

The Historical Significance
of the Legion of Mary in South America
(1950-1984)

Very few countries have been called upon by Divine Providence to rebuild the Church in more than one historical setting. Spain has had this privilege. She discovered and evangelized the New World, and on three separate occasions defeated the greatest enemies of the Church: the Muslims, the French Revolutionaries and the Communists. Ireland has also had this privilege. The Monks of the West leaving Ireland in the sixth and seventh centuries established monasteries throughout Europe rebuilding the Church which the fall of the Roman Empire had brought down with it.¹

In the twentieth century Ireland has again been called by Providence to send its missionaries throughout the world, to strengthen the Church which is in so much need of repair. This movement, founded in Dublin in 1921 is known as the Legion of Mary. It is not a coincidence that the roots of the Legion stem back to 1917, the year of Our Lady's appearance at Fatima and the Communist Revolution. In just sixty-four years the Legion has grown to become the largest lay-apostolic organization in the Church, numbering almost two-million active and fifteen-million auxiliary members. In the same spirit as the monks of the West, over seventy-five Legionaries have served Our Lady in foreign lands, and more leave the shores of Ireland every year. Volumes could be written on the experiences and successes of these envoys, as well as the Legion's effect upon China, Africa, the Philippines, South Korea, Europe and North America. Each country has its own unique story but the effect of the Legion upon the South American continent is one of the most important ones in the history of the Church in the twentieth century.

The evangelization of the native peoples was always one of the primary objectives of the Spanish when they settled in the New World. For example, just forty years after the discovery, the first Catholic diocese was established in Coro, Venezuela.² Spanish missionaries set up schools and other educational institutions and a large majority of the native South Americans were baptised and brought into the Catholic Church.³ By the end of the eighteenth century only a few of the more remote regions of South America remained unconverted.⁴ In the beginning all the clergy were Spanish. Gradually, some creoles (i.e., persons of Spanish descent born in America) were ordained.⁵ The question of whether to ordain Indians was raised and discussed, and it was concluded that there should not be a native priesthood. This was to have a

¹ Frank Duff, The Official Handbook of the Legion of Mary (Dublin: Concilium Legionis Mariae, 1975), p. 225.

² Seamus Grace, "The Legion of Mary in Latin America", The Capuchin Annual 1956-1957 (Wexford: John English, 1957), p. 374.

³ Ibid., p.374.

⁴ Edwin Ryan, D.D., The Church in the South American Republics (New York: Bruce Publishing Co., 1932), p.30.

⁵ Ibid., p. 25.

tremendous effect upon the Church in South America and the consequences are still being felt today.⁶

The great set-back for the Catholic Church occurred in the beginning of the nineteenth century when the South American republics fought for their independence from Spain. The revolutionary regimes which led the national governments against Spain were influenced by the French Revolution and thus hostile to the Church. With Spanish authority overthrown, a wave of liberalism and anti-clericalism came upon the Church in the form of restrictive legislation and physical attack. Missionaries who had ministered to the whole continent were prohibited to enter. Gradually moral problems grew worse and worse due to the depletion of the priestly ranks, the want of instruction, and the nonpractice among so large a population.⁷ By the twentieth century the scarcity of priests was beyond doubt the greatest problem for the South American countries. In 1928, Peru had 1,400 priests in a population of 4,000,000.⁸ In 1945, Brazil had 5,000 priests for 41,000,000 inhabitants.⁹ And according to statistics in 1957, Paraguay had only 250 priests to tend to 1,500,000 souls.¹⁰ But by the 1950's, despite these statistics, the priestly situation was improving: more seminaries were being built and vocations were increasing. For example, the total number of priests in Colombia doubled between 1940 and 1955.¹¹ This increase was still very inadequate but the Church began to make remarkable progress and recovery during those years.

