

Modernising the Legion

A lot of people have got it into their heads that the Legion of Mary must be updated, as they put it. So let me say something about the modernisation of the Legion. Numbers are found expounding that theory. But that is not quite the same thing, we have found, as saying that they are interested in the Legion. Because from an examination of their suggestions I have to declare my conviction that the vast majority of them do not proceed from what could be called a first class interest in the Legion. Some of them are disgraceful, anarchical.

When suggestions for reform are made, it is imperative to look back to the early ideas of the Legion and to see how new ones fit in. So, I return to the first meeting. Viewed from now, it forms an interesting inspection. There was a sureness of touch and a confidence as to the future. Those people were planning for distant days. As one example: It was not at the moment possible to take in men and that for a very practical reason. We were meeting in Vincent de Paul premises by the kindness of that society. If we proceeded to take men into the new society, it would

have been a definite act of rivalry, unthinkable in the circumstances. But men were included in that gaze into the future and it was insisted at that first meeting that the Legion was equally for men and for women.

In the second place, the remarkable feature stands out that there was no temporising spirit in that group of doers and planners.

That in itself is amazing to think over, for surely if they were anxious to gain numbers, as they were, they will tone down what they demand to what they are likely to get? No, they were concerned only with that they themselves were willing to give. Others who would enter would have to conform to that.

At this point let us suppose the *modern* attitude to what was proposed at that first meeting. There would be protest: 'You are asking for too much! The Rosary is unthinkable. No active society uses it at meetings! It would take precious time from the consideration of the work! Besides a weekly meeting and a weekly work are just too much! Thereby you condemn yourself to a select and small membership. Furthermore, this extravagant notion of the Blessed Virgin upon which you are founding your work will debar you from numbers and most probably from Ecclesiastical approval!'

And there would seem to be sense in such objections. The circumstances of that time must not be judged from the standpoint of the present when the Legion system is so accepted.

The facts were then as follows: Apostleship was regarded as a counsel of perfection; it is only now that the council insists that it is a *Christian obligation*. At that time there were only about 50 ladies in Dublin who were carrying on apostolic action in the ranks of the Ladies' Association of

Charity. It was universally held that apostleship did not appeal to the fair sex. Furthermore, the True Devotion of St Louis Marie de Montfort was practically unknown. Unquestionably people would not be prepared to accept it as a standard.

If that original scheme, inspired by the True Devotion, had been issued in the form of a prospectus it would have met with a storm of disagreement.

So it would then have been reasonable to object to those requirements as excessive. Yet there was not a word of protest from the band. And the same attitude characterised what followed – the growing of the Legion. For it did grow, contrary to those gloomy forecasts that we have been imaging. Far from doubting as to the accuracy of its course, the Legion grew more confident as it went along. It had not been thinking too big after all, for it saw numbers coming in. Its horizons expanded; it began to use its slogans, now so familiar to you; to talk audaciously of going to every man, a programme which would entail a simply colossal membership. So the parallel slogan was produced at an early date when Monsignor Deery declared that the potential membership of the Legion was equal to the Catholic population. A very daring idea at the time! Even now many outside the Legion would still regard that as empty dreaming. But it is a dream which is in process of coming true.

Now just a word of comment on that extensive proposition. How can we hope to get all Catholics into membership considering that only about ten per cent of the world's Catholic population is practising? But they *should* be practising, and they *should* be apostolic and we *must make* them so. At this our friend, the practical man, protests indignantly: 'Come down to earth. Have

commonsense.' But strange to say, the idea is practical. For example, in the 1930s the Philippines were non-practising. Now there are 6,000 praesidia there with more than 75,000 active members. Brazil and other imperilled countries are staging the same happy anomaly. So after all those fantastic legionary ideas seem to have something in them. The Legion is able to transform non-practising and non-Catholics into active members.

Moreover, in the earliest documentary presentation of itself, the Legion insisted on quality as the key to eventual numerical strength, just as it likewise insisted that its alleged extravagant devotion to Mary was only a norm, below which one should not and indeed could not, safely descent. The council promulgation on Mary would appear to constitute support for this point of view.

Likewise the Legion was so convinced that there was not too much prayer in its system that it soon added the auxiliary degree and then the praetorians and adjutorians, anticipating the council's legislation on the Liturgy.

I have mentioned certain additions to the Legion system. This brings up the question as to whether the Legion is receptive of proposals for improvement. Empathically it is. The Legion eagerly welcomes proper suggestions and considers them most anxiously, for in each one may lie something helpful and perhaps the germ of a great new work. From its beginning the Legion was not only growing in numbers, but was also fertile in ideas. It has been unceasingly prolific of new works. This process is a continuing one. Let us hope it will always characterise the Legion.

I give you just a few names to show you the importance of that aspect: The adjutorians, the Patricians, the Peregrinatio Pro Christo, the Viatores and True Devotion

to the Nation. Actually the Legion is like an ever budding tree, producing all the time, without – as far as can be seen – any final borders in that respect.

