

THREE SPECIFIC TEXTBOOKS OF THE LEGION OF MARY

By Rev. Francis Lendacky

The vocation of a Christian is no small gift, nor is it an optional responsibility. The II Vatican Council has insistently emphasized that it is the duty of each Christian to imitate Christ, and the Council has strongly encouraged every member of the Catholic Church to assume the responsibility proper to his state in life. Much effort has been made to specify the roles of the Lay Faithful and to provide avenues of expressing their particular vocation for their personal perfection and for the welfare of the Church and for the salvation of the world.

Along with the specifications of their vocation and the expanded number of services; i.e., ministries and collaborations, the Church has insisted on the proper and adequate education or training for the many volunteers who would wish to fulfill the duties of their vocation. Many programs have been initiated to educate and to form the Lay People for their tasks and to encourage ongoing development.

For the Lay apostle in the Church, the Legion of Mary--from very early in its history till the present--has followed a definite and invariable program to form the Lay Catholic apostle. The style of formation in the Legion and the performance of its particular apostolate has not been altered essentially from the beginning of its existence. Since the inception of Lay Catholic Action in the early 1900's, the Legion has always concentrated on the essentials of the Vocation of the Laity in the Church. Those essentials have not been altered over the course of the decades; they have been refined as time goes on, according to the teaching of the Church. That is the reason why the Legion has never been out-of-date, but has always tried to be up-to-date with the Church she wishes to serve.

The manner of meeting and the method of work assignments are the practical channels of educating and forming the Lay Legionary apostle. One of the maxims observed by the Legion is that we learn by doing. The meeting is learned by attending it; 'apostolic skills' are learned by the actual performance of them. The 'Master-Apprentice' style of formation has been the most successful method. It is not our intention to describe now the order of meeting or the method of evangelizing employed by the Legion of Mary. What we wish to mention here are the important textbooks' used in the formation of an active member of the Legion of Mary.

The textbooks we will mention will not necessarily be books as such. They will be certain indispensable means which can teach us in the manner mentioned by St. Thomas Aquinas when he stated that the best textbook resource he ever used to learn the things of God was the Cross of Christ.

The three textbooks which a Legionary should study are the Handbook of the Legion of Mary, the Tessera, and the Cross of Christ. The Handbook is certainly an

obvious selection. Every Legionary should study it seriously and thoroughly. The Tesserà is mentioned because it comprises the Prayers of the Legion, which constitute the heart of the Legion formative spirit. The Cross of Christ is mentioned because it is the most important and influential textbook of the Lay Legionary apostle.

Without knowing the detailed history of the Handbook, one can easily appreciate the wealth of information it contains. From the very first the Handbook based its reflections and regulations upon the certain documents of the Church which promoted the Lay Apostolate. The text of the Handbook has swollen in volume over the course of its history by the addition of practical suggestions and actual apostolic experiences. There are no theories offered; recorded there are real life experiences which have been tried and proven true. The most recent edition of the Handbook has been 'inspiringly' updated in accord with the recent documents of the Church, the Revised Code of Canon Law, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. In its revision-and realignment of material-the Legion has not seen the need to reform or to change its essential charism or character. The Handbook of the Legion of Mary remains a CLASSIC of practical spiritual formation of the Lay Apostolate.

The Tesserà, which contains all the invariable prayers of the Legion of Mary, which are considered the very soul of the Legion, is the second important textbook of the Legion. Even though Active Legionaries are obliged to recite only the Catena daily, every Legionary is encouraged to pray all the prayers of the Tesserà every day. It is the first step on the way to Praetorian Membership. The daily recitation of the Tesserà energizes the very soul of the Legionary and it can serve as a mirror to examine the degree of one's Legionary progress toward Christian perfection. The praying of the Rosary, contemplating the various mysteries, is the sharing in the 'memory of Mary.' The Catena is the 'lyrical Sing-along' with Mary at the joyful Visitation. And the Faith-Prayer of the Legion focuses one's attention on the value of Faith and the ultimate purpose of the apostolic vocation.

The Cross of Christ is the third and most important textbook. It is by far the most influential text in the Legionary formation and it is the one textbook which relies most on personal courage and commitment. There on Calvary, in the shadow of the Cross, we are shown by Mary and Her Savior Son the surprisingly violent dimension of the apostolic vocation. We are reminded of the infinite bloody cost of the redemption of all mankind and the 'universal mortification' of the Word made Flesh during which the Church was painfully conceived.

There was no violence in the universe as God created it in infinite Love and impeccable Order. Violence was born in the rebellion by disobedient spirits--first of Angels, then of men. It would appear that the violence of Angels could not be undone. But the violence of men could be reversed. The Fall of Adam and Eve provoked a Divine Violence which 'would sanction the violence of man. Only in the Cross of Christ is a Christian introduced to the nature of Divine Violence.

As we keep vigil with the Sorrowful Mother of Jesus at the foot of the Cross, we can come to recognize, at the proclamation of the fourth Word of Jesus from the Cross, the unique nursery wherein the Legionary is made a child of Mary. And we can comprehend Calvary as the forge wherein the Legionary soldier is fashioned. And the Legionary can become aware of the spiritual warfare in which he is to engage. Divine Violence consists in Perfect Adoration of the True God springing from Total Obedience to the Will of the Father. This text most clearly portrays that redeeming Divine Violence to the Legionary.

In the Legionary Promise there are at least eight military references. As the member takes his place in the ranks of the Legion, there is mention of battle, and army, and marching. And there is mention also of victory.

Perhaps we do not achieve victory as often as we should, because we do not understand the Cross correctly or courageously stand under the Cross. We are intimidated by all the less-than-divine violence, actual and potential, that we experience--or imagine--at the hands of the world, the flesh, and the devil. The Crucified Lamb of God is the profligate expression of the Divine Violence which alone can absorb, absolve and abolish human violence. The Legionary must yearn to identify with the Obedient Warrior of Divine Violence, and His Obedient Mother, Who were promised after man's first disobedience. The Legionary must study the Cross, and he must learn to cherish the Cross. And he must obediently follow the example of Jesus and Mary.

These three textbooks are necessary study-matter for the Legionary who would seek perfection in the Legion. One without the other two may result in ineffectual combat and disgraceful and disheartening setbacks. All three intermingled in the daily life routine of the Legionary will bring to perfection the faithful member of the Legion. A Legionary may study the Handbook and quote each title and page without error; a Legionary may meditate fruitfully on every prayer of the Tessera. But unless a Legionary is willing to draw close to the Cross of Christ and sustain some scars in the spiritual warfare which is going on without respite, then the Legionary may never merit his Legionary 'Badge of Courage.'