



THE LEGION OF MARY



AN OVERVIEW OF THE LEGION OF MARY



What is the Legion of Mary?

The Legion of Mary is a body of Catholic men and women, formed into local parish units called “Praesidia”, under the leadership and guidance of the local priest, working towards self-sanctification and the salvation of other souls.



The Birth of the Legion

The Legion of Mary was born in Dublin, Ireland, on the Vigil of the Nativity of Our Lady, on September 7, 1921. It evolved from a meeting of lay persons, instigated by Frank Duff, who intended to discuss and familiarize themselves with St. Louis de Montfort’s True Devotion to Mary. The first Legion meeting was attended by 17 persons, Fr. Toher, Frank Duff and fifteen women.



Based upon the Roman Legion of Ancient Rome

Within a very short time, Latin terminology, from Ancient Rome, was adapted for the Legion’s organizational purposes, e.g., Praesidium, Senatus, Regia, Comitium, Allocutio, Tessera, etc. The Legion Handbook explains, somewhat, the reason behind its association with the Roman Legion:—

“The Roman Legion, from which the Legion takes its name, has come down through the centuries illustrious for loyalty, courage, discipline, endurance and success—and this for ends that were often base and never more than worldly. Manifestly, Mary’s Legion cannot offer to her the name ‘Legion’ accompanied by qualities less notable, so that in these qualities is indicated the very minimum of Legionary service. St. Clement, who was converted by St. Peter, and was a fellow-worker of St. Paul, proposes the Roman Army as a model to be imitated by the Church” (Legion Handbook, chap. iv)

“The Roman Legion was probably the most magnificent fighting unit the world has ever seen. The secret of invincibleness lay in the marvelous spirit of its members ... Hence all moved forward as one man, because directed by a common purpose, each bound to the leader and to one another ... Their devotedness made them irresistible in the face of the enemy, their undaunted courage and dogged perseverance wearing him out and compelling him either to surrender or flee ... The spirit of the Legion may be summed up as one inspired by submission to authority, an unflagging sense of duty, perseverance in the face of obstacles, endurance in hardship, and loyalty to the cause in the tiniest details of duty. Such was the pagan ideal of reliable service. The Legionary of Mary must also have this virility” (Legion Handbook; Appendix 1, The Roman Legion).



The Structure and Government of the Legion

ACTIVE MEMBERS and AUXILIARY MEMBERS. Briefly, Active Members work for the priest in a variety of fields, whereas the Auxiliary Members are the praying branch of the Legion, drawing down the required graces, necessary for the success of the work, by their daily prayers. The Auxiliary Member is obliged, though **not** under pain of sin, to say the prayers contained in the Tessera (prayer leaflet). An extra daily Rosary is not necessary, but it should at least be encouraged. The role of the Active Member will be explained below. Both Active and Auxiliary Members undergo a three-month trial period, whereby they see if they will be able to fulfill the obligations of membership.

THE PRAESIDIUM—is the smallest cell in the Legion structure and must be named after one of Our Lady's titles. It is the local branch of the Legion, under the direct leadership and guidance of the parish priest. The minimum number of members required, for a Praesidium to operate, is four. They would thus fill the roles of the four Praesidium Officers: viz., President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer. In the 1940's and 1950's, the Praesidia in England averaged a number of 20 members. Once established, the Praesidium works a Master-Apprentice system of training members in Legion work, whereby a new member is assigned to work together with an experienced Legionary, at times passing from one experienced member to another, thereby becoming a highly proficient member over the course of a few years. It is Legion policy to work in pairs, though exceptions can occur. Work performed in pairs benefits from the added encouragement and courage supplied by a partner in the field. Each member is normally expected to perform at least a couple of hours actual work per week and is also required to attend a weekly meeting of the Praesidium, wherein he gives a report upon the work done. Meetings must not last more than 90 minutes. The order of the meeting will be explained later.

THE CURIA—is a governing body in any town, city or district, where there are two or more Praesidia. It is composed of the spiritual director and all four officers of each Praesidium found in the area. Normally, the Curia controls the work of several parishes. It is the heart and mind of the Praesidia attached to it. It sees that each Praesidium is visited once or twice a year. If possible the Curia meets once a month.

THE COMITIUM—is one Curia among several, which has the role of supervising the work of the others. It usually operated within the boundaries of a diocese. It meets monthly.

THE REGIA—was created to administer a territory too large for a Comitium, and not large enough for a Senatus. However, it follows the same pattern of operation as employed by the Senatus.

THE SENATUS—exercises authority over a region. One of lesser councils (mentioned above) can be invested with the title Senatus, while still operating as a lesser council. It meets monthly.

THE CONCILIO LEGIONIS—is the central council of the Legion. It consists of representatives of subordinate councils and the members of the Dublin City Curia. It meets monthly.



The Original Work of the Legion

The initial work undertaken by the first Praesidium of the Legion was the visitation of the wards of the Union Hospital in Dublin. The women were allocated specific wards, including the cancer ward, with the aim of performing whatever corporal or spiritual works of mercy were required. The Legion, at that time, had taken the name of the Association of Our Lady of Mercy.