One reason for the growth of the Church at this time was the introduction of the Legion of Mary in South America. In a country with so few priests it was urgent to train the lay practicing Catholics for the apostolate. The Legion could help the ordinary Catholic grow in knowledge of the Faith and also bring the Faith to others. One Legion envoy writing in 1956 explained the type of work the Legion did upon its entry into South America:

In a very few years several thousand active Legionaries had been organised in almost all these countries to spread instruction in Catholic Faith and morals and to bring back to the practice of the Faith the great numbers who have drifted away from the norms of Catholic life, especially in the matter of the sanctity of marriage and the observance of the Sunday.¹²

Because of the lack of priests to instruct them, many couples were living together outside of marriage. This was a widespread problem throughout South America, because divorce had been legalised in most of the countries and Christian doctrine was

⁶ Grace, p. 374.

⁷ Ibid., p.375.

⁸ Ryan, p.73.

⁹ Peter Dunne, S.J., A Padre Views South America (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1945), p. 93.

¹⁰ "Maria Legiouis", Vol. II, No, 3 (Dublin: Legio Mariae, Sept., 1957), p.4.

¹¹ Grace, p. 375.

¹² Ibid., p.375.

rarely taught in the schools. If these couples attended Sunday Mass they could have been educated in their marital duties, but unfortunately many were also lax in their Sunday observance.¹³ The Legion decided it had to face this problem and came up with the only possible solution: a systematic visitation of homes. This door to door visitation would "bring to the father and mother informal catechetical instructions on the basic truths of the Faith, the observance of the commandments, the Sacrament of marriage and the obligation to attend Sunday Mass."¹⁴

Once the Legion began this visitation of homes, a movement back to the Sacraments and Sunday Mass occurred among the lapsed Catholics. One group of Legionaries in Ecuador, in one month, brought about the marriage of seventy couples who had previously been living together outside of the marriage bond.¹⁵ In a small town in Venezuela one praesidium effected forty such unions during a one week mission. And "one Colombian Legionary was personally responsible for the sanctification of sixty-five homes."¹⁶

Besides the regular visitation of homes the Legionaries in each parish organized catechism classes for children and sometimes adults.¹⁷ "In one instance in a poor section of the city of Cali, Colombia, the attendance at the parochial Sunday school was increased from seventy-five to four hundred and fifty in four months, with, of course proportionate increase in the number of catechists."¹⁸ Besides training ordinary Catholics in the devotional aspects of the Faith, the Legionaries also explained the rational basis for the Faith. This was important for a people who had a deeply religious sense but who had never received much doctrinal instruction. To some parts of the country priests could only come once every two years. The need for Legionaries was greater in these places: they taught catechism, gave information classes and "offered a public Rosary on Sundays with the reading of the Gospel in place of the much longed-for mass."¹⁹

By educating Catholics in the truths of the Faith, the Legion was able to slow down the growth of the Protestant sects which were working in South America at that time. For example, the Baptists have been in Brazil since 1882. "In 1943 they had ninety-nine

¹³ Ibid., p.375.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.375.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.375.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.375.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.375.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.375.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.378.

pastors, 283 native workers and 59,272 converts."²⁰ In one parish alone, in the province of Antioquia, Colombia the Presbyterians made 5,000 converts in one decade.²¹ Because many native South Americans were not educated in the Faith and did not fervently practice their Catholic religion, they easily fell prey to the Protestant evangelists. The Legion tried its best to offset this trend. For example, the first praesidium in Bogota was devoted exclusively to winning back those who had apostatised from the Faith as a result of the Protestant propaganda.²² The Legionaries visited the homes of these people to discuss questions on the Bible and Catholic doctrine. Soon a monthly conference for non-Catholics was organised in Bogota and it was not long until many returned to the Faith.²³

Perhaps the greatest success of the Legion was to involve the native South Americans in the apostolate. Those who joined the Legion showed outstanding spirit and dedication in the service of Our Lady. Catholics who had previously not practiced the Faith became fervent and began devoting their time and effort to strengthen the Church. Their dedication and spirit of sacrifice is seen in this situation:

In the inaugural meeting of the Curia in the little town of Junin in Cundinamarca, Colombia, out of a possible attendance of some fifty-six members all but four were present for the roll-call and these were absent through illness. The merit of that was not appreciated until enquiry elicited the information that almost all had walked great distances to the meeting. Many had walked for four hours and would have to walk the same distance home.²⁴

