

THE SOCIETY OF ST VINCENT DE PAUL IN THE NORTH : 1850-1930

DR CAHAL DALLAT
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The St Vincent de Paul Society was founded in Paris by Frederic Ozanam and a group of fellow students at the University of Paris in 1833. The Society was introduced to Ireland in 1844, when Dr Woodlock of All Hallows College set up a Conference in Dublin. The first meeting of the Society of St Vincent de Paul in Ireland was held in the White Cross Rooms, Charles Street West, off Ormonde Quay, Dublin, on Monday 16 December 1844. Redmund Peter O'Carroll was elected as first President and among the other 19 present was John Baldwin Murphy, a barrister, who became President of St Mary's Conference, Clonmel, in 1847. Sad to say, Redmund Peter O'Carroll died from Typhus in 1847, possibly contracted while visiting the sick.

In a few years, the following Conferences were set up: St Senan, Kilrush, in 1846, St Michael, Limerick, in 1846, and St John in 1847, St Mary, Clonmel, in 1847, St Nicholas, Carrick-on-Suir, in 1847, St Nicholas, Galway, in 1849, and St Cummins, Oughterard, in 1849. The first Conferences to be set up in the north were Enniskillen in 1848 and Monaghan in 1849 and it could be assumed that they were set up in response to the Famine which was still affecting large areas of the country. A Conference report from Enniskillen in 1856 has an obvious reference to the Famine years when it states: "There has not been that great distress which we experienced at this season for the last 7 or 8 years."

Another example of the plight of the people during the Famine years appears in this report from another early Conference: "The condition of the poor has never been so bad as it was in 1848". There is recorded somewhere that in 1848 the slops were collected from the Dublin hotels to feed the poor. This illustrates the gap which existed between the haves and the have nots.

In a report in 1856, it was recorded that during the years 1847 and 1848, upwards of œ6,000 were transmitted to the Society in Ireland through the hands of the President of the Society in France. The report goes on: "When the Famine in Ireland was at its worst, France nobly stepped forward to assist the poor starving Irish and its charity continued to flow in a copious and uninterrupted stream as long as the pressing miseries of the country stood in need of foreign aid."

In an article in "The Bulletin" June 1994, entitled "A Look Back at the Society in Galway", it is stated that "in these early years Frederic Ozanam himself took more than a mere passing interest in the development of the Society in Ireland. Touched no doubt by the severity of the Famine distress in the country, he was instrumental in collecting and forwarding, in the year 1847, a sum of 150,000 francs (£12,500) to the Council in Dublin. He came personally in the company of an English member of the Society and visited the Irish poor in the slums of Dublin". This writer would be interested in finding the source of that reference as it may be that the Ozanam visit referred to is really being confused with Monsieur Baudon's visit to Ireland in 1856.

At the 150th Anniversary Celebrations in Dublin in May 1994, members were reminded that the Society in England had rendered financial assistance to the Society in Ireland during the Famine years. On the other hand, when serious flooding occurred in France in 1856, circumstances in Ireland were so bad that the St Vincent de Paul Society could only send £50.

Among the other early Conferences was Newry, established in 1850, as was St John's, Waterside, Derry, and on 5 April of the same year the first Conference of the Society in Belfast was set up in St Mary's Parish.

There are no details of this meeting or of the first 75 years of the Society in the Diocese as the records were lost from the Central Council's office in St Mary's Hall during the years in which the hall had been commissioned by the forces, 1921/25. We do know, however, that there were 12 active members and 5 honorary members.

