

THE PRAESIDIUM MEETING - A UNIQUE LEGION SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

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The primary obligation of the Active member of the Legion of Mary is the attendance at the weekly meetings. It is the meeting which makes the Legion. This bond sundered or disesteemed, the members drop away and the work falls to the ground. Conversely, in measure as the meeting is respected, so is the power of the organization intensified. (Handbook of the Legion, page 70--1993 edition)

If the attendance at the weekly Praesidium Meeting is to be seen as an absolute requirement for fidelity in the Legion of Mary, then there is an obligation towards Mary which is boldly pronounced in the handbook as ranking before any other obligation of membership. The statement is found on page 25 of the 1993 edition of the Handbook. "The honouring of the Legion devotion to Mary by serious meditation and zealous practice is placed on each member as a solemn trusteeship to the Legion. It is to be regarded as an essential part of Legionary duty, ranking before any other obligation of membership."

The two quotations from the Handbook cited above, together with the description of the order of the Legion Praesidium Meeting, should give us a definite idea of what the Legion of Mary expects to accomplish at the weekly meetings.

It is very clear that the Legion measures the intensity of the Legion on the spiritual development of its members and not on the assorted array of its successful works. And the Legion believes that the Active member will advance toward that special Marian Legion devotion of which it speaks more definitely at the weekly formation meeting than on the assignments which may present different experiences every week. That is why the primary obligation of the Legionary is to attend the weekly meeting. And it is the reason why the Meeting protects several invariable elements in its order of business.

There is no heavenly mandate to meet every week, but there are bonafide reasons on earth for meeting every week. Many important routines and schedules are based upon the weekly rhythm of human affairs. Some natural cycles in the universe are observed in terms of weekly occurrences. The Divine Positive Commandment to worship the Lord on the Lord's day is a weekly obligation. To the Legion of Mary it seems a minimum requirement to conduct a weekly meeting, during which it aims to achieve its undeniably lofty spiritual goal.

A semantic hurdle to overcome is the present-day connotation of the word 'meeting.' As soon as one hears of 'another meeting,' the defenses go up, and there is begotten a foreboding anticipation of yet 'another meeting.' But the 'Praesidium meeting' of the Legion of Mary is no ordinary meeting. The true Legionary comes to

realize that very shortly in his Active membership. Unfortunately, no other one suitable term can be found to describe satisfactorily the Legion Praesidium meeting.

The Praesidium Meeting of the Legion is a required exercise in the life-style of a Legionary. It is scheduled every week because of two very important characteristics of the Legion's mission. The Legion of Mary considers its apostolate of spreading the Good News to every person as something absolutely imperative. (For there are so many souls to seek!) And there is a sense of urgency connected with that mandate given to us by the Lord, Who commissioned his followers to preach His Gospel to the ends of the earth. That mandate is clearly expressed in the Gospels and it is sacramentally impressed upon the soul of every baptized person. It is not a duty from which a Christian can easily excuse himself.

Another reason for the weekly Praesidium Meeting derives from the nature of the 'earthen vessel' in which the treasured Good News is carried. The nature of humankind needs a regular routine to maintain its interest and its energy and its progress in matters which depend heavily on certain acquired spiritual skills. Make no mistake about it, the apostle of Christ is aware of the spiritual graces which are bestowed by the Lord and Master, but the Legionary must also perfect his personal spiritual skills to be an effective apostle!

The weekly Praesidium Meeting of the Legion of Mary can develop the effective Christian' apostle under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and His Spouse, and the active members at the Praesidium truly devoted to the Legion of Mary. A meeting of that kind must surely be looked upon as more than a meeting. The Lay Legionary apostle would not be accused of exaggeration if he looked upon the Praesidium meeting as a unique spiritual exercise and would grant it a commensurate respect.

The principal components of the Praesidium Meeting which can make it a unique spiritual exercise are prayer, instruction, and assignments. The three times of prayer provide a variety of expressions in prayer: the Rosary is meditative and Biblical; the Catena is every Legionary's 'sing-along' with Mary; the Concluding Prayers are imprecatory for an active apostolic Faith. The assignments towards the end of the meeting continue the momentum of apostleship in the Legionary's life. But most of the meeting is prayerfully informative to the Legionary and apostolically formative of the Legionary. The Praesidium has all the ingredients of a true spiritual exercise.

This must be the basis which prompts the Legion itself to regard the Praesidium as a Mystical Home of Nazareth which, to the Legionary, is a special school of sanctity. And the Legion has no fear that it might be a victim of hallucination when it envisions the Praesidium as a local presence of Mary where the Legionaries assemble to learn Mary's Handmaiden way.

The 'instruction' at the Praesidium Meeting is multi-faceted. There is the spiritual reading taken from the Handbook, which must be studied by each Legionary. There is

the Legion-oriented Allocutio, which should explain the beauty of the Legion and inspire the member to that Legionary devotion to Mary. In the mystical presence of the Mother of the Home of Nazareth, there must be the prayerful learning of the principles of the Legion, and the honest inquiry of the reports of Mary's work through the fellow Legionaries. This is accomplished by sincere and open discussion. Though the types of instruction are varied, there is but one attitude to embrace them all. The Handbook describes it as 'serious meditation.'

The 'serious meditation' is achieved in the typical Legionary manner. It is practiced within the context of complete participation and according to 'Patrician' pattern. The 'serious meditation' is best perfected through discussion with all the fellow-members, not through solitary study alone. If the Legion insists on loyal obedience for fear of independent action, then the Legion insists on sincere, accurate discussion for fear of private misinterpretation of its rules and regulations.

Perhaps the Handbook discussion does not realize its full potential at the Meeting very often. And so, some Legionaries might be inclined to regard that discussion as unimportant. Many a time, however, the principal fault rests with the Legionary who fails to prepare adequately for the assigned study of the Handbook. He may come to the meeting not really able to contribute a positive word to the discussion, because he either neglected to study the passage or has even forgotten the portion assigned. That kind of habit can be injurious to self and to fellow-members. In addition, that kind of habit will eventually render the meeting ineffectual, and what is considered by some worse than anything, boring. The Legionary will derive much benefit from the Handbook Discussion at the meeting if he comes prepared to share a thought he defined through private study. Many a time that thought will be refined through the scrutiny of a sincere Praesidium Discussion of the handbook.

Even though 'Handbook Discussion' may not be listed as such in the order of the Praesidium Meeting in the Handbook, and therefore may be considered 'optional,' the Legion of Mary would surely endorse that practice at the Meeting. The Legion elsewhere states the relationship between the priest and the Legionary to be similar to the Novice-Master and Novice relationship. That relationship certainly supposes discussion and dialogue. What better place to direct spiritually than at the Meeting-Spiritual Exercise every week in the Praesidium. What other way to explain the Legion principles except through serious discussion at the most controlled exercise of the Legion of Mary--its Praesidium Meeting. Where else can that Legion Devotion towards Mary be better nurtured except through serious meditation at the Praesidium Meeting--the Mystical Home of Nazareth!