Within a few months the work had further expanded outside the walls of the hospital, in seeking out converts and fallen away Catholics, not to mention the well documented assault upon the red-light district of Dublin, which they succeeded in closing down, finding decent employment for many of the street girls in the process. They would also work among soldiers and seamen, the down-and-outs, alcoholics and other cases of human misery, bringing them to the sacraments and a new way of life. Though the Legion did not give material or monetary relief (leaving and recommending such cases to the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul), it did, however, give relief by a practical charity, by personally helping those they were assigned to in a variety of ways: doing chores, helping them with some work, or even finding lodgings & employment.



The Expansion of the Legion of Mary.

The Legion of Mary was clearly a child of Divine Providence. This can be seen in the following summary of its growth.

- 1921—First Legion meeting is held, called the Association of Our Lady of Mercy.
- 1922—First Sancta Maria opens, first conversion of street girls in large numbers.
- 1923—Name changed to Legion of Mary.
- 1925—June 7: Death of Matt Talbot while walking to Mass.
- 1927—First Morning Star Hostel opens. Edel Quinn enters Legion.
 - Branches open in Cork, Waterford & Belfast
- 1928—April: Legion spreads overseas to Scotland.
- 1929—May: First Praesidium in England is established.
- 1930—First Regina Coeli house for women opens.
- 1931—Frank Duff meets Pope Pius XI in Rome. Holy Father blesses the Legion.
- 1931 to 1933—Rapid expansion of the Legion throughout the world.
- 1931—November: First Praesidium opens in the USA, Our Lady of Mercy Praesidium, Raton, New Mexico.
 - Later U.S. branches open in Los Angeles & St. Louis
- 1932—Legion starts in Canada.
- 1936—Legion established in China.
- 1937—Edel Quinn is assigned as Legion envoy to East Africa.
- 1941—Founding of the Mercier Society in Dublin.
- 1953—Seamus Grace and Alfie Lamb are appointed Legion envoys to South America.
- 1965—*Peregrinatio pro Christo* movement is established.
- 1969—First Peregrinatio pro Christo team goes to Russia.
- 1980—On November 7th, Frank Duff dies at his home in Dublin.

The Legion grew slowly, but surely in Dublin city. Within months a second Praesidium was formed, then a third, and soon the Legion of Mary had opened and staffed the Sancta Maria Hostel for destitute women and the Morning Star Hostel for destitute men. Later another hostel for the destitute opened, called the Regina Coeli House. The news of the new organization spread and in 1927 it opened a branch in Waterford, Cork and Belfast. The successive years saw it spread its roots farther afield. In 1928 Duff went to Scotland and then to England, in the hope of winning ecclesiastical approval for the Legion there. Scotland's first Praesidium was opened in April, 1928. England followed soon after with Cardinal Bourne allowing to be erected in his diocese in 1929. In 1931 he went to Rome and was granted a private audience with Pope Pius XI. The Pope, after hearing of the work performed by the Legion, expressed a desire that the Legion of Mary be propagated throughout the whole world.

That same year, 1931, saw the Legion of Mary come to the U.S.A., to Raton in New Mexico, due to the invitation of Fr. Donovan who had witnessed Legion work during a visit to Dublin of 1931. Next the Legion opened in Los Angeles and St. Louis. Legion envoys were sent the U.S.A. in order to propagate the Legion still further. They trekked from coast to coast and even up into Canada, explaining the Legion's work, securing ecclesiastical permission, organizing praesidia, training officers, and then later returning and reviewing the work. In 1934, Bishop Charles Helmsing, spiritual director of the first Senatus in the U.S.A. said: "I cannot recommend the Legion too highly to our priests, religious and laity. I beg no one to despise it, because of its simplicity and humility, please try it!" The growth of the Legion in the U.S.A. was phenomenal and it was destined to bring forth its greatest fruit.

One priest, Fr. Edward Kotter, started a Praesidium in his parish of St. Louis, in Cincinnati, in 1938 and, during his fourteen years there, received 500 people into the Church, not to mention the return of many more fallen away Catholics. A Legion Comitium at the New York Senatus, reported that in one year, its legionaries had brought 257 lapsed Catholics back to the Church. One single Praesidium of Blacks in Pennsylvania was responsible for 23 people being received into the Church in one year. Hundreds of similar reports were received from all over the U.S.A.

In London, as in Dublin, a Curia specialized in the training of envoys, who would be sent all over the world. Soon the Legion was sending envoys to different continents: Asia and Australia (1931-33), Africa (1937) and later South America (1953). It was in Communist China that the Legion performed many heroic works, producing many martyrs for the Faith. It was second only to priests as the object of hatred and persecution. Many preserved the Faith under Communist persecution, due to the bolstering work of the Legion.



