

Vincent de Paul Society, Limerick, and the Famine

by Larry Walsh

The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul was founded in Paris in 1833, and the first branch in Limerick, in St. Michael's Parish, was founded in 1846. Limerick Museum possesses a copy of the first report of the Society in Limerick, which was read by the chairman, Bishop John Ryan, at the general meeting at The Town Hall on 14 June, 1849, and printed by O'Brien Brothers, 108 George St., Limerick. The following are extracts relevant to the famine in the city.

The dreadful sufferings which the poor have undergone during the past three seasons, and the extreme difficulty found in affording them even a partial and inadequate relief, makes the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, in this City, anxious to lay before the public some account of its past labours, in the earnest hope of obtaining their assistance and co-operation.

As numbers of charitable persons however, are as yet but little acquainted with the Society, it may be well first to invite attention to its origin, objects, and the mode of its proceedings in the relief of the poor.

The Society is composed of honorary and active members. The active members hold their meetings at a fixed time and place weekly. At these meetings, applications for aid, previously sent in, are considered, and visitors are appointed to particular cases. These are obliged to make the strictest enquiry into the circumstances and merits of each case, and for this end take with them, on their first visit, printed forms or report sheets, to be filled up, and so laid before the Society, with their observations at the next meeting. On this, the cases, if suitable and deserving, are adopted. At each meeting, the several visitors take tickets for the amount of weekly relief granted to each poor family under their charge, which they dispense before the next meeting, it being a rule that the poor families are seen in their own homes, by the visitors, at least once a week. The visits are always made by two members together, and the relief is given almost always in kind - seldom, except under peculiar circumstances, in money.

Honorary members do not assist at the conferences. - They are invited like ordinary members to all other meetings, and they send every year a contribution to the Treasurer of the council or conference of their town. They assist the active members by their efforts and their influence, and by their offerings and their prayers, they supply the absence of that actual co-operation which their ordinary engagements will not permit them to perform.



Old St. Patrick's Church, Clare Street.

A meeting or assemblage of active members is called a conference. Besides the weekly meetings, there are four general meetings in the year, of which due notice is given. At the close of each weekly meeting of the active members, the treasurer goes round with his collection bag, into which each person present secretly drops his contribution. These collections, amongst the active members, together with similar collections at the four general meetings, and the contributions of Honorary Members, Ladies Subscribers and Donors, ordinarily constitute the funds of the Society.

The first conference of Saint Vincent de Paul, that of Saint Michael's, was formed in this City, on the First of November, 1846. The extreme pressure of the times, and the extraordinary depression under which this conference originated, raised an almost insuperable obstacle to the success of their pious labours. The great public distress that followed the loss of the ordinary food of the people, rendered it excessively difficult to procure funds for their purposes, while the dreadful sufferings of the poor made it more than ever necessary to obtain them. These circumstances, however, only served to stimulate the

members to still further exertion, and, under the Divine blessing, the conference prospered. It will be seen by the accounts of the conference annexed at the close of this Report, that it has already distributed, amongst the poor, upwards of 5227lbs. of bread, 2665 stones of meal, besides quantities of tea, sugar, milk, and other articles; the relief bestowed upon the poor, amounting on the whole in value to £357 10s 2d., obtained as we have stated, from the contributions of members and various other charitable sources.

The conference of Saint John was formed on the 20th of February, 1847. The consequences of the loss of the potato crop the previous year, were then at their greatest height in forms of the most dreadful destitution, combined with its necessary result - disease in various horrid shapes which it was sickening to contemplate. The extent of the evil was such as, from its overwhelming character, to render almost hopeless any efforts to bring it within moderate bounds, or even sensibly to diminish it. The high price of provisions - the limited means at the disposal of the Conference - the many social evils consequent upon the sudden and calamitous losses the country had experienced - the public distress that followed, and the contracted circumstances of many charitably disposed persons - all were difficulties that rendered the time extremely unfavourable to the objects they contemplated. For one family adopted by the Society, it was felt that many, many must necessarily remain without the advantage of its influence and continue to suffer; but Providence blessed their efforts, and the members found themselves, by degrees, accomplishing more than they had ever ventured to hope for. The conference of Saint John's parish, has, within a short period distributed the amount of relief shown in the account annexed at the end, in a manner, the efficiency of which, no poor law can ever hope either to reach or rival; the poor families being watched over by the members with the most sedulous attention, and generally visited twice a week at their own homes.

