

# THE PRIEST MUST HAVE MEMBERS

by Frank Duff

The Church has seen the striking things that have followed the use of the Legion of Mary. I have no wish to be assertive about it, but it would be sheer unreality not to recognize that it is a force let loose in the world, one which must be exploited to the maximum. At the same time I explain that when I speak of the Legion, I do not exclude anything analogous to it—though it is not so easy to see anything analogous.

## **The Legion of Mary — Extension of the Priest**

The Legion of Mary is the priest's organization *par excellence*. It pivots upon the priest. It declares that it is an extension of him. This fact has not been completely appreciated in the past. There was originally a tendency to look on the Legion as a trespasser on the priestly field. On the Continent of Europe, a contrary and truer view was taken of the position. There it was the fashion to talk slightly about the Legion as being only clericalism, that is unduly under the power of the priest. It was alleged that this note disqualified it from being regarded as authentic Catholic Action which should exhibit greater independence. The result in both quarters was that the Legion has not been sufficiently helped.

On various other grounds out over the world the Legion has also been opposed. The general notion was that it was incapable of being regarded as Catholic Action because it did not specialize, that is, specialize in the social gospel, specialize in class organization, and so forth. That misconception militated against the Legion in many of the countries, like Italy, France and Spain up to, you may say, yesterday. But that phase of history may be said to have finished in October, 1957, when the late Pope made his rather sensational announcement at the Lay Apostolate Congress in Rome. He said that Bishops were not free to exclude a worthy apostolic society on the grounds that it was not Catholic Action. Though he did not specify the Legion, still everybody present knew that he had the Legion in mind, and immediately after the Congress, Signor Veronese gave an interview to the Press, in which he declared that those words referred to the Legion of Mary. And now comes the appointment of a distinguished Vatican personage, Monsignor Baffle (since been appointed Apostolic Nuncio to Germany and consecrated Archbishop) to be spiritual director of the Legion in Italy. This is a major circumstance, because, of all countries, Italy has been the most opposed to the Legion. This appointment, made by the Episcopal Commission of Catholic Action in Italy, seems likely to open every door in Italy.

## **Every Priest Needs the Legion**

Altogether those events are significant as a pointer. Soon the scales will fall from all eyes and the importance of the Legion will be clearly seen. It is about that importance that I talk to you, who are the people on whom the Legion depends. I want to show that the Legion is much more than a mere Organization from your point of view. I intend to go so far as to say

that the Legion or something analogous is necessary to every priest in the sense that, without it he is incomplete. Something needful to him is missing. And that missing element is so peremptory that, without, it his priestly role and character must suffer detriment. He will not achieve what he is supposed to be, nor what he can do. He will go through life realizing a mere fraction of his powers, where he should be measuring the horizons. He will not have an outlet for his powers. Certainly he will accomplish a good work, inasmuch as he will save his soul in a highly respectable manner, but he will not achieve his priestly mission; he will not influence the world. And what we are going to talk about, is nothing less than your duty and your ability to shake and move and mold the whole world.

Actually the Legion is ideal as a priestly mechanism. It possesses the same outlook, the same methods, and—a very important thing—it has in it the element of correct and due subordination. Lay people realize their position in the Legion and conform to it completely and eagerly. I have not got to labor that point, because you who work in the Legion know it. It is a feature not invariably found in the lay societies. It would be hard to find a better means for the priest to express himself and to multiply himself. This notion, of broadcasting himself, is vital to the priestly function, not only because it is part of its essence, but as well by reason of the fewness of the priests in relation to the needs. It is also necessary psychologically, for an effective and smooth contact with people demands a mediating class, or what we might call an interpreting class, one sharing the point of view of both sides. It must have the priest's outlook and yet belong to the people. It explains one to the other and forms the uniting link.

### **When the Priest Is Isolated**

Moreover, in certain circumstances, in fact in very many places to-day, the priest is isolated. It is a very easy thing to elbow the priest out and to keep him out, and that is the first step in all these schemes of de-Catholicizing places—to get the priest away from the people. There are whole populations where a priest can only enter by deputy. Take, for instance, the Iron Curtain countries, and they are by no means the only places, where a priest is a marked man. He is incessantly spied upon; every step he takes is watched. People are afraid to be seen talking to him. In China, as the initial stage in the State Church plan, the priests were herded off from the people. The Government then thought that they had the people where they wanted them, and certainly they had but for the intervention of the Legion which had so opportunely been developed. And the Legion saved the day. It may be objected that those cases of Communist preserves are extreme, having no application to other more normal parts of the world. True! they are extreme at the moment, but only in point of degree. That danger to religion is latent everywhere. Its symptom will always be that pushing aside of the priest. A consecrated class must guard itself against becoming a separated class. In many places the clergy have virtually become a separated class.