A second Conference, St Malachy's, was formed in the city in 1851. These early Conferences did not let the grass grow under their feet for we find that, apart from giving assistance in cash and kind and encouraging people to attend to their religious duties, they got involved in the provision of schools. The Society acquired 2 roods of ground at Wolfhill, Ligoniel, on a lease in perpetuity at a rent of £5 per annum. I am sure you are all aware that Wolfhill got its name because there is a tradition that the last wolf in Ireland was killed at this place. A Day and Sunday school was erected on this site in 1851 at a cost of £350. With a view to the future the school was built in the style of a church. The Society paid the teacher's salary, provided books and requisites and free education for those pupils whose parents were unable to pay. The Society had the great satisfaction of seeing the building being dedicated for Divine Worship by Most Rev Dr Dorrian in 1869. The new church was named after St Vincent de Paul. A neighbouring building was converted into a school. Schooling was not free in those days.

Pupils in another area in 1851 were paying 2/- a quarter in a school which was in receipt of a subsidy from a London Society and from the local landlord's wife. Education was expensive; obviously St Vincent de Paul had considerable outlay in this field.

In 1851, a boys and girls school was established in Chapel Lane where to quote the President of the Conference, "a large number of children received gratuitous education".

The year 1855 saw the opening of a school in Alexander Street West in the Falls area and in the following year another was built in Garmoyle Street at a cost of £600. There was an average daily attendance of 90. This school subsequently expanded into the Henry Street schools.

The Belfast Conferences were very forward looking and it was here that "The Bulletin", the Journal of the Society, was first published. It was described as a periodical intended to acquaint the members of the Society with its workings all over the world and imbue them with the spirit of the original founder. It was also aimed at advancing the cause of education. Though recommended by the President General of the Council of Ireland, it did not meet with the success it deserved and ceased

publication after 21 issues. It was the pioneer for its more successful namesake today and even its failure underlines the courage of the men who dared to risk this bold experiment in the infant days of the Society. These men were not simply content with doling out alms.

Randalstown has the distinction of being the first place in the Diocese of Down and Connor outside the Belfast area in which the Society was established. A Conference was set up here in 1853. The Conference of St Columba, Omagh, was also established in 1853 and like most others of the time had difficulty in meeting the needs of the area. An early report reads:

“From the demand on our resources and also the supply of coffins for the poor, we are this day in debt”.

In the same year, a Conference was set up in Portadown and in 1856 an additional Conference was established in Belfast and one in Ballymena.

Conferences were not established without due consideration and when in 1856 the President of the Belfast Central Council requested permission for the third time to form a third Conference in the city, he had to make a good case for it in a letter to the Council of Ireland in Dublin:

“The great and increasing population of this town demands from a charitable society, that would embrace in its operations the entire of its poor and an increase in organisation and efficiency. We have found that the work of looking after the wants of one half of the town too laborious for one Conference, and having in our body a number of experienced and prudent members, capable of directing a Conference, we have not any doubt that a great boon will be conferred on the poor of this town.

We have 30 mills giving employment to 33,000 work people and if we only look at the vast amount of accidents, of sickness, and other misfortunes that the congregation of such a vast number of trades people must inevitably produce; if we consider the large draught of people seeking employment here and pouring in from the surrounding counties, often looking to us for employment and sustenance until they become skilled operatives; if we could recount the number of unfortunates landed on our quays, penniless and friendless, the Council of Ireland would not hesitate for a moment in granting the necessary permission to make an organisation more complete and perfect”.

Permission was granted and St Patrick’s Conference was set up that year.

Further Conferences followed: St Columb’s, Derry, and St John’s, Coleraine, in 1860, St Joseph, Strabane, and St Joseph, Newry, in 1862, St Peter, Lurgan, in 1863, St Peter’s, Belfast, in 1865; St Matthew’s, St Patrick, Armagh, in 1869, Holy Cross and St Joseph’s Ligoniel in 1869. St Joseph’s Parish, Ligoniel, was renamed St Vincent de Paul, presumably because the St Vincent de Paul Society had erected the original building.