The native Legionaries could not help but be inspired by the Legion envoys who gave up many years of their lives working throughout the whole of South America. Pacita Santos and Joaquina Lucas were two of the earliest envoys on the Continent. Joaquina arrived in Argentina in 1950 and during the next six years laboured in Chile, Argentina, Peru, Colombia, and Brazil. She established the first praesidium in Chile in 1951 with the blessing and active support of Cardinal Caro Rodriguez, the much loved Archbishop of Santiago.²⁵ A year earlier the Legion had been presented to nine Bishops at the Marian Congress in Concepcion, most of whom requested the Legion in their Diocese. Just six years after Cardinal Rodriguez started the Legion in his Diocese, there were fifty praesidia of adults and sixteen for youth. By 1958, there were over 125 praesidia in Chile.²⁶

²⁰ Dunne, p. 269.

²¹ Ibid., p.268.

²² Grace, p. 378.

²³ Ibid., p.378.

²⁴ Ibid., p.377.

²⁵ Ibid., p.378.

²⁶ "Maria Legionis", Vol, 12, No. 4 (Dublin: Legio Mariae, Dec., 1958), p. 10.

By 1950, the Legion was already in ten dioceses of Colombia. When extension teams set to work in 1953, they found great support from the missionary sisters of the Colombian order "Hermanas misioneras de la Inmaculada." A Legion envoy began working in Ecuador in February of 1954 at the request of Msgr. Echeveria, O.F.H. Bishop of Ambato. "The foundation of the Legion in Ecuador was urgently needed because of the unChristian legislation which prohibited the teaching of Christian doctrine in the schools, and because of the activity of a considerable number of communists.²⁷ So striking were the results of the Legion's work in Ecuador, including "some remarkable conversions of Communists in the very first days", that the Bishops declared the Legion of Mary a part of the official apostolate of the Church in Ecuador.²⁸ Praesidia were set up in gaols and penitentiaries and in one penitentiary in Quito, named after the saintly Garcia Moreno, three praesidia were organised. The prisoners devoted themselves to a very fruitful apostolate among their fellow inmates.²⁹ Rapid extension took place throughout the whole of Ecuador and it was done mostly by the Ecuadorian Legionaries themselves. One of the goals of the Irish envoys was to train the South Americans to do their own missionary work, and this was accomplished with great success:

The foundation Legionaries in Ambato had only six weeks experience of the Legion when six of them went with the envoy to help organise the Legion in the capital, Quito. The Legion prayers were translated into Quechua, the native language of the Ecuadorian Indians, and the first praesidia were set up among recent converts making their first contacts with civilization.³⁰

While this work was going on in Ecuador, the Legion began an extension campaign in Venezuela. The native Legionaries of Caracas volunteered with great enthusiasm for extension work across the many dioceses of their country. Venezuela had been "deeply wounded in its religious and moral life by a succession of anti-clerical liberal governments."³¹ The Legion took hold, and from seventeen praesidia in February of 1955, the Legion grew to one hundred and thirty praesidia and nine diocesan councils by November of that same year.³²

A history of the Church in twentieth-century South America should not be written without some mention of Alphonus Lambe. Alphie Lambe was born in Tullamore, Ireland in 1932 and became an envoy for the Legion at the youthful age of twenty. He and Seamus Grace arrived in Colombia in 1953 and began visiting Bishops to interest them in the Legion and to obtain their approval for this movement which was little

²⁷ Grace, p. 378.

²⁸ IBID., p. 378-379.

²⁹ Ibid., p.378-379.

³⁰ Ibid., p.379.

³¹ Ibid., p.379.

³² Ibid., p.379.