I turn to South America where the problem might seem to be one of insufficient priests. The very best countries there enjoy a proportion of one priest for 4,000 people, and the worst case

is that of Guatemala, where there is one priest for 25,000 people. This means that Cork city would be entitled to four priests, one of whom would be the Bishop; another would likewise be in an administrative post, and in the end there might be one priest available for pastoral purposes. This problem of South America has been much debated, and efforts of a feverish character are being made to provide priests for it. Will additional priests solve the situation in South America? It will not. Not by itself. As evidence of that, see Italy which has a sufficient supply of priests, 56,000 of them; but there is no proper approach being made to the people. Therefore, to multiply priests in South America or in any similar field, and to do no more, is not to solve the problem—perhaps not even to touch it. Truly it would mean that more places could have Mass. There are innumerable places in South America where there is not a weekly Mass, nor a monthly Mass either. If adequately supplied with priests, those places could have frequent Masses, but that does not bring the people to Mass. If there is no system whereby the priests, in person or by deputy, go to the people and argue with them in the traditional Christian manner, then little is solved by multiplying the priests. But except through the Legion, there is no possibility of making an individual approach to the millions in South America.

### **Think in Terms of Conversion**

But really the problem is not one of particular places. It is a question of something general and radical. I think that as the very first condition for solving it, we must confront it boldly. As I see things, the fundamental problem is that, in more modern days, the vital note of conversion has not been assertive in the Church. We have not been thinking in terms of conversion. To justify this statement, I specify a number of departments: Mahommedans, the Jews, Protestants, the Orthodox, the Buddhists, the Hindus. Perhaps you might query the inclusion of the Hindus and the Buddhists. So I give the figures. In the two countries of China and India the pagan population in the past hundred years has increased by over three hundred million people, bringing the number to one thousand millions, of which we have about seven millions. We have not even partially kept pace with the increase, let alone dug into the nucleus.

We cannot claim that things are any better in the domestic field all over the world. Have a look at prostitution, the down and out classes, the whole problem of lapsing and the great lapsed Catholic populations, and that all-pervading problem of religious ignorance. These problems are definitely not being tackled. As a whole we have settled down to defensive tactics, so that the prevalent view among the peoples of the world to-day is that the Church is helpless, without a solution to any problem. This in turn has caused a collapse of morale among the ordinary Catholic people, producing that lapsing and progressive destruction.

### **Failure under Test**

It might be argued that the foregoing does not apply to Ireland. Certainly, this country gave a better impression until some time ago, but now we are more than a little worried. In one significant respect our failures are more distressing than those abroad. Our failures arose out of a practicing Catholicism, out of a sufficiency of priests, out of a total control over

education, and a very great influence over legislation. Yet we have seen the crumbling of our people where they have been put under a test, that is in England. At home where practice still holds firm, we have to judge things as far from good. There is plain evidence of the operation of a poor sense of duty. Few are pulling their weight in any department in the country. We really have no national principles today, and one result has been the collapse of our economy. That collapse has come because of the disregard of all the elemental rules. It would not do, I think, to blame all this on the politicians as is the fashion at the moment — as if the Church had no share in the whole matter, as if religion and common life in the past had not really been the one thing, intertwined.

In all the foregoing we have been looking at a world religious position of desperate dimensions and gravity. May I greatly venture in proposing a theory as to what is wrong: That there is a gap in the Catholic system, and at such a pivotal point as to exert a crippling effect. It is that by and large the priest is without members; and that the priest without members is in the same position as Our Lord Himself without members. He is immobilized, deprived of his intended means of action. What can follow from this, but the chaos that we have been picturing?

The priest is intended to be Christ in the world in His fulness: Christ the sacrificer, Christ the organizer of the Church, Christ the source of religious knowledge and the main teacher, Christ the converter of nations and the inspirer of men. But Christ's method of thus fulfilling Himself was to add on to Himself members and through them discharge His functions. Had He not done so, His religion would have died with Him on the Cross. But this conception has been lost sight of. Largely, the priest stands alone. Where he does call on the people to assist him, it is normally for purposes which do not belong to his proper priesthood. It is for material purposes of some kind (of course with an ultimate spiritual aim). Or at best it is for a social apostolate, in which case it is more a matter of the priest entering into a secular movement than the attaching of apostles to his own priestly function.

