

How the Legion of Mary can assist the pastor
By Rev. Father Francis J. Peffley

The parish Legion group is intended to be the extension of the priest, to be at the disposal of the pastor to do spiritual work that needs to be done.

Perhaps the two most important canons for pastors in the 1983 Code of Canon Law are numbers 528 and 529. These two canons describe the obligations and duties which pastors have to the flock entrusted to their care. At first glance, one is almost overwhelmed by the extent of the pastor's duties. Yet there is in the Church an organization which can greatly assist the priest in fulfilling these pastoral functions: the Legion of Mary.

As a lay organization approved by the Church, the Legion of Mary is a "pastoral tool" ready for use by the priest. Started in Ireland in 1921, it has developed and spread to almost every diocese in the world and presently has a membership of some two million active members and 15 million auxiliary (praying) members. The local unit of the Legion, termed a praesidium, is established in a parish with the permission of the pastor and operates under his supervision. A praesidium usually has a blend of six to twenty lay people who come together each week for prayer, discussion, pastoral reporting and spiritual formation; they then perform some apostolic work under the guidance of the spiritual director (i.e., pastor, assistant, deacon, religious sister, etc.).

The parish Legion group is intended to be the extension of the priest. Under his direction, legionaries perform two hours of apostolic work a week, such as visiting homes of new parishioners, shut-ins and those who have ceased to practice their Catholic Faith. Other works include door to-door visitation within the parish boundaries, visiting hospitals, prisons and nursing homes, running spiritual groups for youth, teaching CCD, etc. In effect, the legionaries are at the disposal of the pastor of the parish to do any spiritual work that needs to be done. It is in this light that we turn to canons 528 and 529 to see how the Legion can assist the pastor in his many pastoral duties.

The Code states that the pastor is obliged to see to it that "the word of God is announced to those living in the parish." He does this primarily through his homilies and other types of catechetical formation, which he gives to his parish owners. Right away a problem arises. What about those Catholics living within his parish boundaries who neither attend Mass on Sundays nor participate in any parish activities? It would seem that if the people do not come to the parish, the parish must go to the people. Of course, the priests could never visit all these people on their own, and yet the word of God must be announced "to those living in the parish." This is where the Legion comes in. The pastor, aware of families that have ceased to practice their Faith, would assign two of his legionaries to pay a friendly visit to them. Representing the pastor, the legionaries ask if there is anything they can do for the family or individual and offer a warm helping hand in the pastor's name. In this way, he can keep in touch with all members of his flock and make sure their spiritual needs are not being neglected.

The Legion promotes charity

The pastor is also to foster works "by which the spirit of the gospel, including issues involving social justice, is promoted." These works would include both the spiritual and corporal works of mercy such as converting the sinner, instructing the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, comforting the sorrowful, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless and visiting the sick and imprisoned. For these works many parish organizations are needed which facilitate the laity's obligation to practice works of charity. Many parishes have programs to help feed the poor, shelter the homeless and clothe the needy. The St. Vincent de Paul Society is an excellent example. The Legion, focusing on the spiritual, offers the laity an opportunity to visit the sick in nursing homes and hospitals, to visit prisons, to instruct people in the Faith and visit door-to-door within the parish boundaries. By promoting lay organizations like the legion and the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the pastor is fulfilling his call to foster works of service among his lay people.

The Code goes on to say that the pastor has to take "special care for the Catholic education of children and young adults." He can do this by insuring that there is a good adult-education course and CCD program in the parish. The praesidium could aid the pastor in this area by encouraging adults - both young and not so young -- to attend the adult-education program. A special visit could be made to parishioners to invite and encourage them to attend, and to insure that the children are enrolled in either the Catholic school or the parish CCD program. Another way to insure the Catholic education of youth is to have the Legion start a Junior or Intermediate praesidium in the parish. Junior praesidia are for children ages 8-13, and Intermediate groups for young people of high-school age. These praesidia give young parishioners weekly formation in both Catholic doctrine and the lay apostolate. The young people focus primarily on visiting nursing homes and shut-ins.

Visits reach every parishioner

Next, the pastor is asked to "make every effort with the aid of the Christian Faithful, to bring the gospel message also to those who have ceased practicing their religion or who do not profess the true faith." This is a monumental task, especially if the parish covers a large area. Some pastors take this canon very seriously and visit homes themselves. And yet, as individuals, they can only get to a fraction of the homes within the parish boundaries. This is why the Code states that he is to do this "with the aid of the Christian Faithful." There are two ways in which the Legion can assist the pastor in bringing the gospel message to both fallen-away Catholics and to those outside the Catholic Church. First, the praesidium could host a Peregrinatio Pro Christo evangelization project at the parish. A "PPC" is a one or two week door-to-door visitation program which legionaries from other areas take part in. It is not uncommon for the legionaries to visit 3,000 homes in just two weeks of visiting. This is an ideal way for the pastor to arrange for friendly visits to non-Catholics and Catholics alike (while not costing the parish a cent). A vital aspect of the PPC is to have the parish praesidium do the follow-up visits, which insures that important cases are not lost sight of. The second way a praesidium could help the pastor

fulfill the Church's desire to come into contact with every soul within the parish boundaries is to have "door-to-door visitation" as a weekly Legion assignment. Many Legion groups are doing this. A praesidium of twenty members guarantees forty hours of apostolic work per week for the pastor. It does not take long for a praesidium, which consistently does door-to-door visitation to cover a large portion of the parish. In this way, the pastor can reach those who do not come to Church and those who do not possess the true Faith.