The balance stated by these accounts, to be in the hands of the Treasurer of each

conference, on the 1st of January last, would not be at all sufficient to meet the necessities of the poor for any lengthened period. A bazaar was therefore set on foot by both conferences conjointly, which, by the ever active charity of the citizens of Limerick, realised a considerable sum. Even this, however, will be exhausted before long, as the destitution of the city has increased to such an alarming extent, that the number of poor families on the books is more than double what it used ever be before.

Considering the limited number of members of which the Society in any particular locality consists, it would be impossible to sustain solely out of their own funds, such an expenditure as the necessities of the poor, in these calamitous times, require. This, indeed, has been felt not in Limerick only, but very generally throughout Ireland during the awful visitation of the last few years. Under a strong sense of the miseries of the poor, and the inadequacy of the means for their relief, the late lamented president of the Council of Ireland, Mr. Redmund Peter O'Carrol, one whose loss can never be sufficiently deplored, in his correspondence with the president-general of the Society in Paris, represented their condition, and the insufficiency of the means at the disposal of the Society. It was known indeed, that the causes to which the distress in Ireland was attributable, were very general in their operation, and had prevailed over the European continent with almost equal severity. - The result of this appeal was therefore looked to with great doubt and uncertainty, but the event formed a very happy contrast to those gloomy anticipations. For more than nine months, no Saturday of the week passed that the excellent president-general of the Society, M. Gossin, did not make a remittance from Paris of a larger or smaller amount for the objects contemplated. The aggregate amount of these donations have reached the sum of £6084 11s. 0d. Of this sum a very liberal proportion, as may be seen by the accounts just read, has been transmitted by the council of Ireland to the conferences of Limerick, for which the members of the Society beg to express their most grateful thanks.

They have also to express their grateful acknowledgements to the Right Rev. Dr. Ryan, our good Bishop, not alone for his extremely liberal contributions, but for his kind patronage of the Society on all occasions; to Michael Quin, Esq., late Mayor of Limerick, and other charitable persons for several large donations in aid of the Society - to the Society of Friends for some meal given by them for distribution to the poor, and in an especial manner to several benevolent gentlemen in Oxford, who, with the most praiseworthy philanthropy, reduced their daily expenditure for the purpose of contributing to the necessities of the Irish poor, and sent them from time to time several sums of money at the suggestion of William Monsell, Esq., M.P. to whom also for his strenuous and constant exertions in

their behalf they beg leave to offer their sincere and heartfelt thanks.

The great object of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is the improvement, in a religious point of view, both of the members themselves, and of the poor visited by them. In Ireland indeed, from the extremely wretched condition of the people, attention to their physical wants became of necessity a prominent feature of the working of the Society. Still this object though unavoidable and in itself a great field for the exercise of charity, has always been considered subsidiary to the other, and the greater end. With this feeling, the members of both conferences, besides requiring the children of the families they visited to be kept at school, and the parents to attend their religious duties, established a night-school for adult boys in each parish, where those who are at their occupations in the day-time might receive religious and other instruction in the evening, when their work was over. These schools were rendered to a slight extent self-supporting by requiring a small sum weekly in aid of the expences from such of the boys as could afford to pay it. Those who could not were paid for by the Society. The reports of the conferences speak strongly of the great improvement in morals and conduct of many of the adult boys who attend them. That of St. Michael's however, was obliged to be discontinued last season from some circumstances which prevented the boys attending except in small numbers. These circumstances it is hoped will only be of a temporary character. That of St. John's is still in active operation. At each meeting of the conference two members are appointed to visit the schools every night during the ensuing week, to watch over its proceedings and make entries thereof in a report book which is read at the next conference meeting and entered on the minutes - the conference supplies books and all other requisites.