“Members” must have a significance above that of employees or adherents or convenient adjuncts. “Members” must imply a connection and a kinship of function, and of course helpfulness and activity. A true member must be an extension of the priest, attuned to his outlook, throbbing in sympathy. The member must share in the priestly work to the fullest possible extent, that is to the point where the lay function stops, but only there. If the laity is hedged off from genuine participation in the ordinary pastoral office of the priest, the expression “members” is inappropriate.

A member is inseparable from its head except at the price of mutual loss. If the priest is without members, he is reduced to a negligible dimension, rendered isolated and helpless. As *one man* he cannot extend himself. He can deal with mankind and its problems only in a general or theoretic way which really amounts to nothing, i.e., by talking to audiences or writing.

When the priest has thus reduced himself to the dimension of *one man* and believes it to be the divine dispensation, a disastrous psychology comes into play. The priest has to devise a formula which seems to give him a practical relation to the salvation of the world. It must be based on the principle of one man seeking by himself to save a multitude, that is, he has (so to speak), to cut the world down to his own size. Such formulae as the following are applied.

### **Inadequate Solutions of Modern Problems**

A common refuge in such circumstances is the Youth Formula. It is explained that the adults are clean gone, a total loss we can do nothing about! So let us preserve the young! They will marry, make Christian homes, and in such and such a period of time they will restore the position in the population. It sounds plausible and infinite labor has been thrown into that formula. Schools are constructed and kept going at tremendous cost. Youth schemes of all descriptions are launched. But alas, it will have to be admitted that the final working out of that campaign is not a victory. I cannot see one example myself where it has worked out according to plan. Nor could it be expected to, because it marked a Christian betrayal, which was the abandonment of the adults to their fate. Who are we to judge that they were hopeless? It is not our business to do that; it is our duty to go after them. But no, they are just written off because we think them to be hopeless.

Another formula, for enabling the man of spirit to adjust himself triumphantly to a universal irreligion, is the one which prescribes that the priest attend devoutly to his own interior life; that he offer the Mass and the Sacraments to those who come, but that he should remain in his presbytery. The formula goes on to say that, by purifying himself and rendering himself a storehouse of sanctity, God would then radiate that spirituality and would raise and convert the multitudes, better, in fact, than if they had been directly approached. You here who have a practical cast of mind will revolt at that programme as fantastic. But it was the French formula of priestly life, and it has been imposed by France, as so many other things have been, upon a great proportion of the priesthood of the world. It made a virtue of neglecting the people. In this condition of things, because nothing better could be striven after, it became normal Catholicism to be baptized, to make one's First Holy Communion, to marry and die in the Church. Then, over the poor waste of a life that had conformed to those conditions, were pronounced Benedictions and Deo Gratias's and everything else. A soul saved! All this is accepted and defended, regarded as the best that could be. And perhaps it is the best possible if we are going to content ourselves with the idea of the priest as the *one man*.

### **Half-belief, a Critical Problem**

Not all places sink as low as that; not all make terms in that terrible way with irreligion, recognizing it and practically blessing it. But it is fatally easy to enter on a process of toning down. Take the common case where the people are conforming to the essentials and where all are satisfied with that position. What more does anybody want than that? The counting of the heads at Mass is the test, and things are not regarded as too bad if the missing proportion is not too high. But is not that an intolerable and dangerous formula? For

multitudes are fitting into it who only half-believe, who would not lift a finger for the Church, and who in fact are ready to abandon it under slight inducement. I beg a little consideration for this critical problem of half-belief. Up to a point I imagined that a Catholic believed; that even the queer characters had a firm faith. But at last I came to the realization that there is, in the Catholic fold, a large number whose state can only be described as that of half-belief. They are riven with doubts and difficulties which paralyze them, but which they do not disclose so that there is no remedy. They hold on, but that is all there is to it. It would not do to expose them to adverse pressure.

How large is that section? If the test is that there be interest to the extent of talking about religion or helping it in the smallest way, then that negative class is a big one. So general and manifest is this timidity and helplessness among Catholics over the world that I have ventured to formulate the cynical definition of a Catholic as “one who is not prepared to lift his finger to help another in point of religion.” It is a shocking definition, but it is shockingly applicable.

