

THE ART OF HOME VISITATION

A SUCCESSFUL PRAESIDIUM

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The art of home visitation pertains to all the many times that you and I as legionaries have occasion to go to a private home i.e., Auxiliary call, sick or condolence call, a specific case call as a fallen-away/marriage validation or simply on a house to house basis. It is this last category that I would like to explore first.

Many times we are asked for a specific approach that maybe memorized and used by all legionaries. Actually, the making of an approach at a home is very personal and like all "selling," depends greatly on the personality and ability of the one making the approach. In a definite way, it must become a rather personal matter and as all good salesmen can attest, it is perfected by trying and changing until the "perfect" approach is ascertained. Also, in reality the perfect approach depends on the personality of the person being contacted.

The writer has found the following approach (on a house to house basis) produces the best results for himself. The bell is rung and the party residing there opens the door. Immediately, we respond with "Good evening or good day, we are neighbors of yours from St. Ambrose Parish and we're going through the neighborhood welcoming people to our church." Then pause and smile.

You have quickly indicated that you are not selling merchandise or asking for a donation and have created a friendly atmosphere by stating that you are "neighbors" with all the good connotation that the word contains. By pausing and smiling, you have thrown the ball to the resident and now he or she must respond.

If the response is, "We already belong to a Protestant Church," then we respond by asking, "Oh, are you active in your religion?" If the indication is that they do attend every Sunday, teach Bible study, etc., then we ask them to pray for church unity. We ask if there are any questions that we might answer for them on the Catholic Church and prior to departing, ask if "they would be offended if we left a piece of literature explaining some facet of the Catholic religion?" Normally, if the literature is offered in this manner, they will accept it.

If the response to our original question is that they only attend the non-Catholic church at Easter or Christmas, then we invite them to come to one of the Masses the following Sunday, perhaps mentioning some event like coffee and doughnuts after a certain Mass, etc. Also, literature is offered.

If the person answering the door indicates being Catholic, then we explain that we are from the Legion of Mary and are completing the parish census for Father. We fill out a census card.

If the person is a fallen-away, we lightly attempt, if possible, to ascertain the reason and length of time and offer a Miraculous Medal, parish bulletin and try to leave with the opportunity of returning at a later date.

A non-Christian would also be invited to attend one of the Masses and if the person showed some interest would also be offered literature. A fallen-away can sometimes be hurting within and may respond in a hostile and unpleasant manner. The two legionaries must endeavor to turn the sharp remark with a Christ-like answer. A smile goes a long way to solicit a friendly demeanor.

Why go house to house?

The answer is simple. The home is the bastion of the family and thus of society itself. It is to the home that we must go if we are to capture society. Our Blessed Lord gave us the command to go out and to tell the Good News to all. Naturally, we utilize many vehicles, i.e., book barrow, apostolate to the crowd, rest home visitation etc., but the prime work of the Legion of Mary is going into the home. "It is the apple of the Legions' apostolic eye." It is the vehicle "par excellence" in putting into action Frank Duffs' thought of winning souls to Christ who have never heard of the truths of the Catholic Faith.

Naturally, I would stress that our home contact is distinguished from some militant non-Catholic groups by our "soft sell." The fact that we approach and enter the home with Christ-like humility and respect and as the Handbook states, "with cap in hand, as an inferior to a superior" sets the tone of our visit. If this attitude is always maintained, there can be little possibility for errors.

Some years ago, we used to say, "Are there any Catholics living here?" Immediately, we had set the tone that we were interested only in Catholics and the response of "no" was quickly followed by the closing of the door. Also, if there were Catholics residing there who had stopped practicing or joined another religion, they felt that they were now non-Catholics and would say "no."

So, we switched to saying, "Are there any baptized Catholics living here?", then, the response sometimes heard would be "Well yes, I was baptized but now I am not practicing or am happy in another religion."

But the approach, "We wish to welcome everyone to our church" elicits a much more positive response in every category of persons contacted. Always endeavor, if at all possible, to allow an excuse or opportunity for a return visit. "We've certainly enjoyed our visit and hope you permit us to return in the future."

Fallen-aways.

