

CROWDS

First published in Maria Legionis, Vol.3, No.9, March, April, May, 1943, pp.6, 7, 23, under the pen name F. S. Mitchell. Also published under the title THE APPROACH TO THE MASSES in 'Souls at Stake', Joseph F. Wagner, Inc., New York City, 1948, by Francis Ripley and F. S. Mitchell, pp.80-89, edited to exclude specific reference to the Legion of Mary for the benefit of readers outside the Legion; and under the title CROWDS in 'The Spirit of the Legion of Mary/Walking with Mary', John S. Burns & Sons, Glasgow, 1956, pp.62-70; and in 'Victory Through Mary', Praedicanda Publications, Dublin, 1981, pp.52-60.

The Gospel to Every Soul

Apostleship is a special note of the Church, inseparable from Catholicism - inseparable not merely in the life of the Church as a body, but in the life of each individual member of the Church. You cannot be a true Catholic without being an apostle. Legionaries, accordingly, far from occupying any exalted position in the flock, do no more than carry out their ordinary Christian duty.

Apostleship, moreover, views bringing the full riches of the Church to men; therefore, logically, to everyone among them - to *every* person. That means that we have to seek out the person in the top-back room and try to bring to him or her all the spirituality that you would find in an advanced book on the subject. But you object that this is fantastic - a rushing to extremes. Admittedly it is, in the sense that a great deal of such spirituality will not be understood by or accepted by the people to whom you would bear it. But how can we decide how much and by whom? At least it must be tendered. Each person has a right to be *offered* the fullness of the Christian heritage.

If we are going to essay a task like that, it is plain that there is a lot of work waiting for somebody! Indeed it is a superhuman task. We are talking in terms of the impossible. But reflect that with God no word shall be impossible. If we but set about the task in the reasonably right way and with a reasonably right degree of effort and fidelity, then something beyond natural expectation must happen; because it is the work of the Lord and no mere work of our own that we do. The fact, moreover, that a work is beyond our power forms no excuse for not attempting it. If we only attempt what we can complete, where exactly does God come in?

Personal Contact Vital

The quasi-impossibility of the above programme of spiritualising everybody is due to the fact that you cannot spiritualise men in bulk. The basis of this work must be the individual and persevering touch of one warm soul on another soul, what we call by the technical name of "contact." Each person is a separate and distinct problem; yet we are obsessed by the contrary idea. All the time we think on mass-production lines, and look on it as a fine thing to get people into crowds so that we can deluge them with oratory or printed matter. It is not realised that in the measure that the personal contact weakens, so does real influence. According as men become a crowd, they escape from us. Here is a beautiful expression of that truth, said by G. K Chesterton in writing of St. Francis of Assisi: "He saw the image of God multiplied but never monotonous. To St. Francis, a man was always a man, an individual - he did not disappear in a crowd any more than in a desert." But there lies the trouble today. We allow people to disappear into the crowd. We allow the crowd to keep us from the person. That is my theme. I want to talk about crowds. What sort of crowds? Any sort of crowd at all. In the street, or gathered together in any place. It matters not if they be passing by, watching, or waiting. I just want you to think of people gathered together in crowds. The uninterested eye flickers over these crowds - unreflectedly; but in the mind of St. Francis of Assisi, or of any other apostle, these crowds are no mere mass of faces and bodies; they are made up of individuals, each one representing a priceless soul.

Crowds - Assemblies of Souls

Here, as in many other ways, the children of light are less expert than the world. The politician

sees no mere mob. He sees individual voters, each one of whom he has to cultivate. He studies the characteristics of each person, for the sake of exploiting him. What about the three-card-man on the racecourse? We know well that he sees no mob either. He searches the faces of each person that passes, trying to pick out the suckers. For him the crowd has disappeared and individuals are there instead.