When St John’s, Coleraine, was being set up, Dr James Kelly, Bishop of Derry, wrote to Father Charles Flanagan, PP, Coleraine, as follows:-

“I am happy to learn that you hope soon to see a Conference of the St Vincent de Paul established in Coleraine. The success which has hitherto attended the several Conferences already established in this Diocese, leads us to believe that a few zealous men will, with God’s blessing, effect much good among the worthy people entrusted to your care”.

It is interesting to note the type of relief in kind being given. St Malachy’s Conference distributed the following in 1856:

1601 lbs of bread
512 stones of meal
588 ounces of tea
200 lbs of sugar
5 sheaves of straw (presumably the straw was for bedding).

A Conference in Tipperary gave out 2 tons of straw in the same year which they said was the means of raising 150 families off the damp ground and perhaps saving them and the town from fever or other contagious diseases.

The President of Portadown in 1856 reported that the establishment of the Society had been productive of great good in Portadown. As well as bringing relief to the poor, they had recently set up a library which had been very much appreciated.

In 1856 the Bishop of Cork proposed that “collections should be made at the doors of all the churches in the city, to which suggestion the clergy most generously assented.” It is not clear how funds were raised previously. What would the Society accomplish without the support of the boxes outside the church?

The President-General of the Society, Monsieur Baudon, visited Belfast in 1856 and was very impressed with the work of the Society, especially in the provision of schools. He expressed great satisfaction with the working of the Society in Ireland. In reply to a question from one of the Northern Presidents, he said, “it was rather desirable to invite to General Meetings of the Society Catholics of known probity and virtue who were not members of the Society; but that, in every instance, those invitations should be conveyed by private card or circular and under no circumstances were ladies admissible to the Society’s meetings”.

This echoes the attitudes of the time but thankfully we have moved on from those days.

A major undertaking in 1860 was the erection of Earl Street Male, Female and Infant National Schools at a cost of œ650. These schools, constructed on the most scientific basis and supplied with every educational requirement, received the warm commendation from one of the Commissioners of Education, who having been attracted by their architectural styling, inspected them most minutely and extended his warm approval of them in the school’s log report. Later on the Council of Belfast was enabled to aid the establishment of the Reformatory of Glenree by subscribing £100. And when Bishop Dorrian founded an institution for the training of boys under the Industrial Schools Act, the Society gave substantial assistance with a money grant.

Poor people in general were poorly clad and St Patrick's Conference set up a clothing depot, so you say to yourself, what's new; we still have a clothing depot at Eia House, albeit more modern in its setting and the fashions it supplies. The Conference also reported that "distress is still very prevalent amongst us owing in great measure to the late riots that have disgraced our city".

St Malachy's Conference had a similar comment to make:

"There has been an unusual number of families assisted by the Conference, principally because sickness; and some where heads of families were disabled during the riots of August 1864, and are unable to return to work yet". The poor were always at the receiving end of any troubles.

The great famine continued to be uppermost in people's minds and Randalstown Conference in 1856 reports:

"As regards those poor to whom seed potatoes have been issued, their gardens are now ripe and should they be spared the blight will yield a sufficiency of food for the winter".

An Industrial School for Boys was instituted in Belfast in 1857.

Famine and hunger are usually accompanied by disease and in the late fifties typhus and cholera were rampant. No doubt the brothers of the Society were in danger of catching these diseases. At times like these the Society's resources were severely strained. A report from St Columb's Conference in Derry for 1860 bears this out:

"The universal severity of the winter and the prevalence of smallpox amongst the poor families induced us to purchase and distribute a considerable quantity of blankets and boys clothing and through the Ladies Clothing Society clothing to females which we account for the sum opposite clothing in the Treasurer's Report. We have thought it an important duty to provide coffins and shrouds for the poor, etc." Obviously the brothers felt that they had to apologise for the large amount spent.

And five years later there was typhus in Derry in the St Columb's area:

"We have had a very severe visitation of typhus fever during the past quarter amongst the working classes of the city and we have been prompt and liberal in affording relief in all such cases. It has been the most severe season of sickness and distress since the establishment of the Conference; we have clothed a number of boys to enable them to attend school." It is quite likely that the St Vincent de Paul brothers were in danger of catching smallpox, typhus or cholera when visiting the homes of the poor.