But that incredible fruitfulness proceeds from its scheme and depends upon it. So be careful about the *essence* of the Legion. Especially let us be solicitous about Our Blessed Lady who might be described as the *quintessence* of the Legion. 'Quintessence' is a chemist's term for the essence of the essence.

So I go back to her. That first group was clear in its mind about her. It saw her as de Montfort did, and it has seen her that way ever since. It is intriguing that the Legion should start immediately after what I might call a 'Patrician discussion' on the subject of the True Devotion, as if the minds of the future members had to be fully acclimatised to Mary before they were fit for membership; before they could *become* the Legion of Mary. Any suggestion that its Marian scheme should be toned down would have seemed preposterous to those early legionaries and their successors.

Indeed the idea would be the opposite. Having glimpsed her glory and tasted the fruits of her leadership, they wanted more not less. In actual fact no suggestion to minimise Mary was ever made in the Legion until quite recently and then as part of the turbulence which we have been considering. Perhaps it is a consequence of, or a penalty for, that incorrect trend that quite a rash of other reforming propositions has broken out. These touch everything in the Legion and they contradict the whole course of legionary tradition. They all involve diminutions. They are proposed in the alleged interest of making the Legion more acceptable to those outside, and therefore increasing its membership and also of making the Legion easier on its existing members.

There is an element of stupefying contradiction about this phenomenon of unsettlement at a time when all the original ideas of the Legion have been so completely justified, not merely by successful practice but by the council legislation. It has been proved that strength of membership could be built on those principles; that the simplest people could understand them; that Mary is no barrier but the necessary mother and that a degree of conquest unprecedented and un contemplated could be achieved.

Can we assign a cause for this unexpected and inconsistent germination of theories which are so opposed to the current of legionary life? Probably it was linked with the council itself and the preparation for it. We see that there has been a disturbance of minds in the Church and that a lot of festering thought has suddenly burst forth. While making all allowances for the desirability of enterprising thinking, I think it will have to be agreed that many persons have gone too far. Everything in the Church has been attacked and in a definitely nasty way. The Eucharist and Our Lady have been the chief subjects of this perversion, but the papacy has followed close behind. One is distressingly reminded of the tone which characterised the instigators of the Protestant Reformation. Some have even feared that we were facing a second such manifestation; that many were making ready to leave the Church. From that consummation we seem, thanks to the inspired action of the present tenant of the papacy, to have been saved. But the price of retaining in the Church elements that are somewhat out of sympathy will be that we will suffer torment from them. This forms a dolorous consideration for the after council time.

Now we in the Legion have to see that the Legion is not destroyed and that it is not too much tormented. A part of that process of safeguarding lies in keeping before us our beginnings, tradition and principles. A phrase from the Council Decree on Adaptation and Renewal of the Religious Life is particularly applicable to this position. I quote it for you: 'It redounds to the good of the Church that institutes have their own particular characteristics and work. Therefore let their founders' spirit and special aims be kept before them and their sound traditions be faithfully held in honour.' Among these founders whose mentality is to be so carefully preserved I specify – as a remote one – St Louis Marie de Montfort. For secondary reasons, persons commonly put his treatise on the True Devotion away from them. I mean that they are not attracted by the Consecration or Slavery which he proposes and so they think they have nothing to learn from him or his book. That is an error which is costly to them. Thereby they miss the treasure which the book offers. Here is what Cardinal Tedeschini says on the subject: 'He has given us a Mariology such as no one before him has conceived. So deeply has he explored the roots of Marian devotion, so widely has he extended its horizons and he has become without question the announcer of all the modern manifestations on Mary – from Lourdes to Fatima, from the Definition of the Immaculate Conception to the Legion of Mary.' On the foundation of that Mariology of his, he has built his special devotion, but the two things, foundation and building are different. It is legitimate to refuse the special devotion, but it is disastrous to reject along with it his splendid Mariology.

The adhering to our traditional guiding lines has already brought us far, and a greater career and adventure is

opened up to us as a result of the council. I would say that the Legion is one of the big thoughts which the council fathers carried home with them to their territories. In part this is due to the endorsement given by the legislation to the Legion type of organisation; in part because the Legion seems to stand out as the obvious instrument for implementing all that council legislation, which insists so imperatively on the need for the co-operation of the People of God.

I have given you a sort of snapshot of that earlier idealism of the Legion. We must steer our future course according to it. In the recent edition of the handbook, which contains new items of a proper updating character, you will find some quotations from the council legislation. These will show you how up-to-date the Legion has been. For instance, the first attempt at a Constitution of the Church sets forth a description of Our Lady's providential role which sounds like a paraphrase of the handbook's depicting of that same thing. Much the same would apply to the other legionary features. Take any of them, then consult the legislation and you will find that it is there endorsed in some form or another. The council seems to confirm the Legion and its up-to-datedness. An analysis of the various decrees does not reveal anything which would seem to call for a readjustment of the Legion system. So it looks a little as if what is being demanded is not for improvement but for change's sake. Bear this in mind when you hear those confident utterances about revising and modernising. Those who talk in this vein may be only reformers in the improper sense of that word. If so, it is essential that they seek their ideals outside the Legion, where they will be unfettered.