

THE LEGION OF MARY RESPONDS TO MARY'S CALL

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From time to time we hear about the Legion of Mary. The Legion of Mary has a strong presence in our country and worldwide. What is the Legion of Mary? How does it respond to Mary's call for assistance in the Church's mission? And what is the source of their phenomenal effectiveness and growth into the Church's largest lay apostolic organization?

Origin

The Legion of Mary was born on the first vespers of the Nativity of Mary, September 7, 1921, in Dublin, Ireland.

At the invitation of Frank Duff (1889-1980) several people had arranged to meet in a building named Myra House. The group was comprised of a priest, Father Michael Toher; an employee at the ministry of finances; some fifteen women, almost all office workers or store employees; and Frank Duff. They wished to devote themselves to an active spiritual apostolate, similar to that of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. They met around a table on which had been placed a statue of the most Blessed Virgin.

After the recitation of the *Veni Sancte Spiritus* and the rosary, Duff spoke of the discovery he had just made of the *Treatise on True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin* by St. Louis Grignion de Montfort (1673-1716). His first reading of it had repelled him. The language of holy slavery was strange. But the doctrine of the universal mediation of Mary had struck him and he was convinced that that doctrine is the source of life. He was determined to draw out of the Marian mediation its apostolic consequences. With contagious ardor he explained to the members assembled there that a sincere devotion toward Mary must be active: it obliges us to work for Mary, to help her save the souls for whom she had suffered so much. A century after St. Louis de Montfort, Blessed William Joseph Chaminade (1761-1850) would present this doctrine in the more appealing language of filial commitment to Mary. In the 20th century Mary's apostolic mission and our participation in it would be popularized Marianist Father Emile Neubert S.M., with whom Frank Duff has extensive correspondence.

It was decided that they would go, two by two, to visit the United Hospital of Dublin to give spiritual encouragement to the patients and that, on

the following week, they would return to the Myra House to give a report on the results and to receive new tasks. Gradually the group grew and organized itself. It took the name of Legion of Mary because it was efficiently organized like a Roman legion. In this way, it avoided giving the group an Irish or local identity, since it meant to extend itself to all the countries of the world.

A lay apostolic organization under Church guidance, the Legion's twofold purpose is the spiritual development of its members and advancing the reign of Christ in cooperation with Our Lady.

Spirituality

The *Handbook* (titled *Legio Mariae*) states that “the spirit of the Legion is the spirit of Mary herself.” Three qualities of Mary, above all, should capture the attention of the Legionary: 1) her role of mediatrix of all graces; 2) her Immaculate Conception; 3) her spiritual maternity in our regard.

The *Handbook* affirms:

The devotion of the Legion is the foundation of its apostolate. One of the duties the Legion has especially at heart is to manifest this ardent devotion toward the Mother of God. (*Handbook*, p. 22) ... True devotion to Mary achieves its full development only in union with her. Union necessarily signifies community of life. Now, Mary's life does not consist chiefly in receiving admiration, but in communicating grace (*Handbook*, p. 32) ... Our Lady could declare: “I am the Apostleship,” just as truly as she said: “I am the Immaculate Conception.” (*Handbook*, p. 32)

It is to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the apostolate, to whom the Legionaries make their promises. But the Holy Spirit never acts without Mary and always acts for Mary.

Expansion

Growth came slowly for the Legion. Five years after its foundation, it was still confined to the limits of the Archdiocese of Dublin. But, then, declared Cardinal Leon Suenens in a report about the Legion in 1950, “behold, a tempest blast arose: in 1927, the Legion began to move into all the dioceses of Ireland; in 1928, it crossed the seas and took root in Scotland.” Then, in 1929, England opened its gates to it. In 1931, it entered America; in 1932, Australia; in 1933, Africa; in 1937, Asia, through China; in 1940, the Philippines; in 1948, Japan.

There are now millions of active and auxiliary members of the Legion. It is, in fact, difficult to give exact figures, for what is valid today may be too small tomorrow. At the end of 1953, the *tessera* was being prayed in some seventy languages. A report from Dublin at the end of February 1956, noted:

The Legion is working in more than 900 dioceses, with an increase of about two per week. On the average, a new *praesidium* is formed every day in the Belgian Congo, in the Philippines, in Central America. Last year, 150 *praesidia* were founded in 150 days. Other places also show numbers just as elevated.

