

Society of St. Vincent de Paul

IRELAND

REPORT

ANNUAL MEETING OF PRESIDENTS

1901

Dublin:

SUPERIOR COUNCIL OF IRELAND,

CONVENT ROOMS 50 UPPER SACKVILLE STREET

1901

of course, takes credit for the amount of relief in kind to prisoners' families during the breadwinners' imprisonment.

The success of Prison Aid work in Belfast is so encouraging that I take the liberty of bringing it before this meeting, in the hope that it may be taken up by the St. Vincent de Paul Society throughout the country, especially in those places in which there are prisons, viz.: Dublin, Cork, Waterford, Tralee, Clonmel,* Limerick, Tullamore, Galway, Sligo, Londonderry, Armagh, and Dundalk.

If this suggestion were adopted by the St. Vincent de Paul Society, which is practically universal, we would have a network of Prison Aid Societies, by means of which we could keep in touch with prisoners, even when they leave the country. This work would surely bring an additional blessing on the Society, and peace and comfort to many an unfortunate prisoner.

The Secretary of the Central Council of Down and Connor said that he rose to commend to the earnest consideration of the Meeting and of the Superior Council the work for the prisoners, which was undertaken by the Council of Belfast at the request of the Prison Chaplain, with the sanction of the late Bishop of Down and Connor, who took an extraordinary interest in anything that tended to the welfare of the poor under his care.

The work of looking after prisoners was nothing new to the Society, for if they would only read some of the *Bulletins*, they would find that the prison work was recognized as a special work. There was nothing extraordinary about this, because it was considered that, after the primary work of the Society, the next thing was that of seeing to the unfortunate men who had the misfortune to fall under the power of the law. A religious society was the best to do this work. They, in Belfast, had only started the work about six months, and they got much encouragement. They had been able to do some good already, and, although the class of people for whom they worked frequently disappointed them, yet the Society had good hopes of ultimate success, and the motives of the members were high. The primary motive of his Council in taking up this special work was the one great ideal of doing something for ourselves, first, because we had it on the high authority of Christ Himself that what we did to one of these unfortunate men we did it for Him, and, although we might not be able in the beginning to point to the definite

* The Paper at page 11 shows that there is already such a Work at Clonmel.

good that we did, we might find that our work had borne fruit 25 or 30 years hence. If there were only one saved in 10,000 years would not success be written on the horizon. If we were able to point to one case, it would justify the end we had in view. He would be very pleased to let any person have the details of the scheme. He deprecated criticism of the work, which he would strongly recommend for general adoption, and which did not entail very much labour. 'It was a work for God to succour this unfortunate class of His erring humanity.

The President of St. Comgal's Conference, Bangor, said that he happened to be present when the question was mooted at a Quarterly Meeting in Belfast, and it struck him that it was the most valuable idea that he had heard of. Some might say that it was only into gaol and out of gaol with these people. Undoubtedly there were people in prisons and the moment they breathed the pure air outside you could do little with them, but there were very many to whom this remark did not apply, and the St. Vincent de Paul Society should, in his opinion, take up the work generally.

The Treasurer of the Council of Ireland said that the Papers read were admirable, and their tone and spirit commended them to all, but he would like to know something of the practical working of the system. He thought it a pity that the reader of the second Paper had not indicated how the Society in Belfast came in contact with the prisoners. Was it before their discharge or only afterwards? If the latter, he was at a loss to see how either confidence or sympathy between the Brothers and the prisoners could then be established. He had some acquaintance with Dundalk and Armagh, two typical places for the introduction of the work.

In Armagh he knew that a majority of the prisoners came from outside places, and that the prison authorities, in order to get discharged prisoners out of the city as quickly as possible, had them conveyed direct to the train from the prison. If the members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul could not see them in the prison, the interval between their release and their going away would be very small to enable the members to exercise much influence on them. He understood that under the Borstal system in Clonmel access to the prisoners in detention was permitted, and he saw no practical difficulty in achieving good results there. But as regards the Belfast system, while the Society in Ireland had so much pressing work to do in other directions of estab-

lished nature and desirability, he was not at all in agreement with the Belfast idea of expending 10,000 years' work on a new scheme unless the prospects of ultimate success were more hopeful than those which would seem to satisfy the Secretary of the Central Council of Down and Connor.