known in South America. In 1954, Alphie was asked by Bishop Echevearia to extend the Legion in the Diocese of Ambato, Ecuador, which he did with absolute genius. Alphie was the master of extension. It was not an uncommon record for him to have 24 praesidia established in two weeks time.³³ The Concilium in Dublin was amazed at the great growth of the Legion under Alphie's direction and thought he must be establishing the groups incorrectly. And yet his praesidia all were organised properly and running with great efficiency. The secret of this young envoy's success was his total dependence on Our Lady and his ability to inflame others in the service of the Legion. Everywhere he went he trained the South American Legionaries to do their own extension. After leaving Ecuador he went to Peru, where Joaquina Lucas had worked for a year leaving behind one hundred praesidia.³⁴ From Peru, the young Irish Legionary went to Bolivia, Brazil (for the purpose of attending the Eucharistic Congress) then to Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and back to Argentina. The Legion flourished everywhere he went. At the Eucharistic Congress in Rio de Janeiro in 1954, Bishop Echevearia told Alphie, "The Legion is doing wonderfully in my diocese; there are now forty praesidia at work."³⁵ It was declared at the Congress that the Hierarchy of Ecuador made the Legion their official apostolate.³⁶ Brazil was consecrated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and great blessings were brought down upon the whole of South America. Bishops from all over the continent became interested in the Legion and asked it be started in their dioceses. This was the breakthrough which Alphie and the other envoys needed. They set to work at once, establishing hundreds and thousands of praesidia during the next few years. Unfortunately, Alphie did not have long to live. He died of cancer on the feast of St. Agnes in 1959, at the age of twenty six. Alphie's cause has been introduced in Rome and countless Legionaries in South America and throughout the world look forward to his beatification.

1957 was designated the "Year of the Priesthood" in South America in the hope of increasing the number of vocations. A campaign of prayer and work resulted in an increase of many youths dedicating themselves to God. In 1956, only eight young men joined the Seminary in Asuncion, Paraguay. But in the first ten months of 1957, sixty began their studies for the priesthood.³⁷ The Legion increased the number of vocations in South America by leading average or non-practicing Catholics into fuller life in the Church, and by increasing the devotion to Our Lady among the people. For example, one man wanted to join the Legion but he was not a practicing Catholic. In order for him to become a Legionary he returned to the Sacraments. He soon became the president of his praesidium and then president of a Comitium. This led him to discover his true vocation. He entered a seminary as a late vocation and is the spiritual director of a curia to this day.

³³ Joaquina Lucas, On an Errand of Love (Manila: Joaquina Lucas, 1968), p. 83.

³⁴ "Maria Legionis", Vol. 12, No. 5 (Dublin: Legio Mariae, December, 1955), p.12.

³⁵ "Maria Legionis", Vol. 10, No. 4 (Dublin: Legio Mariae, December, 1955), p. 12.

³⁶ Ibid., p.12.

³⁷ "Maria Legionis", Vol. 11, No. 3 (Dublin: Legio Mariae, Sept. 1957), p. 4.

All during the thirty-five years that the Legion has been in South America the native-born Legionaries have taken the conversion of their homeland into their own hands. Between the years 1959 and 1967 over 2,000 praesidia were set up by the native Legionaries of Argentina alone. From the beginning, Legionaries volunteered to make extension trips to other parts of the Continent and even to Central America. Colombian Legionaries volunteered to go to Costa Rica, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras.³⁸ Legionaries from Colombia and Venezuela volunteered for work in Mexico. In the Diocese of San Vincente, El Salvador, they set up thirty-one Praesidia in a fortnight. Two Venezuelan Legionaries working with an envoy set up over sixty praesidia in less than two months. Joaquina Lucas wrote about the amazing work which Seamus Grace did with his extension volunteers:

In passing I want to mention Seamus' record as having been unsurpassable. With his teams he invaded the whole of Central America aside from those of South America, and they set up some 600 praesidia in the space of six months, an average of 100 new praesidia per month.³⁹

Because the Legion was placed in the hands of the native Legionaries, it continued to grow even after the envoys moved on to another location. The Legion envoys from Ireland realized the importance of setting up praesidia in every parish, town or village. A "praesidium" in Latin means a "fortified post or garrison" which battles against the forces of evil "crushing the head of the serpent and advancing the reign of Christ."⁴⁰ After an envoy establishes a praesidium and moves on, that group continues to work in that area. A praesidium of 15 members will do at least 30 hours of work for the priest every week. Since many places had three or four praesidia, a priest could rely on his Legionaries doing 100 hours of work a week, and over the course of a year, that would amount to over 5000 hours of apostolic work done in just one parish. This was the objective of the envoys: to establish well-working praesidia which would sanctify the members, and continue to build up the Church even after the envoy left.