Similarly, to the interested Catholic eye - to the legionary - no crowd should be only a crowd. It is an assembly of souls - each one of them (no matter what brings them together, no matter what type they are) needing mothering. Every single one is a problem, not alone in time, but stretching into eternity. Most of them, as you watch them, are just drifting along, doing nothing in particular, while plenty of them are more or less destructive. Yet each is a world in himself, greater by far than the material universe in which we live. Each one is a supreme masterpiece, because God has brought forth the soul directly by an effort of His creative power. Hence, we can be positively certain that no soul is ever just like any other soul. Reflect that the tiny corrugations on the tips of your fingers are unlike those of any other living person. Now if such is the conduct of God in relation to a thing like a fingertip (which is a thing of little consequence and which God did not produce directly but through the ministry of one's parents), what is to be imagined of the human soul?

So, what a tragedy it would be if we were to forget that a mob of one thousand people is in reality one thousand souls, each one with immeasurable possibilities for good and evil, for itself and for all others. Each one is a seed of power without limit, with the capacity to build and the capacity to ruin, and unfortunately more inclined to fulfil the latter role than the former.

Crowds Dodging the Church

There they are in a crowd, vitally, peremptorily, in need of this mothering of which I speak. But where, oh, where is the apostle who will try to make the personal contact with them which would germinate those seeds and stimulate them to an infinite flowering?

Just think of them - any crowd; think of its lack of spiritual development. Most of the individuals in that crowd have no more than a child's knowledge of religion - and that much half-forgotten. For at the age of fourteen, remember, the vast majority of them severed their connection with the process of education. Whatever amount of religious knowledge had been painfully drilled into them by that age represented for only too many of them a high-water mark; and the tide has been going out ever since. What are most of them doing so far as religion is concerned? Probably Mass on Sunday and monthly Communion. In what way is that Mass heard? The great majority assist without the slightest advertence to what it is. To them it is merely a ceremony. Sometimes, no Mass even. They may say brief morning and evening prayers. They never hear a sermon; and the fact that a sermon was added to a Mass would mean that they would make a point of hearing Mass elsewhere. Then, after that exhausting spiritual exercise on a Sunday, the world reigns supreme in their lives for the rest of the week. They never read a spiritual book. You could say in truth that they were trying to dodge the Church for the greater part of their lives.

From Crowds to Individuals

Of course there is a counterpoise, and that is their homes. Each member of that crowd has his or her private life. There, various good influences touch them; amongst these your visitation. But how many members of that family are always missing when the home is visited? They seem to be always out getting the exercise and amusement which they have earned. They are not there when the priest goes, and they are not there when you go. For a great number of those who form the crowds that we have been considering, their homes are merely dormitories; just places where they sleep. The rest of the time they are - in crowds.

While they are in these crowds we cannot get at them, and yet eternal things depend on our establishing contact with them. Every day the cord of life of some amongst them is severed. Out of this world they pass into eternity. We trust it is to a happy eternity; but certainly it possesses little of the fullness which it should have, because the great majority of them are not going into eternity as saints. That much is certain, and the tragedy of it is (as someone has said) that to the mind of God,

the saint - and not the ordinary person - represents normality. In other words, anybody who is not a saint is subnormal. Father Faber says that a saint is worth a million ordinary people. By that arithmetic, many a big crowd is worth only a thousandth part of what God would regard as a normal person. That vast army of souls are realising but a fraction of their possibilities. Each one a potential world - yet only playing the part of a clod of earth!

The heart of St. Francis of Assisi, or of any other apostle, could not look with equanimity on that spectacle of great numbers dodging their divine destiny. And - more than any apostle! - how must Our Blessed Lady look on those crowds! She is the Mother of each individual soul comprised in them. She must be in anguish at their necessities, and her heart must yearn for someone to help her in her work of mothering them. Be sure of this much - that if anyone volunteers to help her in a whole-hearted way, she will fill his efforts with her power. Let us offer ourselves in that whole-hearted way. Let us study these crowds...Let us try to evolve a technique which will turn those crowds into individuals and thus enable us to establish contact with their souls.

This very evening if you walk along the central streets, you will see a long queue stretching out from every picture house; every picture house will be packed to the doors. Think of the football crowds, the boxing crowds, the race-going crowds, the crowds at the dogs, the fancy-fair crowds, the dancing crowds, and the non-Catholic crowds. What about all of these? What about the public-house crowds; and the sort of crowd that seems to be doing nothing at all except lounging about, loitering along, just putting in the few hours between that moment and the time that they have to go to bed?