The Hon. Secretary, Council of Ireland, said that the President of the Conference of SS. Peter and Paul, Clonmel, had placed in his hands a letter by means of which he was in a position, to some extent, at all events, to reply to the enquiry just made by the Treasurer of the Superior Council so far as the work at Clonmel is concerned. Before he read it, it might be well to emphasize the fact that all the writer of the Paper asks is the co-operation of the Conferences of Ireland in the work of reclaiming the young prisoners who are sent forth after treatment under the Borstal System in the prison at Clonmel. The nature of the co-operation he desires may be well illustrated by a concrete case.

The other day a young prisoner was sent, on his liberation from Clonmel, to his native place in a distant county, and on his leaving, the writer of the Paper, in his capacity as Secretary of the Discharged Prisoners' Committee, wrote to a person in the town whither the young fellow was going, asking that person to look after him and to see to the application of a sum of £2, which the Discharged Prisoners' Committee were willing to send to be applied for his benefit. It so happened that the gentleman to whom that letter was addressed gave no reply to it—to the great disappointment of the Committee in Clonmel, and, accordingly, they are now seeking the aid of our Conferences, believing that if they consent to undertake the supervision of discharged prisoners, and to apply the small sums which the Committee is enabled to forward for their benefit, the work will be more effectually carried out than has been possible hitherto.

Now, as illustrating the facilities which will be given to those who are willing to co-operate in this good work, he might state that he held in his hand a letter from the Chairman of the Prisons' Board, intimating that "every facility will be given to the Conferences of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, and their aid will be welcomed at all prisons."

The President of the Particular Council of Dublin said that amongst the places mentioned was Dublin. As President of the Particular Council of Dublin he wished to state that although it would appear that Dublin has done nothing

in this matter, he might mention that about twenty years ago the Council of Dublin was communicated with and asked would it undertake this work. It appointed a Committee, decided on undertaking the work, prepared rules for the purpose of carrying it out, and sent them forward. Unfortunately, the Council were told after their trouble that their services were not then required. It therefore fell through. Now, he believed, if we intervene, our services will be accepted, and he would, therefore, take an early opportunity of bringing the subject before the Council of Dublin with the view of starting the work.

The President of the Conference of St. Kevin, Dublin, said that at the time referred to by the President of the Council of Dublin the Prisoners' Aid Society was established, and has been in existence ever since. Its officials work in the prisons every day. They are attending to the work in Mountjoy, and there are assistants, paid and unpaid.

There were Borstal prisoners at the present moment under the observation of the Catholic officials in Mountjoy. The Borstal system is in actual operation in Mountjoy and other prisons besides Clonmel.*

The Secretary of the Council of Derry said that it seemed to him that the juvenile prisoners between 17 and 22 were easy to get at, and, as regards them, it was quite easy to sow the seeds that would bear fruit in the future. The Hon. Secretary of the Council of Ireland told them how that work was done and how it might be extended. He was sure that every Brother present would strenuously and strongly help the Brothers of Clonmel with these prisoners, but, while strongly in favour of taking up a work of that kind, he thought they should be very slow in taking up general prisoners in the various prisons. They were usually hardened criminals, and it was difficult to reform them. He would ask that details should be sent to the Superior Council, to whom we could appeal at no distant date, to see how we should act in reference to this good work.

The Secretary, Central Council of Down and Connor.—Our Brother from Derry said that these prisoners were usually hardened criminals, but the Grace of God knew no barrier, and if the Conferences took this matter up, and had recourse to prayer, and seizing opportunities, any barrier that there was would be broken

* See same member's explanation, page 22.

down. Of course the inmates of Belfast Prison were not all local. According to law, a man must be set down where he is convicted. If a man were convicted in Kilmainham, the police must leave him back there. There was a gratuity earned by these men in gaol. Whatever little money a prisoner earned as gratuity was given to our agent, who then came to him (the speaker) and he forwarded that amount, together with any amount got from the Prisons' Board, to the President of the Conference of the town where that prisoner lived, and to which he would be returning. If there were no Conference there, he would send it to the parish priest, and he told the prisoner to go to the President of the Conference or the parish priest and he would get his money. He (the speaker) wrote a letter sending the money, and the President or the parish priest would, of course, do his duty. If it were the President of a Conference, that President would dole out the money to the man and would assign Brothers from the Conference to get work for him. His Conference in Belfast appointed Brothers to visit the gaol. Prisoners who were about to be discharged were brought up one by one. They were most penitent and most anxious to change their lives. They were also much relieved by the fact that they were not altogether abandoned by the world, that there was some one to think of them, and the Governor of Belfast Prison told him that he had put them under a rule that, unless their conduct was very good, he would not recommend them to the protection of the Society.

