

The Frank Duff Story

By a legionary of Mary
General Pamphlet No.gen0014

Francis Michael Duff was born on 7th June, 1889. He was an exceptionally good runner and cyclist and also very fond of tennis and cricket. His mother was an accomplished pianist and singer. Frank learnt many lovely songs from her. She was a person of great humility and simplicity. She patiently taught her children their prayers, trained them in their virtues and ensured that they attended Sunday Mass. Frank developed a great love of literature. By the age of 10, he read a great number of the classical novels of Walter Scott and Charles Dickens, as well as Cardinal Wiseman's, "Lectures on Science and Revealed Religion" and "Reflections on the Eucharist", et cetera. He also became acquainted with Cardinal [Blessed John Henry] Newman's writings. He also had a very delicate and precise conscience and a great sense of humour. In 1899, Frank was enrolled as a pupil in Blackrock College. He disliked mathematics but preferred history and languages. From the age of 13, he learnt Irish, English, Greek, Latin and French.

The Blessed Eucharist became the driving force in his life from this time.

Tom Fallon introduced Frank to Matt Lalor who was the president of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society and the Council of Ireland. In October, 1913, Frank joined the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. He read many books about God and the lives of the saints. He also read deeply into the French mystics and studied the Theology of Our Lady while spending days at the Cistercian Monastery. He was overwhelmed when he read a book about the Blessed Virgin called "The Knowledge of Mary" by Januarius De Concilio, which gave Our Lady a prominent place in the Mystical Body. After returning home, Frank read every book on Our Lady that he could find, English or French. He dedicated himself to spend his life spreading an appreciation of Our Lady and training people to express their appreciation by serving her.

Incorporated with the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, he began to visit poor people and tried to help them both spiritually as well as supplying their material needs. Realising that they were neglecting Mass and the Sacraments, he began his own apostolate by privately visiting each house nightly. He gave out Miraculous Medals, Scapulars and Holy Water. This gentle and persuasive appeal encouraged many to return to the full practice of the Catholic faith. Poor people were being offered a free breakfast at the protestant Proselytising Centre on the proviso that they took part in a Protestant service. This prompted Frank to contemplate assisting Joe Gabbett at the Saint Vincent de Paul Society "Breakfast Centre", which he enthusiastically did. In addition, to help resolve this problem, Frank Duff recited the Rosary outside the Proselytising Centre and gave little sermons to Catholics about their betrayal of their religion. Fortunately, after years of picketing with Tom Fallon, along with other volunteers, the Proselytising Centre was closed.

He recalled reading Matthew 10: 32-33: Jesus said, 'Every one therefore that shall confess me before men, I will also confess him before my Father who is in heaven. But he that shall deny me before men, I will also deny him before my Father who is in heaven.' Frank was deeply impressed. Frank later had the privilege of joining "The Pioneer Total Abstinence Association." The

Association was formed in honour of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and for the promotion of total abstinence from alcohol through prayer and self-denial. After seeing a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus at the Breakfast Centre, Frank became intensely devoted to the Sacred Heart and the accounts of Our Divine Lord's revelations to Saint Margaret Mary Aloccoque in 1675.

The 9th Promise made by Our Lord to St. Margaret Mary is: "I will bless every home in which a picture or statue of My Sacred heart shall be displayed and honoured"

This so enthralled Frank that he zealously promoted "The Enthronement of the Sacred Heart" in homes and encouraged enrolments in the Brown Scapular. During the Great War of 1914 to 1918, Frank and Joe Gabbett were appointed 'apostolic laymen' to the Portobello Military Barracks, during which they encouraged more than two thousand soldiers to be faithful to their religion. The soldiers were also encouraged in the use of the Brown Scapular and Miraculous Medal and to regularly recite the Rosary. From 1915 to 1922, Frank only went to Father Brown, a Jesuit priest in Saint Francis Xavier Church, Dublin for spiritual guidance. Father Brown was renowned for his great sanctity and he made the greatest contribution to Frank's spiritual development. He gave Frank a proper appreciation of prayer and especially he taught him how to say the Divine Office.

