

### Senatus of Melbourne – One Thousand Meetings

It is with thanksgiving to God and to Our Lady that we're today holding this 1000th meeting of the Melbourne Senatus of the Legion of Mary.

Eleven years after the first meeting of the Legion in Dublin on 7<sup>th</sup> September 1921, the Legion had been brought to Australia by Fr Henry Bakker. He had learnt about the Legion when he met Frank Duff at the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin in 1932. That same year on his return to Melbourne, with the authorisation of Archbishop Mannix he held the Legion's first Australian meeting in his parish of St Mary of the Immaculate Conception, Ascot Vale (now happily my own parish, where a plaque commemorates this inaugural meeting).

Mrs Ruth Gavan Duffy had also met Frank Duff on her visit to Ireland in 1932, and in 1933 she started a second praesidium in Frankston. Two more praesidia followed at East Brunswick and Merlynston, and the first curia meeting was held at Ascot Vale on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1933. Then in just one year Concilium established the Senatus in Melbourne – it would seem, the third such in the world. Its first meeting was held on 8<sup>th</sup> July 1934, with Fr Bakker as Spiritual Director, and Mrs Gavan Duffy as President. (Fr Joachim O'Brien ofm *A beautiful story to be told: The Legion of Mary in Oceania 1932-2005* pp. 11-12) And so, twelve meetings a year for 83 years has brought us today to our thousandth meeting.

From Melbourne the Legion spread swiftly throughout Australia then Oceania. When we think of the thousands of legionaries who have served in the Legion in our part of the world over these eight decades, we can hardly comprehend how many prayers, rosaries, acts of holiness, acts of service, have been carried out in that time by legionaries and others, as a direct result of the Legion. And how many people have been helped spiritually by the work of legionaries – dare we say, how many souls have legionaries been instrumental in saving, under the grace of God flowing to the Legion through the hands of Mary?

The Melbourne Senatus has played its own specific role in all this, in particular by its governance and its involvement in the extension of the Legion. So we are heirs to a great tradition. But more than that, we're recipients of so many graces flowing to us, gained by the prayers and good works of those who have gone before. And that multitude of graces couldn't be in vain. That gives us the courage, confidence and determination to keep journeying forward under Our Lady's mantle. Next month we enter a second series of a thousand meetings, to be celebrated, God willing, in another eighty-three years' time by those who come after us. The numbers in themselves are just numbers, yet they're also a sign of so many great things worked by God and by Mary in the past, and that will be worked in the future.

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Next Sunday, 11<sup>th</sup> February, is another notable anniversary – 160 years since the first appearance of Our Lady to St Bernadette at Lourdes. We've been concentrating on Fatima for its centenary, but it's good to celebrate also this other most famous appearance of Mary in modern times.

Many of us would know of how on 11<sup>th</sup> February 1858, at Lourdes in the Pyrenees foothills in southern France, 14-year-old Bernadette Soubirous went with her sister and a friend to the Gave River to collect firewood; and how at the grotto at Massabielle, Bernadette first saw the Lady, with a white dress and veil, a rosary, a blue sash, and two golden roses at her feet. Bernadette prayed the Rosary, while the Lady passed the beads through her own fingers, but only joining in the Sign of the Cross and the Glory Be.

On 14<sup>th</sup> February Bernadette returned to the grotto, sprinkling holy water at the Lady, at which the Lady smiled. At the third apparition on 18<sup>th</sup> February, the Lady spoke for the first time: 'I do not promise you happiness in this world, but in the next. Would you be kind enough to come here for a fortnight?' So almost every day for the next fortnight, Bernadette saw Our Lady there, until 4<sup>th</sup> March. Gradually over this time, the crowds grew to about 8,000. On some of these days, there was only a personal message for Bernadette, but other times, there was a message for all: 'Penance, penance, penance! Pray to God for sinners', the Lady said on 24<sup>th</sup> February.

On 25<sup>th</sup> February she told Bernadette, 'Go, drink of the spring' – even though there was only a little muddy water there. Many in the crowd thought Bernadette was crazed to be drinking this water. But on 1<sup>st</sup> March Catherine Latapie plunged her partially paralysed hand into the water of this newly-found spring, and it

regained its movement, the first of so many cures that would occur. Later that month Louis Bouriette would be cured of two years' complete blindness in his right eye – the result of an accident – after bathing it in the water of the spring. Five more authenticated cures would follow over the course of 1858.

The Lady told Bernadette on 2<sup>nd</sup> March, 'Tell the priests that people are to come here in procession, and to build a chapel here.' But the parish priest insisted the Lady say who she was.

Finally on 25<sup>th</sup> March, the feast of the Annunciation – the day the Church celebrates the angel greeting Mary as the one 'full of grace' (*Lk 1:28*) – the Lady revealed her identity. As Bernadette recounted: 'She extended her arms towards the ground, then joined them as though in prayer and said: **"I am the Immaculate Conception"**'. Pope Pius IX had defined the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854, but Bernadette had no knowledge of this title.

Two appearances remained, on 7<sup>th</sup> April and on the Feast of Our Lady of Mt Carmel, 16<sup>th</sup> July, making eighteen altogether. In 1862, the Bishop of Tarbes gave official approval to the apparitions. Bernadette herself joined the Sisters of Charity, dying at Nevers on 16<sup>th</sup> April 1879 at the age of 35. In 1909, her body was exhumed and found completely incorrupt. She was canonised by Pope Pius XI on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1933.

Every year about five million pilgrims come to Lourdes. We're familiar with the numerous cures that have happened ever since, associated with the water from the spring. The Church, using the most rigorous standards and the judgement of the independent Medical Bureau, has officially certified 69 cures as miraculous from over 7000 cases presented.

The healings are another confirmation of faith in modern times. But especially for us as legionaries, we take inspiration from this manifestation of Mary as the Immaculate One, with heaven confirming the infallible papal teaching of four years earlier. And on this occasion of our thousandth meeting, we rejoice to honour our Immaculate Mother and Heavenly Queen.