A man would come to them and give them an outline of his case, and say, if he had a pair of boots, a saw, a shovel, he would do well. They would immediately fill up a form recommending this particular person to the prison officials for the article. That in part answered the queries of the Member of the Council of Ireland, and he would be only too happy to supply any more information.

The President of St. Patrick's Conference, Belfast, said that he would first commend the two Papers that they had heard as being admirable. There was no one who would not consider the discussion a very important one. They had heard that 169 prisoners were discharged; that seemed a large number. He would like the gentleman who read the Paper to give a classification. Recently there had been riots in Belfast. These prisoners were discharged within the period that the Paper dealt with. They had, also, great distress, and the school authorities were, they thought, too active in prosecuting the fathers of children who did not attend school.

Very often the children had not clothes or food to go to school. He should say that 50 of this class were included in the 169. They could only be fined five shillings. Living in a district in which half the lodging-houses were situate would account for a great number. He thought a great deal of good could be effected by this Discharged Prisoners' Aid Society.

Unless the work were taken up properly, the Society might do harm instead of good. If our Society looked after prisoners who did not live in very classic localities the members themselves might incur danger in going to these localities, and might bring odium on the Society in that way. If members were appointed who would properly look after these prisoners, he had no hesitation in saying that good might be done with casual prisoners, but they would require to be met immediately on discharge from prison; otherwise no good would be done, for if they met their companions they would spend their money. Unless the Society could devote immediate attention to cases of this kind, it was his conviction that it could do very little good. He was also convinced that, instead of the Society taking up these cases, if the officials conveyed particulars to the clergy of the districts in which they lived, far greater good would be done, because if the prisoner went to a layman his visit might be resented, There was not a gratuity in one case out of ten. The released prisoner would resent a member's visit to him if he had nothing for him but good advice, which would be useless. It would be very different with the clergyman, whom he would treat with respect, and who might be successful. Unless the matter were treated very carefully very little good could be done with it. In small districts where there would be released prisoners a member might be successful, as he certainly might speak with more effect to those prisoners knowing them; but in large cities the Society should be very careful about what it was doing.

The Vice-President of the Conference of St. John the Baptist, Blackrock, understood that the last Brother who spoke was decidedly in opposition to the proposal, and that one of his principal objections was that, when these men came out, their own crowd would help to spend the money in the locality. If the suggestion of the writer of the Paper were adopted he would not have the money to spend. He thought that the Catholic clergy had quite enough to do, and they should not put this work on

them. In a great many cases this work was done by the Society. In some cases they were only casual prisoners. He did not think that those imprisoned for labour riots or for their children not attending school were criminals in the strict sense. This was a feasible work that could be carried out if they were in earnest. The work should be given to the member—something practical should be given to them to do—and by that means they would enlist the services of young, earnest, and courageous men for it. He would suggest that the Council of Ireland should take up the matter. He thought that when a suggestion of the kind was proffered, instead of criticising it, they should be able to give assistance where it would do good work and serve God.

The President of St. Kevin's Conference, Dublin, wished to explain that, in stating that the Borstal system was in operation in various prisons, he did not intend to convey that Clonmel was not different from them. He knew that Clonmel was the only constituted Borstal prison, but prisoners elsewhere were kept under observation from a Borstal point of view, and if they were fit cases for Clonmel, they were transferred there as vacancies arose.

The Vice-President, Conference of St. Audoen's, Dublin.—We should be told what class are discharged, whether they return to their friends, had occupation before they left, and who would keep a friendly eye on them.

The President of the Conference of SS. Peter and Paul, Clonmel, replied that he could not recollect the cases, but they came from every class in life: servants, carpenters, etc.

The Vice-President of the Council of Ireland enquired if the Brothers in Belfast met the prisoners at the gate and recommended them to the Conferences, or if he was right in his impression that a paid agent—not a member of the Society—met them.

The Secretary, Central Council of Down and Connor, said they were met by a paid agent, who attended daily at the gaol gate.

The Right Rev. Monsignor Fitzpatrick, Spiritual Director of the Council of Ireland said that he should not like the discussion to close without expressing the pleasure he felt that the Society was about to increase its liabilities in this direction. Possibly he had more experience of prison life than anyone there. He was Chaplain to Mountjoy for over

ten years, and if he were to add together all the hours of his life spent inside a prison, he might fairly claim to have served in the aggregate a term of six months.