In 1917, Frank was appointed President of the Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Patrick's Conference, which set up catechism classes for spiritually neglected children. In 1918, he came into possession of a small book "True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin." by Saint Louis Marie Grignion de Montfort. (At the time, he was a Blessed in the Church.) Tom Fallon, a great worker for the Church and of great organizing ability, compelled Frank to read the book repeatedly, until its message finally sank into his soul. Father Paschal Geoffries gave Frank twelve lectures about Our Blessed Lady as the foundation of all Christian understanding and spirituality. These 'Lectures' were purely theological and they gave an even greater appreciation of the role of Our Lady in the sanctification of souls.

On December 23, 1918, after his father's death, Frank, who had become the breadwinner of the family, entered the Civil Service and was assigned to the Department of Finance. Having educated himself in higher mathematics and science, he invented a system of calculus and was later invited to London to demonstrate his system to the officials of the London Treasury who also adapted this system. Frank later purchased a large spacious house at Dartmouth Square. There was a mutual faithfulness and dependence with Frank and his mother. Thus, Frank acquired wonderful and enriching insights into the meaning and beauty of true motherhood. At the monthly meetings of a parish governing body known as the "Association of Our Lady of Mercy", Frank gave talks on the "True Devotion of Mary." Seventeen days later the Legion of Mary was born. The lowest grouping in the hierarchy of the Legion is called a Praesidium.

On September 17, 1921, the first meeting was held with Frank Duff and fifteen young women. Elizabeth Kirwin was elected President. Elizabeth had introduced herself to him in the chapel porch after noticing Frank praying in the chapel. The first apostolic work of legionaries was visitations to patients at a hospital. They put into practice what they learned from De Montfort's "True Devotion to Mary". Frank later decided to work to reclaim Dublin's 'street-walkers'. He was to establish an enclosed retreat for prostitutes at the Convent of the Sisters of Charity. He and five legionaries went to a brothel to call prostitutes to the Retreat. The girls went to Confession and received Holy Communion. It was a spiritual miracle, one of many 'Miracles on Tap'.

A second praesidium was set up including some of these women with the title "Our Lady of the Sacred Heart" which name was later called the "Sancta Maria". Through the Minister for Local

Government, a suitable place was found for the girls when they finished their retreat. The premises were called "Sancta Maria." The Secretary of the Department of Local Government set up a Commission of Enquiry to examine the problems of homeless and destitute men. Frank was consulted by the Commission to write his views on the proposal of a hostel. Due to his impressive ideas and having previously been employed with the Civil Service, Frank's proposal was submitted to the Minister for Local Government who gave approval. The Archbishop of Dublin also gave his final approval.

The Morning Star Hostel was opened on 25 March 1927, the Feast of the Annunciation. Frank Duff and Matt Lalor were appointed trustees. Matt Lalor also practiced the True Devotion to Mary and Frank was edified and encouraged by his example. This gave Frank the enthusiasm and energy to tackle the many problems of the Morning Star Hostel. Frank sold his house in Dartmouth Square and took residence close to the Morning Star Hostel. The hostel was the first providing breakfast, supper and bed for homeless and destitute men in Dublin. Every destitute was regarded as Christ in disguise. Frank Duff was a man of extraordinary gentleness, kindness and patience, a humble servant of poor men, daily cutting bread, pouring mugs of tea, preparing beds and listening patiently to their problems.

The President of the Executive Council of the Irish Free State, a devout Catholic, being impressed by the outcome of the Morning Star Hostel, gave Frank permission for the setting up of the Regina Coeli Hostel for destitute woman and unmarried mothers and children. Daily programs included Mass and Holy Communion, recitation of Divine Office, Rosary and the 'Legion prayers'. Frank was the "handyman" at the hostel. A "discreet" marriage bureau also operated. Residents were very faithful to the Sunday Mass. Children were regularly sent to school. Frank's intense love of children was very great indeed.