A vessel called the Swatara had sailed from Liverpool to America in 1846 with several hundred people on board. It encountered a storm and it put into Derry where a number of passengers who had contracted cholera were put ashore thus bringing the disease to the city. A second attempt to sail was met with another storm and the vessel put into Belfast where more sick passengers were put ashore, bringing the disease to Belfast.

For comment from the country, we return to Randalstown in 1860:

“We have the appearance of a very bad Winter ahead of us. The turf in this part of the country is still not dried and the potatoes and corn are sadly deficient; also have considerably more than the average amount of sickness. Under the circumstances, I regret that we cannot send you more than £2 for the Christians of Syria”. This was a good effort considering the conditions at home.

A report from another Conference in 1860 claims:

“Fuel is scarce and fearfully high in price; very little employment for the people; worst of all a dreadful failure of the potato crop has occurred. A short time ago we were all filled with hope the crop seemed so promising, but suddenly the blight came and it is now said that 12 stones of potatoes have to be dug to obtain one stone of sound ones”.

In spite of the problems caused by disease and poor crops, Conferences were conscious of the need to provide education and libraries and in 1860 St Columb’s, Derry, were very active on this front. They also collected cast-off clothing but that was soon exhausted and blankets had to be purchased for the Winter.

Another Conference reported that £32.19s.8d was distributed to purchase seed potatoes in amounts varying from 5/- to 15/-.

An 1858 report from Blessed Virgin Conference, Belfast, reads:

“The distress in this town has increased to an alarming extent in consequence of the scarcity of employment especially amongst the female section of the population who were chiefly depending on the employment given by the several sewed muslin houses in the town and the flax mills being on half time. The number of applicants therefore has greatly increased. We are doing all in our power to relieve the most deserving cases”.

The situation in Randalstown was very similar in 1858. “We have much distress here at present in consequence of the trade - this being a manufacturing district and weaving and sewn muslin work almost the entire support of the working class. And now both these branches of trade are nearly stopped and the prices given for them so reduced as to not afford the workers a maintenance.

The greater part of our outlay this quarter has been for clothing; we have given out 24 blankets and a quantity of cloth for making gowns and petticoats. We have also assisted in rebuilding a house for an old woman but this we had entered upon before the relief in food had become so urgent.

The Rev Mr O’Reill, the new owner of the Shane’s Castle Estates, gave us his usual donation of £5 which has been of great assistance this season”.

Obviously Mr O’Neill was aware of the excellent work being carried out by the Society.

Lisburn Conference was purchasing linen in 1858 and had distributed a good deal of clothing to children.

By 1861 efforts were being made by the Society throughout Ireland for the establishment of Reformatory Schools.

In 1861 Blessed Virgin Conference could report:

“The Conference is doing all in its power to relieve the sufferings of the working classes, of whom we have a multitude in this town, chiefly from the country districts whence they have come looking for work. Often before they get employment their means are exhausted and we must give relief until such times as they fall into work”.

Randalstown Conference was not looking forward to the Winter of 1861:

“The prospect for the Winter is yet more gloomy. The potatoes are a very poor crop and the little that remain are the very worst quality and in many cases unfit for human consumption. There is also a good deal of fever and other sickness, the usual concomitants of scarcity”.

Nor was there any brighter picture being painted by Blessed Virgin Conference, Belfast, in 1862:

“The past quarter has been most severe on the poor and unemployed of this town. With our limited means we are unable to relieve the number of applicants who apply to us. We can only adopt a few of the most deserving and urgent cases. There is a class of operatives now suffering extreme hardship, i.e., the muslin weavers, some of them with large families, unable to earn more than 3 or 4 shillings a week. They dreaded the thought of the Workhouse, and no wonder, for once they enter it and break up their own houses, they may never return to them. The spectre of the Workhouse was always hanging over poor people”. People would have done anything to avoid going into the Workhouse.