The Spirit of the Legion of Mary

The Legion of Mary is built upon St. Louis de Montfort's *True Devotion to Mary*. It was this book that prompted the meetings that led to the founding of the Legion of Mary in 1921 and it is the same spirit that has been woven throughout the Legion fabric ever since. One finds a generous sprinkling of St. Louis de Montfort's writings throughout the Legion Handbook. Hence, in this current "Age of Mary" in which we find ourselves, an age in which God has made known, through the Blessed Mother, that He wishes the whole world to be devoted to her Immaculate Heart, the Legion presents itself as an ideal instrument for the spreading of that devotion to Mary. Each member is encouraged to make St. Louis de Montfort's True Devotion Consecration and the Legion, as a whole, tries to spread that devotion far and wide. The use and distribution of all the Marian sacramentals, as well as the propagation of the Holy Rosary, also plays an important role in both the spirit and the carrying-out of Legion work.



The Variety of Work Undertaken by the Legion

The Legion Handbook recommends a variety of works, some of which are:

1. The visitation of hospitals and nursing homes.
2. Visiting sick and housebound parishioners.
3. Work for the most wretched and dejected of the population (alcoholics, drug-addicts, etc.).
4. Visitation of the homes of the people, both parishioners and strangers.
5. Raising the spiritual level of the parish (organizing devotions, retreats)
6. The making of and upkeep of a parish census.
7. The dissemination of Catholic Literature.
8. A street corner bookstall with Catholic literature (also at Craft Fairs, etc.).
9. Works for the Young — including both religious and secular activities.
10. Study in order to better live and explain the Faith to others.
11. Teaching Catechism to both children and adults. Weak Catholics and converts.
12. Seeking-out and working with fallen away Catholics.
13. Seeking-out and working with potential converts.
14. Promoting religious practices and encouraging attendance thereat.
15. Recruiting Auxiliary members for the Legion of Mary and providing an 'after-care service.'
16. Recruiting members for other parish organizations and societies.
17. Recruiting families for the Home Visitation of the Pilgrim Virgin Statue of Our Lady of Fatima.
18. Recruiting families for the Sacred Heart Home Enthronement.

However, each parish has its own special needs and the Legion can be employed in limitless areas of work.



The Weekly Legion Meeting

The meeting is an essential part of the Legion system. Without it, the whole system would flounder due to human weakness, laziness and lack of supervision. The meeting requires discipline and helps promote the actual performance of the weekly work obligation. The meeting place should have a table around which all the members can sit. On the table, covered with a white tablecloth, is a statue of Our Lady of Grace (Immaculate Conception), flanked by two vases of flowers, with two candles in candlesticks being placed some distance in front of the vases. The Legion standard, a Vexillum, is placed diagonally in front of the statue. The order of the meeting, which must not last more than 90 minutes, is as follows:

1. The Opening Prayers and Five Decades of The Rosary (see the Tessera)
2. Spiritual Reading (by Spiritual Director) - in opening months, it should be from the Legion Handbook.
This should not last more than five minutes.
3. The Minutes of the previous meeting are read.
4. Standing Instruction is read - which requires from Legionaries punctual and regular attendance; daily recitation of the Catena; weekly performance of substantial Legion work; preservation of absolute secrecy with regard to matters discussed at the meeting or learnt in connection with Legion work.
5. Treasurer's statement
6. Reports of the members are received and discussed.
7. The Catena is recited (Magnificat, Antiphons & Collect).
8. The Allocutio is given (commentary upon excerpts from the Handbook) - around five minutes.
9. Secret Bag Collection
10. Final Prayers and Priest's blessing. This ends the meeting.



How to start a Legion Praesidium

1. Familiarize yourself with the Handbook. Not all of it has to be necessarily read at the outset.
Chapters 1,2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 17, 18, 19, 22, 27, 28, 32, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40 are the chapters that should be focused upon in the early stages.
2. Give a talk upon the Legion of Mary and distribute flyers upon the Legion (available from the District Headquarters in Kansas City)
3. Recruit Auxiliary Members (some of them could later become Active Members)
4. Approach your most zealous parishioners and invite them to join the Legion's Active ranks and give them a handbook to study for a couple of months before calling the first meeting.
5. Call the first meeting and take them through the mechanics of the meeting (chapter 35); the variety of work possible (chapter 37) and the spirit and manner in which that work should be done (chapter 38 & chapter 39).
6. Do not attempt any actual work in the beginning, but go over the theory of how to approach and perform that Work.
7. Communal/Group work is recommended in the early stages, e.g., everyone visits a nursing home, etc.
This kind of work builds the confidence of Legionaries, since they are all together in one group.
8. Those who feel that they are able to undertake work in pairs, should not be discouraged.
9. Gradually introduce members to working in pairs. Vary the cases to suit the talents and dispositions of members.
10. Insist that members study the Handbook weekly. Some members should be asked at random to give a report upon the passages they were obliged to study.
11. Read famous accounts work done by Legionaries, e.g., the book *Miracles on Tap*, or the lives of Frank Duff, Edel Quinn or Alfie Lamb.