Don't allow yourself to become drawn into an argument. As Br. Duff pointed out so aptly, no one is ever brought into the Church by winning an argument.

Resentment will follow whereas you want to strongly endeavor to keep the discussion on a friendly and cool level. Naturally, you may want to correct an error or erroneous statement, but try to remember that the person facing you has probably stored up a lifetime of hostility and that you are his sounding board. As with every good psychologist, listening sometimes is the greatest remedy for hurt feelings and frustration.

I have found on calls that it may be necessary because of great hostility to the Church, to not even discuss religion on the first, second or even third visit. Then gradually, when the right occasion occurs (and it will, have no fear), you will be able to steer the topic of discussion to religion in general and Catholicism in particular.

An interesting example of how we as legionaries approach a home was once given by Father Robert Bradshaw. It seems that a zealous legionary mentioned in her report that she had called on twelve houses. All the residents were non-Catholics. The legionary was courteous in her approach, explained her mission and said "Would you be interested in the Catholic Church." In each case the answer was "No." Another legionary at the meeting commented, "Sister, when you saw after the first few houses that your approach was not getting you anywhere, did you consider trying a different approach? With a blush the legionary sister had to admit she had not thought of that. The outcome was that the praesidium resolved that it would be a good thing if each pair of legionaries could go out on visitation equipped with at least three or four different "approaches." These "approaches" could be tried out and experience would show which ones succeeded. Some weeks later the legionary sister gave her report. This time she was highly elated. She (with her partner) had approached twelve non-Catholic families. All twelve had accepted a leaflet on the Catholic Church. How explain the change in fortune? Everyone wanted to know.

The answer was simple. By this stage the legionary sister had discovered by experimenting that the framing of a question is all important. Certain questions invite the answer "NO." As for instance, "Are you interested in . . . ?" So she was careful. This time she did not ask people, "Are you interested in. . . ?" After the usual greetings and courtesies she simply said "Would you be offended if we offered you a little leaflet on the Catholic Church?" They all said, "No." And they accepted the leaflet. The remarkable thing was that the legionary had asked the same question (more or less) as she had asked some weeks previously only she had expressed it differently.

Objective

Our objective on every call is to make that person visited a more spiritual and Christ-like individual to feel the warmth and love of Christ's mercy.

On an Auxiliary call, we normally have a person already in full communion with the Church. So our job is to perhaps make a saint even holier. Naturally, on Auxiliary calls we thank the person for saying the Legion prayers and perhaps give a little insight into the workings of the Legion in our parish and in the world. The higher degrees, such as Adjutorian, etc., are taken into consideration.

If on a consolation or sick call, we try to bring to the person the meaning and purposes of God's demands and to endeavor to show them the great opportunity of uniting their suffering and sorrow with that of our Blessed Lord's suffering on the Cross.

If a prospective convert, we attempt to bring the truth and fullness residing in Catholicism.

And so, we might summarize the art of home visitation:

- Friendliness
- Developing a rapport
- Business-like
- Alertness
- Questions asked indirectly
- Opportunity for return visit

A successful praesidium

The Legion in the parish and the reasons for its success and failure could probably fill a manuscript. But I think the following outline by Father Robert Bradshaw provides much food for thought.

A. Defective Discipline: How many of us keep to the forefront of our minds the fact that the Legion is an army. That it is very much an army is stressed quite often in the Handbook. Yet, have we treated it as an army?

Real discipline is often missing in a praesidium. Flimsy excuses are made and accepted when allocated work was not done; punctuality is flouted; irregular members are kept on the roll; badly prepared reports are accepted and tolerated by the president; whispering is not frowned upon; etc., etc. That is not the sort of army the Handbook visualizes. It will certainly be inefficient, incompetent. Certainly it is bad character training. What a contrast to the praesidium where discipline prevails, a discipline that is based on love of obedience, and where the members are instilled with loyalty for a cause more glorious than any military army fights for.