In March 1928, Frank journeyed to Glasgow. The Archbishop approved the Legion of Mary and so "Our Lady of Lourdes" praesidium was set up on 23 April. A praesidium was also started in Edinburgh.

The first English praesidium was started 1929. The Vicar of Rome had a great interest in the work of the Legion. He invited Frank Duff to come to Rome to speak in detail on the Legion in 1930. He aimed to set up an organisation to foster community programs through brotherly charity, co-operation and particularly among the rural community. Frank looked forward to visiting Pope Pius XI, who had been repeatedly making urgent appeals to Catholics that the role of the laity in the Church mission necessitated them becoming involved in Catholic Action. No meeting occurred on this occasion. Earlier, in 1925, the Pope had consulted the Prime Minister of Ireland to give Frank a personal letter of introduction to the Pope.

In 1931, Frank was again invited to Rome and was later finally introduced to Pope Pius XI, who then became well acquainted with the Legion and approved that the Legion should spread over the entire world. In 1932, many bishops and priests attended the "International Eucharistic Conference" in Dublin. Many were introduced to the Legion at this Conference, and they later set up the Legion in their dioceses. Noteworthy growth occurred in Los Angeles and Saint Louis, Missouri. Envoys spread the Legion throughout Canada and South America.

In October 1934, Frank retired from his occupation at the Civil Service and became fully involved at the Legion headquarters and directed the Legion from his headquarters at Regina Coeli. Excluding Sundays, devoted to prayer and recreation, he handled all correspondence with

legionaries and Legion Councils worldwide. He spent hours in the hostel, counselling some afflicted souls with an extraordinarily gentle and patient nature. He had a profound understanding of Church doctrines and this inspired him to exhort all legionaries to become quite competent at discussing doctrines, especially doctrines of the Mystical Body, and True Devotion to Mary. Frank started and was first president of the Concilium, the governing Council of the Legion. He had a profound knowledge of the geography, history and more importantly, social factors affecting each country in which the Legion operated.

His facility for grasping the various complexities of a difficult problem and for finding a viable solution convinced experienced legionaries that the Holy Spirit endowed him with the gift of wisdom to an eminent degree. Through the virtue of humility, he cultivated habits of more sacrifice, more prayer and more patience. He also kept in mind that Christ suffered humiliations and frustrations.

Many years after its beginning, the Legion Handbook was eventually given the "Imprimatur" in the diocese of Dublin in 1928. By 1965, the "Peregrinatio pro Christo" (Pilgrimage for Christ) movement had already been established by legionaries aged 16 to 24 from the University of Dublin. They devoted part of their holidays to spreading the faith abroad. Many lapsed Catholics returned to the practice of Catholicism. The "Peregrinatio pro Christo" was previously called "holiday apostolate". The "Peregrinatio pro Christo" took its name from the great missionary journeys of the early Irish monks of the 6th and 7th centuries who brought the light of Christ to shine through the darkness of Europe following the barbarian invasions. The Peregrinatio also developed the "Inoclae Mariae" (Sojourn on Mary's behalf) in which legionaries volunteer to spend a year or so overseas in evangelization work.

In the Philippines, the Legion proved extraordinarily effective in winning back Catholics to a proper appreciation of Catholicism. From here, the Legion extended throughout East Asia, New Guinea, Australia and Pacific Islands. On 11 September, 1965, he was in Rome once more. Frank's profound knowledge of Roman history enabled him to appreciate so many sacred places such as the Coliseum, the Catacombs, the great basilicas and the Vatican. He visited the Coliseum because it represented to him the noblest form of martyrdom for the faith of Christianity.

Before going to Rome, he studied the Decrees of the Second Vatican Council, such as the Decree on the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, et cetera. The Vatican II Council documents on "The Ministry and Life of Priests" and the "Apostolate of the Laity" were considered by Frank as very significant and interrelated. He was delighted when at the conclusion of the session on the "Apostolate of the Laity", the Council Fathers decreed that, "...priests should be preoccupied with forming apostles." Also, "when the apostolate is one of making the Gospel known and man holy, the laity must be specially formed to engage in conversation with believers and non-believers in order to manifest Christ's message to all men."

