

As The Morning Rising...

The Story of the Legion of Mary

By the Rev Patrick O'Connor.
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“Who is she that comes forth as the Morning Rising,
Fair as the Moon, Bright as the Sun,
Terrible as an army set in Battle Array...
(From daily prayer of the Legion)
{See Song of Songs 6:9.}

FORMULA:

Take the fighting spirit of a football team.

Then take the sense of nearness to unearthly power, as you feel it amid the busy tranquility of Lourdes.

Add the painstaking exactness of keen hunters or alert businessmen.

Flavor it with the simple sweetness of the family Rosary.

And the result will be — something like what you find when you get inside the Legion of Mary.

Twenty-two years ago, the Legion began its march. The starting point was the top back room; of a house in a poor section of Dublin. There, on September 7th, 1921, eve of the Feast of Our Lady's Nativity, seventeen people gathered. They included one priest, one layman and fifteen women, most of them young, of various occupations. The house was the headquarters of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society in that neighborhood. The members of this group had already been active in doing good among the poor. Now, at the suggestion of a layman, Frank Duff, a civil servant during office hours, and indefatigable Saint Vincent de Paul member in his free time, they were forming themselves into a little association to do spiritual works of mercy. Their immediate program was to visit the sick poor in the wards of a large hospital. Their ideal was to be lay apostles as the servants, as the very instruments of the Blessed Virgin. They took the name of the Association of Our Lady of Mercy. Three years later, they modified it to the shorter, more militant title:

The Legion of Mary.

They had all read Saint Louis Grignon de Montfort's Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin and had been captivated by it. From it they, and the thousands who were to join them later, took their distinctive spirit.

Realizing that God had chosen to give Himself to mankind through Mary, they believed that He wished to bestow His gifts through her.

Realizing that Jesus came into the world as the fruit of Mary, they believed that He will live and grow in every soul as the fruit of Mary.

Realizing that she is truly His Mother, they realized also that she must be the Mother of His Mystical Body, the Church, and of all its members.

Seeing in Mary the first and most intimate co-operator in the divine work of Redemption, its greatest beneficiary, they knew that it was still given to her, before all other creatures, to crush the serpent's head.

So they went forth into the hospital wards, into the tenements, into the city streets, into the wide world — not just to work for souls with Mary's help, but to help to do Mary's work for souls.

That is the secret of the Legion, of its amazing advance, of its incredible conquests. It is the powerful mediation of Mary taking effect upon souls. Her Divine Son will never have her to be anything but Our Lady of Victories. Her Legionaries know that now, from experience, as twenty-two years ago they knew it from inner conviction.

Across The World:

Just how far has the Legion of Mary gone in its twenty-two years on the march?

In 1927, with thirteen units in Dublin, it made its first foundation outside Dublin, in Waterford, Ireland. Now watch its progress:

1928 to Scotland.

1929 to England.

1931 to the United States and India. [India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.]

1932 to Canada and Australia.

1933 to New Zealand, Africa, West Indies.

1937 to China and Burma.

1938 to Costa Rica, Panama.

1939 to Malta.

1940 to France.

1941 to the Philippines.

1942 to Egypt and Syria and the Holy Land.

1943 to Holland.

Just what kind of work does the Legion do? Every kind that helps to bring people nearer to God. That means any people, good, bad and middling; it means fallen-aways and falling-aways; non-Catholics, agnostics, pagans, prisoners, invalids, children, tramps, gypsies and the fellow who works at the desk or machine next to yours.

Never Give Up:

The Legion specializes in tackling hopeless cases and it never gives up. In one city, the Legionaries used to visit a tenement house where a certain door never opened to their knock. But for years they

kept coming-and knocking! Always before leaving, they pushed a Catholic booklet under the door. Some of the neighbors said that the dweller in the locked room was not a Catholic; others said that he was a Catholic who had been away from the Sacraments for at least thirty years. The Legionaries carried optimism and perseverance so far as to push under his door a card announcing a one-day retreat for workingmen. When the retreat opened, a man was present whom nobody could remember having previously seen or interviewed, he made a good retreat and — yes, he was the man from behind the locked door!

In practice, the Legion work may be making friendly calls to discover newly-arrived Catholics and welcome them to the parish, to unearth fallen-aways or to break the ice that may later thaw into a conversion. It may be selling Catholic literature from a push-cart in the city streets. The Legion sold 6,500 Catholic booklets in a year in the streets of Glasgow. A Legion booth in the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto in 1939 brought eleven people to sign up for instruction and thirty-nine to leave their names for further contact.

Cooking and scrubbing in a shelter for the down-and-out, collecting articles for the missions, conducting a study-club, tactfully helping to have an invalid marriage rectified, rounding up neglected children to prepare for Confession and First Holy Communion; all of these and a thousand more are Legion work; only one activity is barred: giving material relief.

In everything, the Legion is subject to ecclesiastical authority and does its work only as an auxiliary to the priests.