The conference of St. John's parish has also appointed a committee of the members, for the purpose of promoting industry among the female poor of the families they visit - a number of poor women and girls are supplied with orders for cotton 4oz. at a time, which, being worked into a pair of stockings, they receive 4d. for the knitting, on delivering them to the member giving the order - they then get a further order for 4oz. more and so on - each pair of stockings stands about 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ d. and are good value for 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ d. or 7d.

The public will readily understand that any particular detail of the duties that devolve upon the members of the Society in these sad times would be but a painful recital of those dreadful scenes with which the Irish public has now alas become too familiar. It is well for those who use the ministry of the Society in the distribution of their charities, that they are spared the infliction of a personal association with such scenes. Those associations however are not always of an unmixedly painful character - many circumstances occur

from time to time which are extremely gratifying to the visitor and compensate for much that has harrowed his feelings. A family raised from sickness and destitution to health and industry, or brought, under the gentle guidance of the members, from drunkenness and vice to the practices of religion and piety, are circumstances that tend to relieve many an anxious thought, and lessen the pain that would otherwise attend on the duties of a visitor. The following are a few cases selected from many of a similar character. Several of them would undoubtedly have perished but for the assistance of the Society.

A poor labourer had supported a wife and six children by his scanty earnings until it was the will of God to afflict him with fever - the disease ran through the whole family, with one exception, and when the members of the Society first heard of them they found them all in a state of the utmost wretchedness and destitution. The poor man himself, though scarcely able to do so, was obliged to sit up in a chair to make room for the rest in the only bed they had. The house was a miserable hovel, and none of the neighbours would come near them. One little girl whom God was pleased to spare, gave such assistance as she could render, but had nothing for them but a drink of water. The members of the Society visited them frequently cheerfully assisting and administering relief to them, and after a few weeks had the satisfaction of seeing them restored to perfect health and quite able to support themselves.

Some charitable person sent a note to request a poor family living in St. John's parish would be visited by the members. On entering the room they found the floor one sheet of water from torrents or rain through the roof; on the cold hearth, where there was no fire, was seated a girl about thirty years of age, nearly in a state of nudity. The only furniture in the room was an old chest; a small bundle of straw on the wet floor was the bed of this poor family. The girl, though religiously inclined, had not been at mass for over twelve months for want of covering, all her clothes having been pawned in order to provide some sustenance for her family who consisted of her mother, and a brother, aged about twelve years, who, from their extreme wretchedness was greatly neglected in his religious and moral education. The members of the Society provided the poor girl with clothes which enabled her to go out and earn something by washing, and to go to mass on Sundays, she also, under their assistance, employed herself in knitting when otherwise disengaged. After a few visits the family were in a greatly improved condition, and the visitors eventually succeeded in obtaining for the girl a situation as servant in a respectable family which enabled her to support her mother and brother in comparative comfort.

A poor carpenter, with a wife and five children, being visited, were found in the most deplorable state of destitution; they



A mid-19th century view of New Town Pery from the north strand.

had often been twice and sometimes three times a week for more than forty-eight hours without one of them tasting food. They had also, from extreme wretchedness almost entirely abandoned their spiritual duties. After being visited some time this last evil was removed, and in the course of a few months the father got employment which continued until he was able to provide the children and wife with clothing. If this family had not come under the notice of the Society for one week longer they must inevitably - unless by a special interposition of Providence - have perished. They are now going on, the report of the conference states - "as well as can be expected considering the state of the times".