The only part of the world where the Legion did not exist in the mid and latter 20th century is the "Russian part," that is, Russia itself and the adjacent countries behind the iron curtain. Of course, it is possible that the Legion existed in secret in those countries, but there was no information verifiable at that time.

All the Vatican apostolic nuncios and delegates then and now are in favor of having the Legion in the countries where they serve.

Today the Legion of Mary is found in about 170 countries, and numbers more than three million members and many more auxiliary members. It is believed to be the largest lay apostolate organization in the Church.

The Servant of God Frank Duff, whose cause for canonization was introduced in 1996, guided the worldwide extension of the Legion until his death in 1980. At the invitation of Pope Paul VI, he served as a lay observer at the Second Vatican Council.

Apostolic vigor

The Legion's apostolate is universal. It is obedient to Mary's word to the servants at Cana: "Do whatever he tells you." *He*, that is, Christ, through the voice of his representatives. Visits to the elderly, to the sick, to lepers, to the poor, to the imprisoned; catechetical work; taking parish census; recruitment to the sodalities and other apostolic works; moral rescue of children and adults, of prostitutes; preparation for First Communion; re-validation of marriages; care of immigrants; retreats for military personnel, for Protestants; apostolate to assist itinerants; classes for North Africans; conversions of non-Catholics: Protestants

(in great number), schismatics (work has begun), Muslims (with success on some points), Buddhists (numerous conversions), communists (many have become dedicated apostles of Christ).

In the name of Mary, the Legion has accomplished marvels from its beginning, and continues to do so every day. This can easily be seen by reading the *Bulletins* and other Legion periodicals. The Chinese communists have learned, to their chagrin, and have taught the entire world the temper of the apostolic courage with which Mary is able to arm her Legionaries.

Presently the Legion of Mary is the most spectacular proof of the apostolic mission of the Immaculate Virgin and of the effectiveness of an apostolate carried out in her name.

What is the secret of this great fruitfulness of the Legion of Mary? It is the result of both natural and supernatural causes. The natural causes are suppleness in its works and immutability in its method and system. The supernatural causes are its spirituality of prayer and sacrifice, and its total dependence on Mary.

Totally with, for, and by Mary

But it is, above all else, a very special confidence in Mary that confers on the Legion's activity effectiveness that often borders on the miraculous. This was already mentioned with reference to the Legion's devotion to the Immaculate Conception. But we must say more about it, for it is the most important facet. The *Handbook* comes back to it repeatedly:

Under the inspiration of this love and this faith in Mary, her Legion undertakes no matter what kind of work, without ever saying that it is impossible, for it believes that everything is possible and acceptable to it. (*Handbook*, p. 13)

The Legion bears, with inexpressible pride, the name of Mary. A Marian organization, it is based on the unlimited confidence of a child toward this good Mother, a confidence which it believes she will fortify by implanting it deeply into the heart of each one. In this way, it has members who work together with the greatest possible harmony of loyalty and discipline.... Mary, then, will be willing to use her institution to accomplish in souls her work of Mother and to continue her unending

task: to crush victoriously the head of the infernal serpent. Would we be wrong to trust in her? (*Handbook*, p. 24)

These Legionaries find the nourishment of their trust in the daily prayers, in the weekly meeting, in the report on their confreres' successes, in the items of the *Bulletin* and other Legion periodicals. They try, they succeed, their trust is strengthened.

If the contemporaries of Jesus had enough faith to obtain miracles -- and they were not saints! -- it was because they saw through all the miracles that it sufficed to ask with faith in order to obtain. The sight of the apostolic marvels produced in the name of Mary by the Legionaries' confreres throughout the world convinces them that she will do for them as she does for others, provided they act in her name. One fights with confidence when seeing that one is a soldier in an army that is always victorious because an invincible leader directs it.

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Additional information about the Legion of Mary
may be found on these web sites:

www.legion-of-mary.ie

www.legionofmary.org