His experience of the prisoners generally led him to conclude that they had their good and their bad qualities, very much like the rest of the world, and that many of them were well-meaning and naturally good. From what he saw of them he thought it was unfair to apply to them an expression too often used without reflection, "hardened criminals." He just remembered two to whom he should be inclined to apply that term. As a rule they were very much the victims of circumstances and, knowing all about them, one could not but feel that if he were in similar circumstances he might be worse. He remembered one woman who, because of her enormous size, was called the "Great Eastern," and who was very frequently in prison. Her own explanation of her misfortunes was simply, that when she was "riz" she was like a lion, and when she was not she was like a lamb. Her failing was her temper. They might be prepared to find that there were none very bad. Theoretically the work seemed delightful, but if they wanted to help the prisoners they must be prepared to undertake a difficult task and expect a very small harvest. If they reformed ten or twenty per cent., it would be very good. They were told that St. Ignatius, when establishing a refuge for abandoned women, said, if he were able to prevent *one* mortal sin, he would consider his work a glorious one. As regarded the matter in detail he (Monsignor Fitzpatrick), did not think that any hard and fast rule could be laid down, and probably each Conference would be better able to look around and see what would suit.

Years ago there was a magnificent institution in Golden Bridge, managed by the late venerated Sister Magdalen Kirwan, where hundreds of women were reformed. She had an album of photographs of the discharged convicts: on one side were the photographs of them taken when entering Mountjoy and on the other side photographs sent to Sister Magdalen by themselves about two years after they had left her. The contrast was most noteworthy, and proved the work done was lasting.

He would be very glad if the St. Vincent de Paul Society would undertake the work, and he hoped that it would be successful.

The discussion then closed.

THE WORK OF RESCUE AMONGST POOR CHILDREN IN BELFAST.

The Hon. Sec., Central Council of Down and Connor, Belfast, then read the following paper :—

In a mixed community such as we in Belfast reside amongst it is painfully evident that there is a great amount of leakage from membership of the Church. The causes which conspire to bring this about are for the most part patent and above board. There are mixed marriages with all their attendant evil results, and although it must be conceded that, owing to the disfavour with which these unions are looked upon by the Church, the evil is not nearly so rampant now as it formerly was, still, unfortunately, they do occasionally take place. While health continues good and employment can be freely obtained, the woman—for I am sorry to say that it is nearly always the Catholic girl who forms the undesirable alliance—does not come in contact with her former friends ; but when from death, bad health, desertion, or want of work, she finds herself in difficulties, she remembers the Church of her childhood and its Institutions, and appeals to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul for assistance. The amount of aid that can be granted is not very great, nor can it be continued for a lengthened period, and if there are a number of children in the case the problem is rendered more difficult. In the first place, the general character of the applicant may be good, so that assistance cannot very easily be refused ; but the desire not to interfere in cases where even the slightest appearance of proselytism might occur, contributes to make the matter one of extreme difficulty to decide. Not so our opponents. We have invariably found that before they give any relief they strike a hard and fast bargain, and the faith of the child is bought and sold as if in open market. But if the tactics pursued by the proselytiser are so mean and reprehensible in what, after all, might be called questionable cases, what are we to say when we find these people visiting purely Catholic families and using every means in their power to induce the starving parents to give up their children. Formerly this sort of work was carried on in spasmodic fashion and by individuals who, however earnest in their endeavours and profuse with their charity, were easily coped with. But all this changed ; proselytism is reduced to a fine art, and an elaborate and far-reaching system is now at work in our midst,

and many are the subterfuges resorted to by its agents in order to carry it out successfully. Boys have been met coming from the Industrial School, after having completed their term there, and induced by these people to go to a Protestant home. Ladies dressed as district nurses have been known to visit families in distress, and having administered some creature comforts to enter into negotiations with the parents for the custody of the children. The question is then, how to meet and combat this nefarious system, for it is to be feared it has come to stay with us. When the St. Vincent de Paul Home for Boys and Night Refuge was first established it was intended to preserve the dual character of the Institution as far as possible ; but after the first few years of its existence it was found that the younger children had quite crushed out the working boys, and the place had assumed the appearance of an orphanage, so that the work of the Night Refuge had practically to be abandoned. It would hardly be possible in the compass of a short paper to discuss adequately the cause which led to this, for us, very undesirable result. Suffice it to say that the difficulty experienced for some time past in securing committals to Industrial Schools, coupled with the laudable desire to prevent as many of our poor children as possible from vegetating in the uncongenial atmosphere of the workhouse, combined to force the Committee of Management of this Institution to admit as many cases of this type as they had accommodation for. This being the case, the work for which the Home was originally established was in a great measure left undone. About two years ago, the Sisters of Nazareth opened a home for boys in connection with their convent at Nazareth House. To this Home some 30 of our boys were transferred. The St. Vincent Home was thus relieved of its congestion, and for a time a number of its beds were set free for Night Refuge purposes. Gradually the number of orphans in our Home again increased, and at present we are confronted with a state of affairs similar to that which obtained two years ago, with the added responsibility of having to contribute towards the support of the children in Nazareth House. I have striven to give in as short a manner as possible an account of the work of rescue in Belfast. It is one which, as a Society, we cannot pass by or pretend not to see. It is not a local work ; it is not even a provincial work ; it is a national work, for our clients come from all parts of Ireland. The Particular Council of Belfast, which up to the present has been responsible for the proper carrying on of this great and good work of trying to preserve the faith of