B. Planning: The first thing the chief officer of any army does is to call together his other officers and work out a plan of campaign. The exact objective will be discussed, the various possible methods of approach, etc. Legion officers are often guilty of defective planning for their praesidium. The apostolate then becomes vague and haphazard. The note of urgency so vital is missing. The lack of planning is often reflected in a president's agenda and worksheet. There are no new ideas portrayed there, no new suggestions, no question of extension, nothing about discussing new methods of approach, no proposals for heroic work, no attempts to stimulate interest in Envoyship, in the Perogratatio or Incolae. In other words, there is a staleness, a lifelessness, an indifference in the praesidium, all for lack of proper planning.

C. Reports: We all know of cases where legionaries -the "master" as well as the "apprentice" -knock at a door and have only a very vague notion of what they are going to say, or even what it is they are aiming at or hope to achieve at that particular house. The very vagueness is discouraging to the legionary, and it can give a false impression to the members of the household who are being visited. Whose fault is this? Not the legionary's. No. The praesidium must shoulder responsibility for allowing legionaries to go visiting without clear instruction on what to aim at, what approaches to use, what techniques to adopt, etc. In other words, one of a praesidium's main functions is to train members for their Legion work (the other main function of a praesidium is, of course, to develop spirituality in the legionary). This training is most effectively given by means of good reports. It is the duty of the president to train members how to utilize their reports for the fullest possible benefit of the other members of the praesidium.

A good report should contain reference to three things, namely:

- 1) what the legionary aimed at in the particular case;
- 2) the approach he used;
- 3) some indication that the work was linked with the doctrine of the Mystical Body.

(The last one is mentioned because the prime benefit of the visit must be for the **legionary's** own soul.) Many legionaries, unfortunately, omit to mention one of the most important elements of a report, namely, what the legionary said; in other words, the approach used.

D. Allocation of work: If work is worth doing it is worth doing well. Therefore, it is not advisable to give a praesidium too large an area of a parish to cover. If our aim is (as it should be) to contact every soul, then it is better to take an area of workable size, for instance a specific number of streets, realizing that it would probably be impossible for the limited number of legionaries in the praesidium to cover every street in the entire parish within any reasonable degree of time. In addition to the plans that will already have been made (we hope) by the Spiritual Director and the other officers, the praesidium will now plan out and discuss the different types of approach to be used for each of the different categories encountered, i.e., in any one street you can find;

- a.) good Catholics
- b.) indifferent Catholics
- c.) lapsed Catholics
- d.) Protestants
- e.) Jews
- f.) non-Christians
- g.) children who attend non-Catholic schools, (and perhaps receiving no Catholic instruction)
- h.) children who do attend Catholic schools
- i.) "mixed" marriages
- j.) married
- k.) singles
- l.) teenagers, etc., etc.

Straight away it will be obvious that there is really a great deal of work in even any one street or perhaps apartment complex. But it needs to be sorted out. The president may decide it would be a good thing to give one whole street to one pair of legionaries with its assortment of residents. But it is important that the assortment or variety be recognized in order that it may be catered for. When we find Catholics, we must remember to explain the Auxiliary membership and endeavor to enroll them, etc.

E. Heroic: If so few praesidia rise to very high standards it may be because heroic work is not given to at least one pair of legionaries each week. The Handbook states, "As a principle, every praesidium should be doing **some** work which can be called heroic." Having some heroic work always on the agenda will have a marvelous effect on the members. For one thing, it presents a challenge. It does, moreover, bring home to legionaries the absolute necessity of relying on Our Lady. One might even say, to put it bluntly, that heroic work **drives** legionaries to pray; it makes them realize the absolute need of it for their work. And often it is only when certain types of heroic work are being done that legionaries begin to realize perhaps for the first time the priceless value of a human soul.

We have read with pride of the martyrdoms of legionaries in China and in the Congo. Fierce persecution, instead of crushing the Legion, only served to bring out the brilliant heroism of even very "ordinary" legionaries.

We marvel and admire, but surely we ought not have to wait for the next persecution to bring out the heroism and full glory of Catholic men and women, boys and girls. Confronting us on all sides is a sea of legionary souls, a mass of untapped spirituality. If we hold our standards higher, our legionaries will look higher. If we have sufficient faith in Our Lady's power there are no limits to what we may hope to achieve, both in our own souls and in the world around us. The Legion of Mary, if faithfully and effectively administered, can change souls, and the souls can change a parish.