalty and courage. Then in a most interesting continuation in his next chapter he goes on to liken that closely bound human machine to the Mystical Body itself.

Another Handbook reference is to the Roman Legionaries on Calvary. You will recollect that quotation from Bolo which shows those Legionaries as fulfilling a very mixed role :

Executioners and then believers ;

Scoffers finishing as adorers ;

Persecutors destined to become propagators of the Christian faith.

They had dressed Our Lord up in regal purple. They had put a crown of thorns on His Head and a reed in His Hand as a sceptre, and they had mocked Him as a king. Therein they were expressing a truth which they did not comprehend, but which their successors would grasp and enforce later on, when Rome became Christian. They would cause Jesus Christ to be acknowledged as King.

At the foot of the Cross they gambled for the garment which they had stripped from Him. They would not tear it up. The teachers of the Church tell us that this was a pointing to the future in which Rome would keep intact the garment of doctrine which the Mystical Body wears.

They put a label over His Head also, and that label was wiser than they knew. It proclaimed Jesus of Nazareth to be King of the Jews, a truth if ever there was a truth.

They pierced the Lord's side with a spear, bringing forth the symbolic water and blood ; and after His death they presided over His burial. It was by the permission of Pilate

that Our Lord's Body was saved from the place of disgraceful burial and was given the shelter of a worthy, a princely tomb. Pilate set his seal upon the rock which closed it and the Roman soldiers kept constant guard over it. Their watching was a guarantee of the truth of the Resurrection.

The whole thing is a study in opposites. Bolo says that on Calvary the Romans were unconsciously inaugurating the everlasting destiny of Rome in the Church. But the role of Rome began much further back. Before the Romans or the Jews had ever become nations, seven hundred years before Rome was even founded, the eye of Balaam, the Prophet, had pierced the future and seen the Roman fleet setting out to invade and conquer Judea. Fifteen hundred years in advance he saw the Romans fulfilling their ordained part as told in the ancient prophecy of Genesis (49-10): that the Messiah would come when the sceptre, that is sovereignty, had departed from Judea (Numbers 24-24).

The chronology of that distant period is not precise, but it would appear that the final conquest of Judea was soon (perhaps immediately) followed by the birth of Mary, the Woman foretold in Genesis. That event was the commencement of the Redemption.

Also it was a Roman Decree which ordered the census and drew the Holy Family to Bethlehem, causing Our Lord to be born in that town. This brought about the fulfilment of the prophecy which said that Christ would be born in Bethlehem. Otherwise He would have been born in Nazareth. Again this seemingly unconnected action of Rome prepares and ordains the circumstances of Our Lord's coming and mission. And may we not see in the Roman officials who presided at the Census, the representatives of the white race, leaving the Magi to stand for the other great racial divisions, i.e. the Asiatic, Indian and Negro?

The Jews had not the legal right to put Our Lord to death. The power to inflict capital punishment had been taken from them by the Romans, so that they had to proceed through Pilate. Thus Pilate and his Legionaries were the ministers of the Passion and Death of Christ. Therefore

the connection between Rome and Christ did not begin on Calvary, but ages before, in fact in the mind of God in eternity.

After Calvary the Romans served another strange purpose. Having carried out the sentence inflicted on Christ by the Jews, the Romans next executed the condemnation pronounced by Christ on the Jews. They crucified the Jews as they had crucified Our Lord. It is understood that one million Jews were put to death by crucifixion when Jerusalem was taken and destroyed by Titus in the year 70. "Not a stone shall be left upon a stone" was the word of Our Lord and the Romans brought it to pass. In the universal ruin, the Temple was torn down and the now meaningless sacrifice was finally abolished.

Then three hundred years of war followed between Christ and Caesar in which Christ was persecuted in the Christians. That stage was terminated by the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in the year 313. Having become a Christian, he set himself to turn the Empire into Christianity, and as the liturgy says, Rome that had been mistress of error became the teacher of the truth. Roman armies became the maintainer of Christian order ; Roman law became the foundation of Christian law ; and all the Roman institutions became propagators and channels of Christianity.

In its Christian phase, the Empire was called the Holy Roman Empire. The uprise of Protestantism deprived it of reality, but it survived as a legal fiction till 1920, when the Treaty of Versailles struck it finally off the Statute Books. That was about the time when the Legion of Mary was born. At the least this forms an intriguing coincidence. "God fulfils Himself in many ways," as Tennyson says.