The members having been requested to visit another poor family, found them all in the most wretched circumstances. They were in a dark garret, more like a dungeon than a human dwelling - a poor girl in the last stage of consumption, bedridden for several months was sen in one corner; in another the aged mother, paralysed, was lying on a small bundle of half manure (for it could not be called straw) without any covering; in a third place was a wretched looking boy quite deaf and of no use or assistance to anybody. The only means of support of these poor creatures, were the exertions of a poor girl, a sister, whose employment was the washing of a room, or some such work, for which she might receive occasionally two or three pence. They were, indeed, receiving 1s. 6d. a week from the Guardians of the poor, "a large amount", the report of the visitors states, "to relieve so much distress and misery".

It would be tedious to continue the detail of cases which, with trifling variations, are all of a similar character. It is pleasanter to contemplate those, and they were not few, where dispositions naturally good, and strong religious feelings were found, contending with, and over-mastering the temptations of poverty, or those instances in which a manly, disinterested and independent feeling, evinced itself without much previous instruction.

A poor man, one evening, on returning from his employment found that two

members of the Society had been at his house in his absence, and had given 1s. 6d. to a brother of his who lived in his house, a feeble old man, quite incapable of work, who was entirely dependent on him. At their next visit he gave them back the money, saying "that it would be painful to his feelings to allow his aged brother to be dependent upon any one else as long as he was able to assist him". He said, at the same time, that "it was not pride that influenced him, since, if he required the assistance of the Society, he would not at all hesitate to accept it, but his brother had claims upon him which he could not well explain, though he felt it a kind of duty and a gratification to himself to satisfy them".

The members visited a poor widow in St. Michael's parish and offered her relief to the period of her death - she had two children one a girl, the other a young man of about 22 years of age, the latter was deplorably ignorant, but was a good and dutiful son. On being remonstrated with by the visitors, he expressed a wish to learn his religion, and now goes every Sunday to the parish Chapel for that purpose. It is interesting says the report of the conference "to see him, a fine able man, standing among the little children and receiving instruction with them. His attendance, it continues - is now at least disinterested, as he has full employment as a labourer, and receives no relief from the Society". ...

Before concluding this report we shall insert a few extracts from the general report of the Society for the year 1847, for the purpose of directing the particular attention of the members, as well as other persons, to the chief objects it desires to accomplish.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has never encouraged the practice of casual and indiscriminate relief to the poor. On the contrary, previously to granting relief, its rules require that the circumstances of the family which has been recommended to it, should be enquired into; and if it seems desirable to grant relief, it adopts the family for a considerable period, with a view not only to relieve their corporal wants, but also to improve their moral and

religious habits. The great number of families to whom we were compelled to give relief during the last year, caused this rule of the Society to be, in some degree, infringed upon; and such must continue to be, to some extent, the case, until the long prevailing distress shall have passed away, or be considerably mitigated. For our members would have been wanting in the very first duty of charity, if they could have overlooked the pressing cases which are constantly presenting themselves to them in their visits among the poor - cases of such urgency as to necessitate a departure from ordinary rules. But lest an exception called for by the state of society in which we had lived for the last two years, should degenerate into an abuse, and change the character of the Society altogether, the Council thinks it of importance to place before the members the sentiments of the late President of the Society, (Monsieur Gossin) who, in acknowledging the receipt of a report from one of the Irish conferences, thus notices the subject in a letter addressed to the President of the Council of Ireland.

"The report which has been forwarded to us, speaks of numerous families visited, but visited as it were, transitorily, twice or three times. - At the present moment, when the prevailing distress is so frightful and extensive, and when the question is, to preserve unhappy creatures from dying of famine, we can easily conceive this deviation from the rule; but we are most desirous that our brethren should be penetrated with the conviction, that such deviation from the rule should be only temporary. The principal end and object of our visits is, to make the poor better, to instruct, to console them, and to improve their habits by making ourselves their friends; and this end cannot be attained when we only visit them at hazard, and at long intervals. We hope, that our brethren of — will take into consideration these fraternal observations, and that when the frightful crisis, which now desolates the country, shall have passed, they will return to the practice of all the conferences, which is to adopt the families they visit for a long period, so as to improve while they assist them".