The Legion continued to grow in South America during the 1960's and 1970's. In October of 1976, the Legion celebrated its Silver Jubilee in Brazil. Over 4,000 Legionaries were present for the Mass of thanksgiving.⁴¹ Today, the Legion is still a vibrant force in the Church. It is present throughout the whole of the continent. In Argentina there are three Senatus councils -- in Buenos Aires, Salta and Cordoba, which govern countless comitia, curia and praesidia. On the final day of the 1984 Eucharistic Congress in Buenos Aires, over 600 Legionaries processed to the grave of Alphie Lambe to recite the Rosary and Legion prayers. Legionaries continue to do extension work. In the Metan curia Legionaries travel on bicycle and moterbike to set

³⁸ Grace, p. 379.

³⁹ Lucas, p. 82.

⁴⁰ Duff, p. 3.

⁴¹ "Maria Legionis", Vol. 24, No. 1 (Dublin: Legio Marias, 1977), p. 10.

up praesidia in the foothills of the Andes. One comitium in a ten month period "visited 5,500 homes. 62 people came into the Church, and 68 dying children were baptized."⁴²

Brazil also has three senatus -- in Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo and Belo Horizonte. In the city of Rio de Janeiro, Legionaries have public recitation of the Rosary in three main squares. The members of the Reconciliatrix Comitium under the Sao Paulo Senatus brought about 222 returns to the sacraments in one year.⁴³ The Regia in Salvador governs 1,103 praesidia, and the members of the Paenaiba curia closed down three centers of prostitution. The Legion is strong in the other countries of South America as well. In Colombia, there are senatus in Bogota and Medellin; in the other countries, there are senatus in Quito, Caracas, La Paz, Lima, Santiago, etc. Archbishop Pinera of La Serena recently said "it was a blessing to have the Legion of Mary working from the north to the south of the country."⁴⁴ Legion envoys have continued to be sent into South America for the purpose of strengthening the existing groups and starting new ones. In 1984 there were three envoys working in South America: Br. German Leyton in Chile, Sr. Maria Senra in Brazil and Br. Julio Cirillo in Peru and Venezuela.

The effect of the Legion of Mary on South America has been significant: the Legion has mobilised tens of thousands of Catholics into the lay apostolate and inspired them to take their faith seriously. The Legion of Mary was, and is, the custom-made Organisation for South America: it educates the uninformed in matters of the Faith, goes out to win back the countless thousands who have stopped practicing, seeks conversions, hinders the growth of Protestant sects, increases religious vocations, and compensates for the shortage of priests. The Legion is not able to take the place of the priest, but it is able to help the few priests who are all alone in a large territory. Legionaries have instructed children and adults for the reception of the Sacraments and prepared them for the visit of the priest. In the places where Legionaries have worked the Church has been able to remain strong, even though a priest can only visit on occasion.

The reason why the Legion is so important in the history of South America is because of the great number of Catholics on that continent. There are over 220 million Catholics in South America, which is 90% of the population. The potential for South America is enormous. If South America could solve the problem of the shortage of priests and bring its people into a fuller practice of the Faith, its effect on the rest of the world would be great. The Legion began to solve some of these problems in 1950, and continues to strengthen the Church to this day. The future of South America lies in the hands of Our Lady.

Written in 1956, these words of an envoy are still applicable today:

⁴² Ibid., Vol. 27, No. 383 D, June 1984, p. 26.

⁴³ Concilium Legionis Mariae Bulletin, Dec. 16, 1984, 6. 4.

⁴⁴ Ibid., Nov. 18, 84, p.3.

Spectacular though the results have been they are still no more than a beginning; the immensity of the territory and the gravity of the problems to be solved are such that it would be ingenuous to imagine that the end will be quickly achieved. Non-practice of the Faith among all classes, liberalism and anti-clericalism among the upper classes, want of instruction among the lower classes, the penetration of the Protestant sects, and the basic problem of the acute shortage of priests have attained dimensions that would be discouraging were it not for the positive spiritual resources only now beginning to be exploited; but the depth and vitality of spiritual reserve are such that we foresee the day when - with the help of Our Blessed Lady - South America will be the great apostolic force in the Church.⁴⁵

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⁴⁵ Grace, p. 380.