Randalstown’s story for 1862 was very similar:

“We have had a very severe Winter and great poverty and distress among the poor and it is not over yet. The landlord of this place, the Rev Mr O’Neill of Shane’s Castle, has given very largely during the distress but the applicants were so very numerous it was impossible to relieve them all. The Conference selected those cases which were not likely to come under the notice of Mr O’Neill and his relief committee, and did what we could to relieve them”.

Some landlords made great efforts to ease the sufferings of the poor by agreeing not to demand rents during hard times. A good example of this was Rev Robert Gage, landlord of Rathlin, who imported 32 barrels of Indian corn meal along with 3 tons of Caroline rice at £28.10s. per ton and 2 tons of broken Patna rice at £25 per ton. Incidentally, Rathlin has never needed a St Vincent de Paul Conference.

The Secretary of Randalstown Conference deserves great credit for his reports which explained why times were hard in years like 1862:

“The prospect of the coming Winter is one of the most gloomy we ever recollect here. On account of the American war, the weaving by which most of the people supported themselves and their families, is at a standstill. The weather is so poor that these people cannot get outdoor employment. The corn crop in the county is the worst that has been for many years. Wheat is also bad, both in quantity and quality, and the little that is of corn and wheat will suffer in the saving on account of the constant wet”.

St Eunan’s Conference, Letterkenny, was set up in 1874 and Lisburn in 1876: the latter Conference had set up a Library of over 400 books before the end of that year. The Sailors’ Institution or, as it was later known, the Seamen’s Institute, was established in 1874 in Dock Street, Belfast, as a place of rest and comfort for foreign sailors. It has survived for 120 years and in recent times it has been replaced by a more up-to-date and comfortable version in Stella Maris Seamen’s Hostel.

Education became compulsory under the Education Act of 1870 and by 1876 St John’s Conference in Derry was paying for 11 boys to attend school.

The work situation was important in the city as St Joseph’s Conference in Belfast reports:

“One of the spinning mills, the Milewater, owned by Messrs Malcolmson, has been closed for some time owing to the failure of the firm. We have had to relieve a number of workers thus rendered idle. There are no jobs in the other mills”.

Jonathon Bardon in his “History of Ulster” writes:

“In 1871 the St Vincent de Paul Society recorded 2,000 boys attending its Sunday Schools”.

A report from St Molaise, Irvinestown, in 1882 states:

“The labouring men on our books are all employed at present, with the exception of a few who are sick, but in many cases the labouring men are unable, even when they get constant employment, to support and clothe their helpless families without the aid of the Conference.

It often happens that the children have to remain away from school when the Conference has no funds to assist them and during the last four months, they adopted a plan of giving bread to children who came to school and had no breakfast at home, a member being appointed to look after it. I need scarcely say that the system produced good results; but we now unfortunately have no funds, or any means of raising any, to continue this work”.

In 1883 Conferences were set up in Killyleagh and Newtownards.

In the same year St Joseph’s, Belfast, was happy to report on the increasing support which was being given:

“The Conference continues to gain the goodwill of the charitably disposed, not only of the Catholic but also of the Protestant community in this neighbourhood. During the past month, two Protestant gentlemen donated 5 tons of coal. These were distributed judiciously, as well as a large quantity of wearing apparel, blankets, quilts and other bedding”.