In December, 1965, after having given talks about the Legion to bishops of various Religious Orders, Frank had private discussions with (Blessed) Pope Paul VI who praised and encouraged the Legion in its pious aims to achieve a great advantage of the Catholic apostolate thus proving itself to be an instrument of astonishing efficacy for the building up and spreading of Catholicism. In context, the Legion was to keep in close union with the Church by loyalty to the Pope and by absolute unity with the bishops and priests.

Frank's key to success is to have an intense belief in the spiritual order. Combined with his Breviary, Rosary and assistance at daily Mass he emphasised a spiritual unity with the paramount importance of his missionary life. He said: "I have intense belief in the spiritual order and I have never sacrificed it to anything else. It is my conviction that anything good that emerged from efforts has proceeded from that stressing of the supernatural. It meant that I was depending on the Lord and his Mother and not on myself."

Frank told the legionaries that they ought to imitate Our Lady in all the virtues, to aspire especially after Our Lady's faith as the power that could conquer the world for Christ, and that faith meant action on our part and courage. Every person was another Christ and therefore had great potentiality and was capable of heroic conduct. Frank understood that God uses the weak things of this world to confound the strong. This was reflected by his choice of legionaries who had a good Legion spirit. Their Promise gave their consent that they were to be an instrument of God. He also told the legionaries, "The cross is the safest way."

Frank was un-doubtably gifted with great powers of reasoning and an extremely logical mind. When a dilemma presented itself, then his logic became supremely simple: "Does God want this? If so, we must go ahead." Because his faith demanded that he give his utmost, he was prepared to suffer misunderstanding, ridicule, weariness of body and spirit. His constant struggle against fear caused him much mental and physical suffering. His defence against fear was "where lies the faith of duty?" When outlining his ideas on holiness, he said: "The definition of sanctity is heroic virtue, and heroism means the defying of fear." He avoided pessimism, (the doctrine of the ultimate triumph of evil over good) by saying: "The Legion is devoted to Mary who is the torch of faith and who destroys all heresies."

He was confident that the Legion is a well equipped instrument in God's hand and will be used effectively by the Church to combat whatever evils may afflict the world and to cope with whatever crisis may arise. In 1969, the "Iron Curtain" was being drawn aside just a little, so Frank encouraged a group of legionaries to go on a Peregrinatio to Russia, but not to involve themselves with politics. In September 1978, Frank encouraged the Russian government to look favourably on a proposal to have the Legion introduced in Russia. He also had a great love for the Russian Orthodox Church as a sister to the Catholic Church and appreciated its unique role in Russian history. Realizing that many Protestant denominations were allowed into Russia and Russians who were rather weak with the Orthodox Church converted to them, Frank was convinced that the Orthodox Church would benefit immensely if they adopted the Legion system. He sought and obtained permission from the Vatican to propose the Legion with the intention to respect the traditions of the Orthodox Church and be faithful to that commitment.

On May 10, 1979, at the Vatican, Frank and 3 other legionaries were invited by Pope (Saint) John Paul II, to assist at the Pope's Mass in his private chapel. On November 7, 1980, Frank died on the afternoon of the 1st Friday staring at the picture of the Sacred Heart. He had a wonderful devotion to the Sacred Heart and its associated 1st Friday devotion. Father Ahearne and other priests celebrated Mass in the presence of a great number of legionaries. Among them were government ministers, bishops, priests, nuns, and religious. There were nurses from hospitals, school children, – poor women and children from the Regina Coeli and the residents of the Morning Star.

On November 21, the remains were transferred to Saint Andrew's Church where the Most Rev. James Kavanagh, Auxiliary Bishop of Dublin, con-celebrated Mass with a large crowd of spiritual

directors of the Legion. Canon Francis Ripley, a lifelong friend of Frank's, preached the homily. The following morning, a Solemn Requiem Mass was con-celebrated by his Eminence the Cardinal, archbishops, many other bishops and Legion spiritual directors.