It is not competing with any sodality or devotion. It wins members for sodalities and brings people to devotions. It is the realization of that magnificent ideal, so glorious that some people are too timid to aim at it, so entrancing that some only talk about it: Every Catholics an apostle. Indeed, the former Apostolic Delegate to Missionary Africa, Archbishop Riberi, has said of the Legion of Mary: "It is the nearest approach to the ideal of Catholic Action as fostered by the Holy Father."

Who Are They?

Who are the members of the Legion? Frank Duff, the founder answers: "Not special souls or unusual types, but ordinary Catholics living the everyday life of the world. Its membership comprises the learned and the unlearned, laborers and leisured, the unemployed, widely different classes, colors, races, including not a few whom the world would category as primitive or depressed. In a word, it represents typical Catholicism."

It includes boys and girls in junior units. I know of one where they enroll others for catechism, take care of little children while parents are at Sunday Mass, distribute mission literature and print the parish bulletin.

Many of the Legionaries are women but it is emphatically a movement of men likewise. Two Legion groups that I can never forget are of men. One is composed of Dublin laborers, meeting in a hall long associated with a militant labor movement. After their day's work on the docks or in the yards, they come from their tenement homes — lean-jawed, hard-bitten realists — to plan their battles for Mary and to pray around her statue.

The other group is in Saint Columban's missions, China, where Father Hogan started the Legion in 1937. Plain poor men of Hanyang city, laborers, peddlers, fishermen, they say in Chinese the same prayers that the Legion says everywhere and wage among their fellow Chinese the apostolic

campaigns that the Legion wages around the world. [Their fate under communist oppression is a chronicle of heroism.]

The prayers of the Legion of Mary have been printed in some forty languages and dialects. The active membership now includes the following:

Americans (White and Colored); Africans, Australians, Burmese, Chinese, East Indians, Europeans, Filipinos, Indians of North America, soldiers of the United States army, soldiers of the Irish army, soldiers of the British army, soldiers of the Polish forces now in Scotland [as a result of the Nazi occupation of their homeland].

In the Irish army, the members (including officers and men) lead the daily recitation of the Rosary, distribute Catholic literature, visit the sick in army hospitals, and help to organize army sodalities and the annual spiritual retreats for the army men.

One of the units in Malta is composed of soldiers. It was founded by an Irish soldier-Legionary.

Says Father Brown:

G. K. Chesterton's "Father Brown" (Monsignor John J. O'Connor) has praised the Legion, as a working system, for "Combining mobility with stability." It owes something to two masterpieces of organization — the ancient Roman Legion and the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul. From the imperial army of the Caesars it takes the name of its unit, *praesidium*, and some of its other terms. Like the legion of old, it calls for loyalty, courage, discipline and order. From the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, it takes its simplicity and adaptability.

The fraternal spirit, the visiting in pairs, the weekly meeting, the report on work done, the secret-bag collections (the only revenue, apart from special donations) all these are in the tradition of the world-wide Saint Vincent de Paul Society founded by [Blessed] Frederick Ozanam more than a century ago.

On the night of the first meeting in 1921, one of the pioneers came early and decorated the table around which the little group was to gather. The decorations consisted of a statue of Our Lady, as she appears on the Miraculous Medal, set on a white cloth; with two vases of flowers and two candlesticks with lighted candles. The first act of the meeting was to recite the prayer to the Holy Spirit and the rosary around this simple and expressive altar.

Today, the Legion of Mary is everywhere faithful to the happy inspiration that accompanied its beginning. Week after week, as American, European, African, Australian and Asiatic Legionaries gather, it is always around a similar altar and always with the same prayers.

The order of the meeting is everywhere the same, too. The Rosary is followed by a five-minute reading from a spiritual book. The minutes of the previous meeting are read, and then the members give reports on the work done during the week.

Half-way through the business of the meeting a halt is called. All stand and then, like a flourish of trumpets, like sunlight on banners, comes the antiphon, recited in unison:

"Who is she that comes forth as the morning rising, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army set in battle array?"

This is followed by the Magnificat ('My soul glorifies the Lord,') and the prayer for the feast of Our Lady, Mediatrix of all Graces.

The Spiritual Director then gives a short exhortation. When that is finished, a little bag begins a half-hidden journey.

Hand passes it to hand, under the edge of the table, and a muffled clink sounds as each one drops in the offering that is known only to God and himself. (Sometimes, indeed, it is known only to God) This thoroughly secret collection takes care of the modest expenses of the praesidium and of the higher bodies, the local curia, the regional or national senatus, and the general concilium. Before the meeting ends with the closing prayer, work is assigned for the coming week. And the work reported on as well as the work assigned is always work for souls, apostolic work, and nothing but that.

In all his activities, the first objective is the sanctification of the Legionary himself. The Legion of Mary has no illusions about the prime duty of every Catholic or the prime requisite for every apostle. The Legion handbook is a little encyclopedia of practical spirituality and a guide for apostolic harvesters.

In the U. S. A.