### **Be Fearful of Easy Formulae**

We must be fearful of those easy formulae, of those toning down processes. For in that way is the whole Christian message gradually perverted, translated into a casuist's definition of the minimum which will save a soul. Perhaps it will save that soul, but it will not build the Church, and it will gradually shed the people by reducing Christianity to the level of the least of all the causes.

It does not save the situation if at the same time there is being proposed to the worthier elements in the people another formula of Christianity which tells them to “pray” and reduces all life to that “praying.” If we pray, all will be well! These exhortations to prayer sound like the language of faith, but usually they are only a pious way of saying that things are hopeless. We are given to understand that those mountains of irreligion are to be moved by saying a few little prayers. And how few they are going to be in the case of the majority of men.

Or, if we do propose apostleship, it is under every guise except the true idea of apostleship. It is the apostolate of prayer, the apostolate of study, the apostolate of the press, of the liturgy, of suffering, of the radio, of social action and so on indefinitely. Every one of these things is good in itself provided that it accompanies and complements the natural Christian apostolate, where one soul seeks out another and tries to pass on the great treasure. That idea of direct personal apostolate is the center, the core, the essential of the Christian system. The modern paganism, that has forgotten everything else about Christianity, recognizes that part of it. The Christian is one who feels for his fellow-man, and who seeks to serve him. That is all the world has left. Faith is gone, but that sort of charity survives, and as St. John puts it, too strongly perhaps for most of us: “It suffices.” If that center be omitted, all the other items may become almost mischievous, because they can mask an incorrect position. Without that core, we would have our old friend, the feathers without the bird. Nothing can substitute for that essential part. Christianity is not merely a belief. It is a practice of that belief by active

charity. Without that practice the belief soon goes and no effort will keep it there. This explains the phenomenon whereby many of the old nations have merged into non-practice and then from non-practice into unbelief.

### **The Church's Work—a Crusade for Souls**

Here is the victory which conquers the world: It is our faith—saith the Gospel. Where is the remedy? It is to make the Church work as, it is intended to work; that is, as a doctrine put into practice, as a fiery idealism, as a crusade for souls; something that neither fire nor water nor anything else will stop. But the first condition for attempting that supernatural adventure is that it be proposed. If we propose anything less, we engage in the criminal enterprise of leaving the people in ignorance of what Christianity is. Therefore we must teach the real Christianity and not any of those partial or minimum formulae. The Mystical Body and Our Lady must be got home to people as the groundwork of their action. From the moment they are grasped, these doctrines drive one on to the service of souls as their first principle; and it is only in the measure that each soul is subjected to apostleship that the Church can be made healthy and secure, and that it can aim at adding on all other souls to it. To term that programme fantastic would mean that in our hearts we have parted company with the Christian idea. For the programme is Christ's and the Church is His means. Surely the Church is as powerful today as it was in any bygone era, but such a touching of all souls is impossible, unless the priest is surrounded by that army of helpers, akin to himself, who are so immersed in his mission, that they can be said to be his members, imbibing what he has to give them, responsive to his impulses.

### **The Power of the Legion of Mary**

The Legion seems to provide what that potential member must possess in order that he may receive. I do not see any society, but the Legion, which has that affinity to the priestly state. At the outset there were of course doubts, but I think that now it will be admitted that the Legion has demonstrated its orthodoxy and its suitability to the needs. It has proved many things. Through it, the laity can be given an understanding of those great doctrines, which have been often deemed inaccessible, the Mystical Body and Our Lady's Motherhood. Through it can be mobilized a great army, not a little body of select persons who should have been priests or nuns, but the general mass of the people down to the tough guy out in the streets, and the humbler elements in the population. These can be taken and organized into that affinity to the priest; then sorted out into various spheres of action, as an army would be given its departments of energy, and sent off on their missions, thus enabling the priest really and truly to accomplish his destiny of reaching out in an intimate way to every soul.