these little outcasts, now finds that its responsibilities are more than it can bear, and recognising the importance of the work in hand asks you, dear Brothers, for advice and assistance in their endeavour to stem this tide of proselytism which has set in amongst us.

The Vice-President, Particular Council, Belfast : Formerly we found it much easier to provide for children in Industrial Schools, but now unless we prove that they are potential criminals, we cannot have them committed.

BOYS' BRIGADE, CORK.

The President, St. Patrick's Conference, Cork, then read the following paper :—

A Special Patronage Work is, it is hoped, about to be included in the work of the Society in Cork, as an application has been made for affiliating the Catholic Boys' Brigade to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. This work, commenced about eighteen months since by a few Active Members of the Cork Conferences, and with the consent and approval of the Particular Council, has been doing good work amongst the waif and stray boys of the city. The members working it were assisted by the parochial clergy, whose other duties, however, prevented them from giving it constant attention, and accordingly our Brothers, perceiving the importance (in their effort to improve the morals of the boys) of having some priests to give it unremitting supervision, sought the assistance and co-operation of the Capuchin Fathers. The Very Rev. Father Peter, Provincial of the Order, entered earnestly into the consideration of the proposal, and finally decided upon his priests taking, in conjunction with our Society, the control of the Brigade. Under this arrangement the Brigade is managed by an equal number of representatives from the Capuchins and from our Society, with the Very Rev. Father Bernard at its head. A spacious hall has been secured, which was opened in February last, and varied attractions are offered to induce the boys to attend nightly. The number of boys on the books at present is 380, and the average attendance is 150 to 200. These numbers include many street-trading children of tender years, whose chief occupation is the sale of papers in the evening. These boys are, as a rule, characterised by wildness and disregard of discipline, but by judicious treatment the Committee has suc-

ticular Council do for our Conferences exactly what this meeting is doing to-day for the whole of Ireland. I have always spoken in the South with admiration of the impression made on my mind by the Northern Conferences. In the Conference to which I was attached we found that we were too big. We were thirty-five members, and what we did was, we consulted with the clergy, and took a section of each of two parishes, and gave that section to a new Conference, and we found this to work admirably.

The Secretary, Superior Council, said he wished to call attention to a very remarkable circumstance as to the four Conferences of Limerick. Each of those Conferences met on the same night, at the same hour (8 o'clock), and in the same building. So far as he knew, that was a perfectly unique system, and it is obvious that it made communications between those four branches always a matter of the greatest ease.

The discussion then closed, and a paper was read by the Hon. Sec., Boys' Home Committee, on—

"THE BOYS' HOME, BELFAST—ITS UTILITY AND NECESSITY."

To shelter the homeless, to care the orphan, to help the poor, to teach the young, and to inculcate principles of religion and morality to God's little ones, are some of the duties of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

And in no place is there a wider field for this labour, or a more pressing necessity for the exercise of this charitable work than in the City of Belfast.

The members of the Particular Council of Belfast, whilst engaged in the ordinary duties of the Society, grieved to see the boys of our city homeless and alone, in the most impressionable years of their lives, a prey to evil ones, surrounded with temptations, without a friend, a counsellor, or care, some drifting slowly to perdition, others rushing madly down the road that leads to ruin.

To check the tide which was slowly but surely robbing the Church of souls, and society of useful members, the Council, after deliberation and thought, opened, in the year 1890, "The St. Vincent de Paul Home for Boys and Night Refuge." The enterprise received the sanction of ecclesiastical authority and the approbation of a charitable public.

Let me state the objects of the Institution, which are—

To shelter destitute boys.

To rescue them from evil surroundings, especially low lodging houses.