The coming of the Legion means that once again the Church of Rome had an army to protect it and spread it. This force and its arms are not of the world ; its warfare is spiritual. The success of that new army is before all eyes to see. It is portentous. It suggests itself to the mind as something which cannot be refused that the old Roman Legion symbolised and modelled our own, and was so regarded in

the designs of Providence. If so, what an unutterable joy it would be to think that Our Blessed Lord looked down from the Cross on the Roman Legionaries and through them contemplated their successors in title. Let us hope that He thought about them with some degree of comfort. But note it would only be in a vast numerical development, such as the Legion forms and which we are now considering, that it would be possible to reach out to every soul in the whole world. And this is precisely what Our Lord commanded on Mount Olivet.

And now I draw a further lesson. Does it not follow that if the Roman Legion was the foreshadowing of the Legion of Mary, then the qualities of the Roman Legionaries were meant to be a pattern for us? If their indomitable courage and discipline played such a part in spreading the Church over Europe, surely no less quality would be required by Our Lord from us; all the more so as we have in our boldness assumed the name of His Mother?

So I take up that question of courage and strength. The Legion is insistent on that strength in every form. The Legion without courage would be a ridiculous opposite to what it is meant to be. So courage must be shown in every department of its activity. It will be chiefly moral courage, but not that alone. China in a big way showed that torture and death were included in our charter. Since then, those dreaded things have become common in the Legion. It is plain that our warfare is meant to have no limits and that the Legion is not for weaklings. All the time announcement comes of violent death in the line of Legion duty.

That courage must be found in everything that the Legion touches. It must be found in its prayer and devotion where it must be manifested in ways that cost people something. Otherwise devotion would be a spineless thing. Our courage must be plainly shown by performance in difficulties, under ridicule, in illness, in exhaustion, against temptations of every kind. Especially it will be revealed in the holding on to Christian principle in all circumstances. All around us, however little we may realise it, are opportunities for absolute

heroism in that department. How many will stand up for principles against mockery and catch-cries? See the way men are browbeaten into improper courses by the clever villainy of a few, using such epithets as "yellow," "traitor," and the like. These shout loudly and cow the decent majority, which unfortunately has not that quality of strength to stand up even against a handful. If they did fight, they would easily prevail. Scripture itself assures us that the violent bear away the Kingdom of Heaven. Even on earth one has to be strongly assertive on behalf of good. The bold ones win the day always, but usually the field is left to the wrong elements.

The Legionary attitude must be that of rising superior to the baser forces; of excelling in whatever we take up; of being courageously helpful; of showing true Christian qualities, even at the gravest cost to ourselves. In our ranks we see that quality being copiously produced. Take the recent case of Donal Brady, who had brought his whole family into the Legion. He was a victim in that military air crash at Shannon a while ago. There were five young officers in the plane. In the crash Donal and the pilot were thrown out clear of the plane. The pilot was stunned and unable to arise. We do not know how much hurt Donal was, but his only thought was of the three who were still in the plane, now a blazing inferno. He climbed back into the plane in an effort to rescue his companions. He and they perished. His epitaph was composed long ago by his Master: "Greater love than this no man hath that he lay down his life for another." But such is the superb quality which should be forthcoming from every Legionary. Baptism has implanted it but it must be patiently cultivated and elicited. We slowly learn the Christian principles and are taught to put them into practice. After a while they establish themselves as our motives. At that stage we will not be found wanting if a high summons comes.

It should be our ambition, as the poet puts it, "to guide the whirlwind and ride the storm." To do this will require strength, a strength which does not concentrate on conse-

quences. For our very existence it is necessary for us to be positive. If we aim at less, we will be negative. This means that we will lose our nerve in emergencies, being a danger and not an inspiration to others.

It is our tendency to let our imagination darken a prospect so that we draw back from it. What is merely inconvenient is seen as difficult, and the difficult of course as impossible. All have their own special weak spots. Some are more intimidated by a fear of scenes or ridicule than by a grave danger which can surround itself with a sort of glamour. Therefore it is necessary to subject ourselves to a system, such as the Legion, which will measure up situations from the point of holy necessity, and which will shrink neither from the real peril nor from what is merely distasteful. Perhaps the latter is the more formidable because it is more common.