Devising Ways and Means

These are great problems. But somewhere among you there is the answer to them all; if only you will think; and then have the self-confidence to propound the thoughts which will rise up in your minds. Among you are many who have already shaped the course of the Legion of Mary, because one day they shyly came forward with some new suggestion. Encouragement, facilities and manpower were given to them - just as the seed is supplemented by the soil. Then that timid idea took root and flourished and bore fruit sixty-fold and one hundred fold. Such has been the genesis of nearly all of our great works.

Example, they say, speaks louder than exhortation, so I give you an example: Once a legionary presented himself at his headquarters and said that he was busy constructing a book-barrow. With permission, he intended to place this barrow on the public streets. In due course the article was completed, rolled out, and stationed on the pitch at Cathedral Street, where ever since it has been a conspicuous landmark. That was a notable contribution to the problem of the Crowd! Thousands upon thousands of people have been drawn to that barrow and to its fellows, like the moth to the light; and we hope that those human moths have been duly singed. Many spiritual words have been spoken to them, and many religious books have been politely forced upon them; and if they thought upon the former and read even a small portion of the latter, vast good was thereby done. In addition, those that did not stop must have been stirred to think.

You know the story of the simpleton who spent a long time gazing at a wheel-barrow, and then exclaimed; "It's wonderful the works of a wheel-barrow!" With greater accuracy and with reverence I apply the same words to that Cathedral Street barrow, which ushered in a new legionary work, widened legionary technique, and disintegrated an impervious crowd into its vulnerable human atoms.

Then let us take the Protestant crowds. Once upon a time, not so very long ago, those crowds were just crowds. They were the Protestants going to church or coming from church, or in some way or other assembled together in such a way as caused one to say: "A Protestant crowd." They were nothing more. We never gave them further thought. Then one day a little Legion group gathered together and decided they were going to make an attempt to get in touch with them. Question: "How?" Answer: "We know not - we have not an idea as to what we are going to do, but we have got to do something. Let us form a praesidium and let us take a step or two in the dark, trusting to Our Lady to lead us along the unknown, unseen road." That was a very foolish proceeding, you will agree, to start off and rush blindly along into inevitable trouble. But, as events have demonstrated, it was only

another example of that true wisdom which acts on the belief that if we give all we can towards a work for souls, then God will play His part and bring that humanly impossible enterprise to a divine success.

Upon a time, too, the Medical Mission¹ crowd was just a crowd to eye and wonder at. A sordid, horrid crowd of traitorous Catholics pressing into one of those wretched institutions where they compromise their Faith for the proverbial mess of pottage - only in this case it is medicine. One day a few legionaries determined that something must be done about it. They were convinced that their efforts would be fruitless - that no one would pay attention to them. "But," said they, "we will at least stand there and to every person going in we will protest against his action." You know the result? Numbers reduced to a fraction of what they used to be and then the closing down of the institution! Reflect what that has meant in the saving of souls. Yet once it was **ONLY A CROWD**, viewed like the other crowds, that is as a body without a soul; for a crowd has no soul. No one had got down to its real problem, which was the souls of those who composed it.

Seek and You Shall Find

You must not let a crowd conceal that problem from you. Neither let it intimidate you by its seeming toughness, nor by its size - even though it be very great while you are few, or even one lone visionary. The difficulties may be such as definitely to place the task outside your compass. But so much the better. "Hopeless" is a hallmark if looked at from the proper angle. Through our slight - but none the less necessary - co-operation, God will show His inexhaustible ingenuity and power. So that if we knock, the door of inspiration shall be opened to us, and then if we seek a way, we shall find it. Of this I am certain, just as I am certain that God wills that the infinite riches of His heart be brought to all people everywhere. He will walk with you and fill your hands heavily with those treasures of His, if only you will prove your willingness to distribute them.

But if, on the other hand, you start off by passing a vote of No Confidence in yourself, you shall not seek; you shall not knock, and the door will remain closed.

¹ Part of the proselytising system where Catholics were tempted to deny their Faith in order to receive free medicine. The Legion has from its inception picketed these institutions with remarkable success. – Editor, 'Victory through Mary'.