There were always people ready to exploit the poor and occasionally purveyors supplied groceries of an inferior quality just because they thought it did not matter what was being given to the poor. St Malachy’s Conference in Belfast became aware of this and took remedial action. The report claims:

“Our works continue as usual, though we have changed the manner of giving relief to one which we think will be better for the poor and better for ourselves; so far it has been successful. Formerly our orders for meal and other goods were given to some tradesmen, over whom we had not sufficient check, either as to the quality of the provisions given or the prices charged for them. We now purchase them ourselves, and two of us in town weigh and give them out to the poor with our own hands. A room attached to one of our schools is used for this purpose. An hour one morning a week is all that is required and we are astonished at the little trouble caused by our undertaking. We are satisfied that the poor are better served, our funds go a great deal further and it has provided a check to relief being improperly continued by members who are inexperienced, or not sufficiently discriminative”.

A note from the Central Council is added “the Council begs to recommend to the serious consideration of other Conferences the adoption of the system of relief above detailed which has been so successful in Belfast and which is in current use in France”.

St Peter’s 1885 report on the Savings Bank makes interesting reading:

“The Belfast Penny Savings Bank was originated in conjunction with the Post Office by St Peter’s Conference on 7 February 1884. Between that date and the end of the year no fewer than 710 distinct accounts were opened, representing a deposit of £712.18.6. (Looking at the figures it is clear that there were no large depositors.) The numerous benefits accruing to such institutions as this for the rescue of odd sixpences and shillings must be sufficiently obvious. Thrifty habits are engendered or promoted, much good is effected, in the way of example and amounts not inconsiderable are opportunely saved from frivolous, if not criminal, expenditure to be devoted to procuring domestic comforts, supply of clothing, stock of trading commodities or other practical advantages. The humbler class, however, sometimes entertain an objection which either deters them from placing their scanty savings in the Penny Bank or soon discourages a continuance of the good practice once begun. They allege that the repeated visits of the postman to their doors, bringing a formidable looking receipt for each little trifle deposited, or, in the other event, the warrant for withdrawal, arouse the attention of the neighbourhood and that they are exposed to having their private affairs more or less made public in consequence, with an entail of annoyance, perhaps from the spendthrifts of the locality. . . . But this inconvenience is entirely obviated by the excellent arrangements of this undertaking. The Post Office receipts for all deposits are received by the Committee of

Management and so are the warrants and thus a desirable privacy is preserved respecting the banking concerns of each depositor Great credit is due to Mr H J Shepperd, Postmaster, Belfast, for the valuable assistance he afforded in the floating of the bank. His instructions rendered working operations very simple indeed whilst he gave his personal attendance on several occasions and even volunteered to audit the accounts at the end of the year.

It may be remarked that the Penny Bank was taken up as a “Special Work” of the Society, such a work being highly approved of by the Council of Ireland.”

It is clear that the Society as well as giving assistance in cash and kind was helping people to help themselves.

A special collection was taken up throughout the Diocese of Down and Connor in 1887 by order of the Bishop for the relief of those thrown out of work by the late riots. This money was entrusted to the St Vincent de Paul Society for distribution.

Ballycastle Conference was set up 101 years ago in 1893 and this writer was mildly shocked to realise that he had been a member of the Conference for more than half the years of its existence, having joined the Society in 1939.

St Comgall, Bangor, was set up in 1895 and St Colmcille, Holywood in 1896.

When the Conference of St Patrick, Magherafelt, was established in 1894, diseases such as consumption (tuberculosis) and typhoid were commonplace, unemployment was very high and the only comfort for the poor was the Workhouse. The parish, like so many others in Ireland had not fully recovered from the effects of the Famine.

In 1899, Blessed Virgin, Belfast, seeing the need for hospitalisation for the poor who could not afford it, inaugurated a scheme for the endowment of a bed for the poor in the Mater Hospital.

A Clothing Depot was opened by the Conference of the Holy Redeemer, Belfast, in 1899. For some time after the opening very little progress was made in the way of obtaining clothes. In early Winter, another push was made. Cards were printed and distributed; the result was œ30 in cash and many articles of clothing. Conferences today are involved in Clothing Drives which are quite similar. Carrickfergus was also operating a Clothing Depot.