To a certainty, the Legion affords that true Christian adventure which can stir pulses and make the ordinary person present himself ready for anything. Under the ashes of indifference, slumber the sparks of heroism and sacrifice. They must be fanned or they will never show, and eventually they will die out. It would be a great mistake to think that a rare dispensation was at work in China; that a Pentecost operated there which was not available anywhere else. It would be wrong to think so. For the epic of China can be repeated in all

places, even automatically. The Legion is the proof. It has shown that it can convert; that it can face and solve problems. Wherever it is at work, one sees the note of conversion being struck. It is hopeful because it concerns not one place, nor ten places, nor a hundred places. In all places there is that happy manifestation. It means that we have the power to take the offensive; that even in a short term of years we can make the Church triumph. Here are some examples:

### **Some Examples**

In respect of one typical rural territory in France, non-practicing, anti-clerical, etc., we are positively assured by the priests that no one has died there without the Sacraments since the Legion really got down to work.

In the Philippines the Church is in process of solid rebuilding out of absolute rubble. It was not the select elements that helped the priests in the doing of that. It was the ordinary folk, simple and even illiterate.

Take St. Louis in the United States, where a couple of years ago a great campaign, launched by the Archbishop, resulted in the visiting of 837,000 homes in the diocese. The blunt question was put to everyone: "Do you know anything about the Catholic Church—we want to interest you in it?" Answer: 25,000 non-Catholics declared a desire for that information. As part of the harvest of that, 3,200 non-Catholics were received into the Church in 1957.

In the parish of St. Cecilia in Chicago in 1957, 485 persons gave their names for instruction classes. The hopefulness about these figures is that such possibility does not stop short at boundary lines. Over the line there are the same sort of people and the same prospects.

We have noticed with rare interest that in the 1957 report for Brazil it is stated that 400 conversions were effected from Protestantism. You might say that this is not an immense figure. But it is conquest for the first time. Up to now the tide has been running the other way, a huge distressing gain by Protestantism. That 400 may be the turning of the tide, and yet the Legion is only five or six years at work in Brazil.

I conclude by a little survey of history. The old idea often was that the Church went to the king or the chief and won him over. And then he looked after the people. The people turned up at the baptismal font. We know the Lord Himself made use of that method. A lot of the Christianity of the world was built upon that procedure. Many people have remained content with that idea. It is very simple if you can work it. It is much easier to take trouble with one person than to take trouble with many millions. But that method will not keep them Christians. It will not prevent all the ghastly evils of the day from rising up. Nor will it produce a driving force in the Church.

In Monsignor Hughes's *History of the Reformation*, he works out the fact that in every case, with one exception, the ruler determined the fate of the people. Whatever the ruler was, the

people ended up by being. If he was a Catholic ruler, the people remained Catholic. If it was a Protestant ruler, the people went Protestant. The one exception was Ireland, which was not really an exception at all because the rulers were alien. In other words, such was the Catholicity of those people, that it was swept whatever way the wind or the tide went.

The impression, gained from a study of the Reformation, is that the common people were not the chief object of attention. Concentration was on the big people, especially on the ruler. Later on the French Revolution would take the people clean out of the Church, and the Russian Revolution would atheise Russia. Hardly any of the people standing up and saying “No!”. It has been left to China to do a thing like that!

### **Reproduce Christ and Apply His Power**

Of such driftwood as that is the religion of a great portion of the world's surface. To what extent do we rise higher in our own land, which is the last surviving settlement of the faith? Oh, we must not rely on governments and acts of parliament to make or keep people good, or on custom or atmosphere, but only on the implanting of a full Christianity in the heart of each individual person. But for the *one man* to accomplish that is impossible. By himself he can only deal with people more or less in bulk. He has to have his “members” to expand into, so that through them he can speak to every soul. Obviously his great model is Our Lord Himself, Whose main aim on earth, so far as we can see, was the training of His apostles. He taught them and He filled them with His spirit. He gave Himself to them in a very full way. He incorporated them in His priesthood to an extent which you cannot do for your legionaries. But what you can pass on, you must—or else be untrue to the very idea of membership. Part of that idea is that if you stunt your members, you necessarily stunt yourself. You can pass to them such parts of your priesthood as concern apostleship, your spirit and your mission to souls. Thus doing, you reproduce Christ in all His intention, and automatically you apply His power.

Even at this comparatively early stage of its history, the Legion of Mary has demonstrated what it can do. It has proved that the ordinary manpower of the Church can be mobilized, and so one can discern possibilities such as never existed before for the Church. If only the priests at large would do what you have done; would see your vision and accept the consequences; would gather round them the willing elements of their flocks, work on them, set them on fire! It is not a case of faith or hope, but of actual knowledge, that the whole world could be revolutionized while we are here on it, which for a number of us is not going to be too long.