Once upon a time a quaint piece of advice was given to Legionaries at a Congress. It was that to achieve their objectives they should go out and get themselves laughed at—which of course presupposes that our objects and our methods are not absurd ones. There is philosophy there. It requires strength to stand up to that vicious jeering which is so lavishly distributed when someone sets out to do the right but unpopular thing. But holy strength nourishes itself upon itself and eventually cannot be resisted.

You know the phrase of the Curé d'Arns which is quoted for you so often: "The world belongs to him who loves it most and who proves that love." We could, I think, say with equal truth that the completely determined person can move the world, and unfortunately this principle helps the wicked as much as it helps the good. Take an episode which has affected every page of the world's history since it took place. In 1917 the Germans conceived an idea in their war with Russia. With a view to creating disorder and smashing the war effort, they let loose in Russia a number of captured Communists, among them Lenin. This manoeuvre succeeded perfectly. It tuned in with the seething discontent of Russia which had been aggravated by military failure.

Lenin's vehement organisation carried all before it. Every

dissatisfied element in the country joined him and the Russian Revolution took place on lines similar to that of the French Revolution ; indeed it was the French Revolution in delayed action. It took the same course. It executed the members of the Royal Family and it set itself to crush out religion. Eventually Russia, which had always been regarded as one of the most instinctively religious countries, was not only deprived of its faith but turned into an instrument for destroying faith. It was Russia that transformed Karl Marx's dream into an awakening, into that reality which menaces the world to-day. It was Lenin, working through a comparatively small group of men, who made Russia communistic.

Such is the power of the few when moved by a sufficient motive, whether good or bad. Part of that immensity of influence is derived from the fact that God helps the good, and the devil helps the bad, but there is also a psychological process at work which should not be overlooked. It is akin to the scientific fact that an inert mass is responsive to any force which is applied to it. Take, for instance, a great liner ready to set out on its ocean voyage. Usually it does not start on its own engines, but is pulled out to open water by a tug. The latter is a tiny, ridiculous object beside a gigantic liner, but it sets itself to pull and there is a great scurry and a foam of water. For a while there seems to be no result, but then the great ship begins to yield, and soon it is slipping along at the pace dictated by the little craft. There is your picture of an immense inert body made a prey of by a little force. Every general population everywhere is a potential victim for some dominating influence. Of what kind is that influence going to be ?

Take a slightly different case which would approximate more closely to the ordinary situation. Suppose there are two tugs pulling the liner in opposite directions. This would mean that for a long time there would be no motion. The two contrary forces would seem to cancel each other out. But we know that at some time this inertia will end. It is certain that one of the tugs will be ever so slightly stronger than the other, and it will take possession. So it is in the

affairs of the world. The two tugs are the forces of good and evil which struggle for the mastery over whole populations, and the battle will go to the stronger.

But of what nature is that strength? It does not lie in numbers alone, because John Sobieski in the Battle of Vienna with 25,000 men destroyed the power of Mohammedanism for ever on land, and Lenin with a handful of helpers turned the world upside down. Nor does it lie in personal virtue alone, as the fate of the martyrs shows. Nor in the justice of a cause, because our cause suffered glorious defeat in China. The fact is that strength is a combination of numbers and personal qualities and good system. If any one of these be omitted, the combination is destroyed and both nature and grace are impeded. We cannot afford this if we are fighting a powerful enemy.

This brings us back again to that assembly of virtues which characterised the Roman Legion and enabled it to overcome the world. We must try to make those qualities assertive in our Legion. We can do this almost as a matter of routine by fitting in perfectly to all the simple requirements of our system, which Pope John XXIII has been kind enough to describe as a most excellent system.

But let there be no picking and choosing in that system. It will not do to honour Mary and at the same time be negligent in items of duty. Nor will it do to work heroically without understanding the roots of our service. Nor to have the faith that moves mountains without being dependable. Nor to feel overwhelmed with love of God but unprepared to give Him to others. These are gaps in the Christian armour which are only too common and which bring defeat. But granted that full balance of things which we believe to exist in the Legion system, I think that we will be found possessed of that quality of strength which cannot be pent up. For remember that God will enter in if He finds something which is responsive to Him, and will perhaps enable our Legion to repeat in the spiritual order no less conquest than that effected by the Roman Legion in the physical order.

To stimulate ourselves towards that superhuman pro-

gramme let us revert to the thought that when Our Blessed Lord looked down from His Cross on the Roman Legionaries, He must inevitably have seen, through them, their successors in title—yourselves—the Legion of His most blessed Mother Mary.