At the same time, Ballymena Conference was also involved in the clothing business and co-operated with The Ladies Association in collecting cast-off clothing. “The members besides assisting the poor and those stricken down with disease or failing health, from the funds of the Society, on many occasions obtained assistance from the Poor Law Guardians in the form of Outdoor Relief”. Was this an early example of a Citizens’ Advice Bureau in operation?

Just before the turn of the century, Randalstown Conference had charge of 4 Sunday Schools with an attendance of around 300 children and 20 adults. These schools were closed during the Summer months.

With the opening of the new century, the Central Council for Derry was in communication with a number of parishes throughout the Diocese with a view to having new Conferences established. Two country Conferences, St Finlough's, Ballykelly, and St Canice's, Limavady, were spending considerable sums of money in providing boots for the poor.

"To bury the dead" is one of the Corporal Works of Mercy and St Columba's Conference, Omagh, could claim that in all cases where poor people die and have not the means of interment, the Conference endeavoured to obtain assistance from the relieving officers; where the amount given was insufficient to cover the necessary expenditure, the Conference supplied the balance and superintended the funeral. They also distributed 26 cwt of coal to poor families the week before Christmas.

In 1900, the Central Council in Belfast set up a Home for Homeless Boys and a Night Refuge in Great George's Street.

A Conference was set up in Portaferry in 1900; a second bed was endowed in the Mater Hospital. Ballymena continued to co-operate with the Poor Law Guardians in obtaining Outdoor Relief for a number of people. They also arranged to have all the aged poor, who had no one to look after them, taken into the Workhouse where they had cleaner accommodation and were better attended.

In 1900, we find Bangor Conference defraying the funeral expenses of a poor, domestic servant with no relatives. Bangor being a reasonably prosperous town could report that the condition of the poor is due to the influx of visitors during the Summer months. This has enabled the Conference to accumulate extra funds pending the return of Winter.

Newtownards Conference distributed 11 lbs of tea and 44 bags of coal to 22 families in 1900 and again, in the following year, realising that tea was very popular but also very expensive, distributed 28 lbs of tea at Christmas time and each family got 2 bags of coal.

Magherafelt Conference in 1900 provided beds for a family who were sleeping on the floor and succeeded in curing the father of the family who was an alcoholic who had been pronounced incurable.

Sacred Heart Conference, Belfast, made a special effort to assist ex-prisoners and enabled them to find suitable work. It was from this that the Discharged Prisoners Aid Society was established.

When the Old Age Pensions were introduced in 1909 the brothers of the St Vincent de Paul assisted the poor who qualified by putting forward their claims. The pension was 5/- for those whose income did not exceed 10/-. Many people had difficulty in proving that they were old enough to qualify and the usual claim was that they had been born before the night of the Big Wind which was 6 January 1839; others went one better saying that they remembered the night of the Big Wind.

A report in the Irish News for 18 October 1910:-

“A Home for Men at 76 Mill Street, Belfast, was opened on 17 October 1910 by Most Rev Dr Tohill, Bishop of Down and Connor. This institution fills a long felt want in the city and the day was seen as a historic one in the annals of Christian charity in Belfast”. There followed a description of the dining and sleeping accommodation. The Society provided a considerable percentage of the cost of this building.

In 1910 Conferences were set up in Queen’s University, Belfast, Dundrum, Ahoghill, Portglenone, Crebilly, Portstewart, Cushendall, Waterfoot and Ballymoney and this brought the number of Conferences in Down and Connor to 49.

Emphasis was being placed by the Central Council for Down and Connor in 1913 on the visitation of the poor in their own homes.

During the same year, 3381 families consisting of 12,259 persons were relieved and the number of visits made was 29,309. £2,641.18.8 was distributed in Relief in Kind and £707.11.7 in cash.