The second paragraph of canon 528 stresses that the Most Holy Eucharist be made the center of the parish assembly. The pastor can accomplish this through well-planned Sunday Liturgies, by encouraging daily Mass attendance and by promoting Eucharistic Adoration and having Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament in the parish. His legionaries can promote all of these things on their visitations to Catholic families. For example, some pastors have the Legion run "Perpetual Adoration Chapels" in the parish. The members are in charge of encouraging parishioners to sign up for a weekly Holy Hour, and of making sure there are always adorers in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. If the parish has weekly or monthly Benediction, the legionaries could promote this during their apostolic visits.

The pastor is then asked to see to it that the Christian faithful "are nourished through a devout celebration of the sacraments and especially that they frequently approach the sacrament of the Most Holy Eucharist and the sacrament of penance." Regarding this, the pastor could have his legionaries visit shut-ins and those in nursing homes, hospitals and prisons, to ascertain their need of any of the sacraments e.g., anointing of the sick, Penance, Holy Communion, etc). The Legion members also would help those they visit to prepare for a fruitful and devout reception of the sacraments through prayer and conversation. An important aspect of their apostolic work is to encourage reception of the sacrament of penance which is much neglected today.

The pastor is to also encourage the practice of family prayer and bring families to "a knowing and active participation in the Sacred Liturgy" which he supervises under the authority of the Bishop, "being vigilant lest any abuses creep in." The Sunday homily is his primary means to foster prayer and explain the Mass. A secondary way is to have his legionaries promote the Enthronement of the Sacred Heart and the Pilgrim Virgin program in the homes they visit. By encouraging families to honor Our Lord through the Enthronement and to pray the rosary together during the week in which they have the Pilgrim Virgin Statue in their home, the legionaries can help fulfill the Church's desire for family prayer. In the familiar surroundings of the home, the Legion members can also explain the Mass and Church devotions to families in a personal way.

Canon 529 says that the pastor should:

..... come to know the faithful who have been entrusted to his care; therefore he is to visit families, sharing the cares, worries, and especially the griefs of the faithful, strengthening them in the Lord, and correcting them prudently if they are wanting in certain areas.

At first glance, this seems like an overwhelming request. Yet, with a band of trained lay apostles as his right arm, the pastor can fulfill this canon. By attending the weekly meeting of the praesidium, the priest can "come to know the faithful" through the reports which the legionaries give of their apostolic work. With the Legion members visiting the majority of the families, the pastor would learn of the homes that need a priestly visit. In this way, he could concentrate on the families that personally require his presence and pay them a pastoral visit himself. The qualities which the Code desires in the priest should also be present when the laity visit families: a willingness to share their cares, worries and griefs, to strengthen them and correct them prudently if need be. Since the legionaries are the extension of the pastor and act as his representative, they are expected to take these words to heart and apply them on their visits.

The pastor is also to "help the sick, particularly those close to death, refreshing them solicitously with the sacraments and commending their souls to God." One of the great benefits of door-to-door visitation is that the parish becomes aware of unknown sick and close-to-death parishioners. Recently on a Weekend Evangelization Project in Washington, D~C., an elderly Catholic shut-in was discovered who had not been to the sacraments in over twenty years. The legionaries informed the priest who visited the grateful woman, heard her confession and gave her Holy Communion.

The Code says that a special effort should be made to seek out the poor, the afflicted, the lonely, "those exiled from their own land, and similarly those weighed down with special difficulties." Since its beginning in 1921, the Legion has always had as its work the visiting of the poor, afflicted and the lonely. An example of this is the heroic work done by legionaries in Skid Row, Chicago, and in the many hostels for the homeless started and run by the Legion throughout the world. Some parish praesidia do street contact work in poor areas and seek out the deprived men and women who live on the streets. Pastors, concerned about those "exiled from their own land" have started Spanish praesidia in their parishes to reach the increasing number of Hispanic Catholics in their areas. Some Legion members are assigned to visit the growing communities of Korean and Vietnamese Catholics located within parish boundaries.

The pastor is also called to "labor diligently so that spouses and parents are supported in fulfilling their proper duties, and he is to foster growth in the Christian life within the family." Again we see the Church putting great emphasis on the family, which is the basic and most important unit in society. Therefore, to assist the pastor to the highest possible degree, his praesidium will focus attention on strengthening the family. The Legion has great privilege when it visits the homes of parishioners. Spouses and parents are encouraged in their duties toward each other and to their children, Church teachings on marriage and the family are explained. For example, one of the works of legionaries in South Korea is teaching married couples about Natural Family Planning on their door-to-door visitations. This has met with great success.

Lastly, canon 529 says that the pastor is to acknowledge and promote "the proper role which the lay members of the Christian Faithful have in the Church's mission by fostering their associations for religious purposes." He is also to help the laity realize that they are

members of both the diocese and the universal Church. The Legion, then, and other Church approved organizations should be promoted by the pastor for they help enable the laity to fulfill their obligation "of spreading the faith to the best of their ability" (Lumen Gentium, 17).

Associations like the Legion promote the proper role of the laity in the Church's mission, which is to "bring the light of Christ to all" (Lumen Gentium, 1). As a world-wide organization of nearly 2 million active and 15 million praying members of varied races and nationalities, the Legion helps its members to realize that they are part of the Church Universal and gives them a means through which they can be sanctified—a way of life which both develops holiness in its members and supplies the pastor with an invaluable means of caring for souls.