In 1931, Father Joseph P. Donovan, C.M., introduced the Legion of Mary to the United States in an article published in the Ecclesiastical Review. The first American Praesidium was formed in Raton, New Mexico. Later on, envoys were re-quested to come to organize the Legion in the American dioceses. Two of these envoys, Mary Duffy and John Murray, are still [1943] in the United States and are quietly doing an astonishing amount of solid work. The Legion of Mary is now established in about eighty-five dioceses and in approximately 1,000 parishes of the United States.

It is estimated that the Legion is increasing throughout the world at the rate of seven new Praesidia a week. It publishes a quarterly, *Maria Legionis*. The Central Governing body is the Concilium in Dublin.

Legion of Mary history is full of marvels. Take for instance, the beginnings in France.

Of all years possible, it was in 1940 that the Legion of Mary began in France! An Irish girl, Louise O'Brien, teaching in Angers, went to Paris about three weeks before its surrender. There she succeeded in launching a Praesidium among the Polish refugees. One of its fruits is the Praesidium of Polish airmen now in Scotland [fighting the Nazi menace].

Paris fell and then France. Miss O'Brien, a refugee from the capital, went to Nevers, where Saint Bernadette was once a Sister and where the bishop today is the Most Reverend Monsignor Patrice Flynn! The Sisters of Bernadette's community gave Miss O'Brien shelter and encouragement. In that very month of the fall of France, she set about launching the Legion of Mary, relying on the aid of Saint Bernadette. Before the end of the year, the diocese of Nevers had six Praesidia. Today it has seventy and the Legion has radiated out from Nevers to Dijon and back to Paris to the famous Notre Dame church.

The Legion In The Missions:

Most impressive is the story of the Legion of Mary in mission lands. It is a practical proof that baptism and confirmation equip every Catholic for the lay apostolate. Africa was the first mission-field in which the Legion of Mary took root. To Monsignor Moynagh of Saint Patrick's Missionary Society belongs the merit of boldly implanting it. He formed the first Praesidium in 1933 in Nigeria — of native men. Many of the members were unable to read but all could pray and work. And they did. Four conversions, thirty fallen-aways brought back and eleven marriages rectified, were some

of the gains reported in a short time by these new Legionaries battling in the midst of strongly entrenched paganism. Today, West, Central, East and South Africa are dotted with Legion praesidia. Monsignor Moynagh's goal for his territory of Calabar, in south-east Nigeria, is: every practical Catholic an active or an auxiliary member of the Legion. Already, Calabar has sixty praesidia. In Nairobi, Kenya, East Africa, one Praesidium brought in 1,000 catechumens (candidates for baptism) in one year.

In India, the Legion is deeply rooted. In Ceylon, the men Legionaries far outnumber the women. In Burma, the Legion was established in Rangoon, Taungoo, Mandalay and Maymo, as early as 1937. Father Way of Saint Columban's missions was planning to start it in Bhamo in the Kachin area of Burma. [Because of the Japanese invasion, this initiative had to wait until the end of the Second World War.] Father Hogan and Father Pigott of Saint Columban's introduced it into China back in 1937.

From the beginning, the Penitent Thief has been a favorite of Our Lord and His Mother — in a convict settlement on the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal, where all the prisoners are murderers doing life sentences, a Legion of Mary Praesidium has been founded and is doing remarkable spiritual good.

One of the most interesting missionary activities of the Legion of Mary is its Overseas Club for Asiatic and African students attending the universities and colleges in Dublin. Here Hindus, Moslems, Buddhists, Parsees and various kinds of Protestants have a chance, in attractive surroundings, to become acquainted with Catholic life and thought. Discussions take place regularly. At one of these, a Mohammedan student was heard supporting Sovietism. A listener felt that here, at least, was a very unlikely convert. The student has since become a Catholic.

The Legion of Mary has two kinds of membership, Active and Auxiliary. The Active Legionary attends the weekly meeting of the Praesidium, spends a couple of hours (more if he wishes) each week in work for souls, and every day recites the group of prayers called the Catena Legionis. The Catena (Latin word for chain) comprises the Magnificat, (My soul glorifies the Lord,) with the antiphon and prayer as said during the meeting. It is the distinctive prayer that binds all Legionaries of Mary together throughout the world.

If the duties of an active member are not within your range, those of an auxiliary are. The auxiliary marches with the Legion, keeping step by prayer. For a lay auxiliary, this means saying every day the prayers said at the regular Legion meetings. Since priests and religious already have special obligations to spiritual exercises, they are asked only to say the Catena daily and to give the Legion a share in the spiritual treasures at their disposal. Thus, they rank as Adjutorians.

On the evening of September 7th, 1921, if the first seventeen Legionaries looked out the window of that top back room on Francis Street, they would have seen only the Autumn twilight falling over the roofs and steeples of old Dublin. But if they had the gift of prophetic vision, they would have seen far vistas of many cities and many lands. And they would have seen not the shadows of twilight but a great splendor, as of the morning rising.