Special Works included the upkeep of 35 children in Nazareth Lodge Children’s Home; the partial maintenance of the poor in the Mater Hospital and children at nurse accounted for £1,331.3.5; working expenses amounted to £198.16.2; other Special Works included Penny Banks, the Boys’ Home, the Men’s Home, the Visitation of the Prison, the Visitation of Lodging Houses; Boys’ Clubs; Study Circles; and other Social Works such as help in obtaining Outdoor Relief, Old Age Pensions, Health Insurance, etc, Seamen’s Institute.

The Central Council entertained 800 men from public lodging houses in the city at Christmas. The Council again entertained over 6000 poor children in St Mary’s Hall on Christmas day.

A report from St Canice, Limavady, in 1902, reads:-

“In a district like this, where people depend on agriculture for a living, the pangs of Winter are often keenly felt by labourers. The Conference looks after the funeral arrangements on the death of a poor person and provides any help pecuniary or otherwise that may be needed”.

The Society set up a Home for Boys and a Night Refuge in Academy Street in 1890. There was a Workshop furnished with a lathe and carpenters tools and this was certainly very forward looking at the time.

The Society’s Special Works in 1926 included the Penny Savings Banks, a Home for Boys and Men, maintaining 39 boys in Nazareth Lodge, assisting in Probation Work, Discharged Prisoners’ Aid Society, Visitation of the Public Lodging Houses, Men’s and Boys’ Home and Restaurant, maintaining beds for the poor in the Mater Hospital, Visitation of Hospitals and Workhouses, Care of the Catholic Deaf Mutes, entertainment of poor children.

By 1937 the problems which poor people were bringing to the brothers of St Vincent de Paul were becoming more complicated and it was decided to establish the St Peter Canisius Secretariat. It consisted of professional men, trade unionists and tradesmen;

men who were experts in their own field and these gave very valuable assistance to the poor by helping them to obtain pensions, compensation, unemployment benefits and such like. In addition, the Secretariat had taken over the accountancy of the books of various Conferences. Bishop Mageean congratulated those involved for their public spirit by which they placed their knowledge and skill at the disposal of the poor.

Some Conferences not already mentioned:-

St Joseph, Belfast, 1873; St Columcille, Holywood, 1874; St Matthew, Belfast, 1880; St Patrick, Crebilly, 1910; St Comgall, Bangor, 1895; Holy Rosary, Belfast, 1896; Star of the Sea, Killyleagh, 1896; Immaculate Conception, Newcastle, 1896; Holy Redeemer, Belfast, 1897; St Comgall, Larne, 1897; St Patrick, Downpatrick; St Comgall, Antrim, 1908; Our Lady and St Patrick, Ballymoney, 1909; St Mary, Ahoghill, 1910; Blessed Virgin, Ballymena, 1891; Kilcoo, 1911; Ballyclare, 1915; Culfeightrin, 1926; University of Ulster, 1986; Strangford, 1994. The setting up of Conferences depended in most cases on the encouragement and assistance of enthusiastic parish priests and curates.

Without wanting to move into more recent times, I would like to point to an example how the Society meets the change. When the “troubles” began in 1968, Star of the Sea Conference, Portstewart, offered a week’s holiday to 15 people from St Peter’s Parish in Belfast. That offer was taken up and every year since, pensioners from Belfast have been holidaying in Portstewart. For some years past, the other Conferences in the area have become involved in the scheme which is now co-ordinated through the North Antrim and North East Derry Area Council.

The Society in the North has moved on from the early days and now has a well established administration at Eia House in Belfast, headed up by Colm McNicholl. In spite of the Welfare State, there is still a continuing need for the Society which works very closely with the Statutory Authorities (particularly Social Services) in meeting want in its various forms.

In ending this catalogue of the work of the Society in the North during the last 150 years, it is well to remember the words of an unknown speaker in 1880:-

“If anything herein recorded appears to savour of vanity or vainglory, we repudiate such motives, for we humbly refer all our success to the special aid of Almighty God, and the intercession of our glorious patron, St Vincent”.