

Frank Duff: A New Evangelist Ahead of His Time

by [Tim Drake](#)

The Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Paul, and Venerable Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen are all excellent models and intercessors for the New Evangelization. However, for those looking for a lay model, there can be none finer than the unassuming Irish layman, Servant of God Frank Duff. Not only should his name be far more widely recognized among Catholics generally, but he was a tireless worker for the New Evangelization long before the term came into vogue. In many ways, he was a man ahead of his time. He was a kind of John the Baptist, paving the way for the New Evangelization that followed.

Born in Dublin, Ireland, near the end of the 1800s, Frank was the eldest of seven children to John and Susan Duff. Like his parents, Duff pursued a career in the civil service. He excelled in the treasury department. A devoted Catholic, Duff was inspired to go deeper in his faith after becoming involved with a group of Catholic men and witnessing the poverty of inner-city Dublin through the work of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.



Inspired by St. Louis de Montfort's seminal work, *True Devotion to Mary*, Duff became Marian in his spirituality. He adopted the motto *Totus Tuus* ("Totally Yours"), which Pope John Paul II later would adopt as his own papal motto.

A modern pioneer in encouraging the lay apostolate, Duff founded the Legion of Mary in 1921. Its purpose is the spiritual development of its members and the advancement of the reign of Christ through Our Lady. Members participate in the life of the parish by reaching out to families, visiting the sick in their homes and hospitals, meeting weekly for prayer and fellowship, and carrying out a weekly apostolic work in union with Jesus through Mary.

Duff founded the Legion of Mary at a time when the Irish clergy were suspicious of the laity, especially of a movement which involved a mixture of men and women. This clericalism made it difficult for him at first.

Yet, the Legion of Mary was a kind of predecessor to the modern lay ecclesial movements, involving tens of thousands in the Catholic faith in a much deeper way. There has been a

proliferation of such associations in the Church since the Second Vatican Council. Currently, the Pontifical Council for the Laity's Directory of International Associations of the Faithful lists at least 120 canonically recognized associations of the faithful. The Legion of Mary was among the first. Today, the Legion of Mary has more than 4 million active members and 10 million auxiliary members in some 170 countries.

Duff was a man ahead of his time in more ways than one. Long before Pope Francis spoke of desiring a "bruised Church" which is "on the streets," Duff was carrying out his evangelization work through home visits and on the streets of Dublin, as he ministered to those on the margins of society at that time: the poor, single mothers, prostitutes, homosexuals, and alcoholics. He sought to relieve both their temporal and spiritual poverty through the saving Word of Jesus Christ.

He wrote about, and carried out, the work of evangelization, urging all baptized Catholics to share Christ with others, especially the non-Catholic.

"Converting," he wrote in his booklet *Evangelization*, "is basic and essential to the very life of the Church. It was the subject of the last instruction left to the infant Church by our Lord. It was the very peak note or crescendo of His preaching...Then how does it become possible that Catholics can dispense themselves from what Jesus so overwhelmingly laid down?"

His plentiful writings contain many gems that are as relevant today as when they were when written some 70 years ago.

In his writings he foresaw the problems facing the secularization of Catholic education as well our present crisis of faith and the embrace of modern atheism.

"An inert laity is only two generations removed from non-practice," wrote Duff in 1948. "Non-practice is only two generations away from non-belief."

Writing about those who have no desire to talk about religion, Duff had this to say in his booklet, *The Spirit of the Home Visit*:

Those who do not want to talk religion must have religion talked to them. This is the contrary idea to the argument which is so often astoundingly put forward; that people do not want to be approached on the subject of religion and, therefore, they should not be approached. If yielded to, that argument would mean the abandonment of all apostleship and the ultimate destruction of religion.

Disciples make disciples. This is at the heart of Duff's encouragement to Legion members and all Catholics. He saw evangelization as our duty as baptized disciples of Christ.

Home visits were a necessary part of Legion of Mary membership. Said Duff of those whom members would visit: "We must overcome their reluctance and sweetly manage to get them to receive us and to listen to the unpopular thing that we represent."

Duff was also a prophetic voice in describing the Church's universal call to holiness. He did this 48 years before the Second Vatican Council document *Lumen Gentium* laid out that "everyone, whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness." Already, in 1916, at the age of 27, he published his first pamphlet, titled *Can we be Saints?* In it he stressed the idea that everyone, without exception, was called to be a saint, and that we could attain sainthood through the practice of our Catholic faith.

"In the heart of every right-thinking Catholic, God has implanted the desire to become a

Saint,” writes Duff. “Yet few make a serious attempt to realize the ambition.”

How does Duff define sainthood?

“One who, with the object of pleasing God, does his ordinary duties extraordinarily well,” he writes. “Such a life may be lived out without a single wonder in it, arouse little notice, be soon forgotten, and yet be the life of one of God’s dearest friends.”

In 1965, Pope Paul VI invited Duff to attend the Second Vatican Council as a lay observer. The assembled bishops gave him a standing ovation during the Council’s fourth and final session.

In one of his speeches, Duff speaks of embracing our “littleness.” It’s a practice that Duff not only wrote about, but something that he put into practice in his daily life. The humble Duff desired no recognition or accolades. He preferred the back pew. He seldom traveled. He always pointed to Jesus Christ and his Mother. His life of service was recognized through the official petition introducing his cause for beatification in July 1996. Servant of God Frank Duff’s cause is currently under investigation.

Whether or not we are members of the Legion of Mary, we would all do well to familiarize ourselves with the life, writings, and work of Frank Duff. We should emulate his “littleness” in our own work of spreading the Gospel through the New Evangelization. We should implore his intercession in this important work, and pray that his cause be advanced, that we might come to know him, Jesus Christ, and the Blessed Mother more intimately. We, and the Church, would be better for it. Servant of God, Frank Duff, pray for us!

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(The views expressed in this column are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the positions of Catholic Pulse or the Knights of Columbus.)