

LEGIONARY CHARITY

By Rev. Francis Lendacky

The Legionary of Mary is frequently reminded that the virtue of Charity must be the predominant virtue in his apostolic work. He is reminded that the secret of influence is Love; he is reminded that his approach to all should be as, an inferior to a superior; that is, willingness to be the servant of all. His manner and his demeanor must imitate both the Lord and the Blessed Mother who were willing to be servants rather than to be served! The Legionary is advised to suppress self for the sake of becoming the adequate instrument in the apostolate of spreading the Kingdom of God on earth. There is enough evidence of that kind of behavior to be able to say that, when visiting others on assignment, many Legionaries practice charity consistently, and sometimes heroically.

But a Legionary should beware of concentrating so exclusively on the practice of Charity in reaching out to every soul as to lose sight of the equally important practice of Charity towards his fellow-members in the praesidium or in the council. It is time to consider whether the lack of a conspicuous fraternal charity among Legionaries may be one of the main reasons why, in some areas, there is so little success in recruiting new members! Perhaps, without our being aware of it, we Legionaries are not reflecting the kind of charity by which the early Christians were recognized. "See how they love one another" must have been a very attractive 'gospel' to those who were not Christian. Who knows how many on-lookers were drawn into the ranks of the Church simply by recognizing something different among professed Christians. The number of converts must have been significant. Perhaps the ultimate reason why the Legion has not become more widespread in our area is because we are not recognized by others as an edifying Legion Family of Christian Apostles!

Section 40 of the Legion Handbook points out several important observations about a charity which is being described as a special type of Legionary charity. The Legionary is sincerely encouraged to exercise that quality of Charity which will bind himself to his fellow Legionaries. The first outreach of that charity must be to his fellow-members, so that the Legionary charity will be first extended to those who share the apostolate. The Legionary Charity, which is spoken of in this final section of the Handbook, forbids discrimination on any basis except personal spiritual unfitness for membership. Mutual and fraternal charity must be practiced among all members of the Legion. All distinctions are to be non-existent except those which may arise from proficiency in the spirit and work of the Legion. The Legionary Charity must extend itself to other organizations in an unselfish effort to build up each and every Society which is worthy of the name 'Catholic.'¹ Lastly, and very importantly, Legionary Charity must be extended towards the Pastors of the Church. By that simple statement the Charity which is Legionary transcends the scope of simple fraternal charity. For the Charity of Legionaries to Pastors can not be mere fraternal Charity. The Handbook strongly reminds the Legionary to be unreservedly loyal and lovingly obedient to the

Priest, whom the Legion strives to make present to every one and in every place. Fraternal Charity could be frozen on the level of democratic friendliness; Legionary Charity is rooted in a spiritual, sacramental hierarchy, which raises our standard of Charity to a loftier level. It is also noteworthy that the Handbook does not say 'Spiritual Director' but Pastors.

This particular description of "Legionary Charity" challenges each and every one of us to search for a new meaning of what it means to be a member of the Legion Family. This kind of Charity--we are told--is the first requisite necessary to spread Charity to all to whom we are sent. The Legionary Apostle with Legionary Charity will accomplish more by this indirect action than directly by actual works in hand.

In this Year of the Family, it would be most appropriate to scrutinize our love and loyalty to the Family which can be called the Legion Family. And on this Father's Day in the Year of the Family, we should like to consider the Legionary's relationship with the Pastors of the Church.

The Legion of Mary insists on not establishing itself anywhere without the proper approval of the Hierarchy. The reason may very well be that the Legion believes in recognizing its proximate father: the Bishop or his delegate. The Legion will not exist in a place where the Pastor will not give his permission or blessing. A Legion Praesidium without proper permission to exist could consider itself an "orphan" or perhaps worse. One of the most important figures in any family must be the Father, and the Pastor in the Parish must be the father to that Praesidium. And so the Legionary must view that relationship as absolutely one of dependence and not merely one of tolerance or of convenience.

Sometimes, this minimum granting of permission, will be the only sign ever from the - Pastor-father to the Praesidium, but the Legionaries must consider even that fact as a great gift. For merely to exist is no mere gift! And quite realistically, the Legion does not insist on anything more than the Pastor's permission to exist in the parish. The Legion does not demand admission by supplying a resume of its history, or by providing a satisfaction-guarantee of all the works to be done. And the Legion certainly can not assure a great number of recruits to assist the solitary Pastor who must be the Spiritual Father to many souls.

Legionary Charity, therefore, requires the generous exercise of all the virtues which uphold the Fourth Commandment. The members of the Legion Family must love, honor, and respect their Pastor-father. The reward of this kind of charity to Pastor-father, especially when it might not be so easy to do, can not be fully assessed. But many a praesidium can point to an abundant harvest of heart-aches for scorning its Pastor-father, or disrespecting him.

Because of the lack of respect and love to the Pastor-father, the Legion may have hurt itself more than it can imagine. In a sense, the Legionary must imitate the action of

David towards King Saul. David did not dare to harm the duly-recognized King Saul, God's elected one, even though' David might have felt himself justified to defend himself. We must not dare to inflict injury, even verbally, upon the Pastor-father. The reward for our self-control will be bestowed by the Beneficent Father of us all and by the Mother of the Eternal High Priest.

Legionary charity will oblige each and every Legionary to uphold or to build on the necessary relationship of Pastor-father to the Legion. It is a relationship the Legionary can not afford to abuse or to ignore. It remains the basic foundation for the existence of the Legion in the parish and the root for growth of the Legion Family everywhere.

The Charity extended toward the Pastor of the Parish must overcome the tendency to condemn or to criticize the judgments or attitude of the Pastor who restricts the Legionaries or prohibits certain works in the Parish of which he is the Spiritual Head. There must be no open and angry criticism which could be seen as something other than an ideological difference. At all times, the Legionary "hat-in-hand" attitude suggested in the visitation of private homes must be observed even more so in the rectory of the Pastor. The Legionary must always remember that the Ordained Minister is the "Alter Christus," not only at the altar but in his very person. It is not healthy to see the priest 'as priest' only at the altar or in the pulpit, and to see him as someone other anyplace else!

Legionary Charity must extend beyond the Spiritual Directors of Praesidia and beyond those Pastors who have given permission for the Legion to exist in their parishes. Legionary Charity must be extended to all Pastors. The Legion of Mary must avoid the growth-squelching pitfalls of bitterness or disappointment which come from repeated rectory refusals, unsuccessful Extension contacts, unanswered messages, or even the occasional rebuff.

Legionary Charity is best expressed in the Mary-like performance of Legionary duty and enterprise and loving service to each and every soul. It can yield abundant fruit in our own lives and in the apostolate when that Legionary Charity is nurtured by the tenacious devotion to the Holy Spirit, the Spouse of Our Queen and Mother. And who would deny that the Charity extended to all Pastors could be the very life-blood in all the brothers and sisters in the Legion of Mary Family!