

The Legion's First President

By Frank Duff

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Elizabeth Mary Kirwan: Here is how the first Legionaries saw her: Small of stature, frail physique, in failing health even at that time, three-quarters of her life span already past, but the frailty ended there.

Mrs. Kirwan's spirit, her will, her courage, her whole character was strength – strength softened by holiness, and by charity, and by sympathetic understanding; and that strength was what was needed above else...in a guardian of that new movement into which enthusiastic, heroic youth was about to throw itself into such numbers and to face up to such desperate problems.

She sat at the head of the table with a calm dignity which was all her own. Her mode of speech was pleasing, her manner courtly. Her memory for cases was amazing. She had the details of each one at her fingertips. Her judgment was sound. She had a very keen sense of humor. She was the first to discern its spark, she enjoyed it herself, she knew its value to the work, and she fanned it. It was good to hear her laugh, and it made one want to laugh with her. Perhaps thereby she she fashioned the mold which gave yet another pleasing characteristic to the Legion.

She never deviated from a principle. Still even as such was at stake, the kindness of those steady, bright blue eyes would soften the finality of her tone. But oh the impressiveness of that condemnation which with true judicial detachment proceeded occasionally from her lips:

“You have broken a role of the Legion, the merit of the deed is lost!”

Week in and week out it, in regard to each member and to each case, it fell to her to insist on full performance and due detail. At that table at Myra House the firm and holy tradition, which is the Legion system, was established. The rules once framed passed into her hands, and were accepted by her with a degree of responsibility and respect which Legionaries have laughingly likened to the Law giving on Mount Sinai. In Mrs. Kirwan one can now clearly see the providential preparation for a desired result. ... Let those who talk of strictness meditate on that.

The spreading out of the organization brought the need for a governing body. Found faithful in the two (praesidia) presidencies, which she had been filling simultaneously, Mrs. Kirwan was the unanimous selection for the presidency of that governing body. With incomparable wisdom and capacity she discharged its duties for five years. Then suddenly she announced that she must yield place to someone younger than herself. She was physically quite able to continue; also, it was far from clear who should take her place. So urgent entreaty was made for her to continue. (She agreed) to make a novena for further guidance. This done, she almost triumphantly announced that her decision was right and must stand.

The Augustinians and the Legion between them wove the fabric of Mrs. Kirwan's spiritual life and formed her for eternity. With her, the battle of life over, may our Legion reassemble with out the loss of anyone in the Kingdom of God's love and glory.

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Editor's note: Let her example be a model for all Legion presidents of how to perform in office and when and how to step aside for new blood.