

# A glimpse at famine days in Kilkenny

Frank McEvoy

In August 1997, Pope John Paul II beatified Frederic Ozanam (1813-1853), founder of the St Vincent de Paul Society. Born in Milan, educated in Lyons, Ozanam qualified as a barrister at the University of Paris. In the pervasive atmosphere of anti-Catholicism in the university, he felt the necessity to demonstrate Catholic action among the most necessitous. In 1833, with a group of friends he formed the St Vincent de Paul Society, the keystone of whose activities was the visitation of the poor in their own homes.

The movement spread rapidly through Europe, and 1844 saw the establishment of the first 'Conference' (the French-sounding title continues to be adhered to, even today) or branch in Dublin.<sup>1</sup> During the next two years conferences sprang up in Cork, Limerick, Waterford and Dingle, and in 1848 the society was established in Kilkenny. The timing could not have been more propitious. That year saw Ireland in a political ferment, culminating in the 'Young Ireland' rising in nearby County Tipperary in July. The great famine still scourged the country, and Kilkenny city itself, blighted with cholera, was overcrowded with a wretched population living in desperate poverty. And matters were to get even worse over the next few years.

An editorial in the *Kilkenny Journal* of 10 June 1848 stated that 'the labouring classes of this city are at the present moment in a state of the most appalling destitution; they are, in fact, starving ... They now demand food or employment ... many of them had been 24 hours without tasting a morsel of food'.

Indeed that same week there were bread riots on two bakeries in the city. Fever broke out among the inmates of the county gaol. It housed 200 criminals, though only built for about sixty.<sup>2</sup>

'On Sunday last, an influx of some one or two thousand

men, women and children, hungry and ragged, swept into our town and blocked up our streets. Some of the men enjoyed the luxury of a coarse shirt; many of them were shirtless, shoeless – and all were penniless. They wanted employment – they would work for anything'.<sup>3</sup>

An emergency meeting of the magistrates was held to see what steps could be adopted for putting an end to the increase in vagrancy in Kilkenny. The police were blamed for not prohibiting the influx of strangers to the city. In consequence of this rebuke, the police arrested no less than seventy-three remnants of humanity whom the law designated as paupers or vagrants. One of those arrested, a man named Cormick, stated that his wife and four children had 'eaten nothing since Saturday, only a little watercress that we pulled'. The majority of these fugitives from famine were natives of either Tipperary, Cork, Kerry, Galway or Mayo. When asked by the magistrates if they would return home if set free, their inevitable cry was, 'We have no home; there is nothing to be had in the country and we would die along the road'.<sup>4</sup>

It was in this despairing world that one candle was lit by the first meeting in Kilkenny of the St Vincent de Paul Society, which took place on Wednesday 9 February 1848. Present at this meeting were Joseph Lalor (a 37 year old medical practitioner living in King St, who was also a medical officer in the workhouse), Rev. William Hayden (then a curate in St Mary's but later parish priest of St Patrick's which parish has a road named after him), Owen O'Callaghan (a general merchant from the Coalmarket), Joseph Hackett (a watchmaker and postmaster of King St), Martin J. Walsh, John Carroll, William Power and Matthew Rowan (a woollen merchant of High St). At the introductory meeting, Dr Lalor was elected president, Joseph Hackett, secretary, Matthew Rowan assistant-secretary and Fr Hayden spiritual director. It was agreed to hold meetings of the conference on each Tuesday evening and to adopt the rules of the parent society in Paris. Three months later, on 10 May 1848, the council general in Paris wrote to 'Monsieur Joseph Lalor, President de la Conference de Kilkenny', congratulating the conference on its formation, wishing the infant institution prosperity and expecting to learn of its progress through the council in Dublin.

The one message that the council general stressed was that the brothers (as members were designated) should visit the poor in their houses and never desert that charitable practice under any pretext.

Membership was divided into active and honorary members; the former attended weekly meetings of the society, issued alms to the deserving cases and contributed to a secret bag collection; the honorary members gave financial donations and recommended worthy recipients for assistance. The mayor, Thomas Hart, became the first honorary member. In May 1848, Michael Banim the novelist was enrolled as an active member. The earliest weekly meetings were held in the mayor's room, in the Tholsel, later they wandered variously to the Savings Bank, William St, the under room of the Trades, Political & Literary Institution, William St, and St Mary's National School, Chapel Lane.

The scale of poverty in the city may be gauged from the number of cases given assistance in the first year:

1848	March	122		September	120
	April	455		October	95
	May	560		November	94
	June	359		December	69
	July	252	1949	January	116
	August	281		February	163

Behind these statistics, the flesh and blood circumstances of some of these cases were detailed at the first general meeting held in the assembly rooms of the Tholsel on 7 May 1848:

A slater with a wife and seven children was reduced to such distress from want of employment that scarcely a vestige of furniture or clothing was left to the family, having pawned almost all to supply the necessaries of life. This family has been supported by the society for the last fortnight and there is every prospect of the head of it being shortly restored to employment and independence.

A labourer without any employment or visible means of subsistence with a family of five was found by our visitors in such abject want that his wife who had been very recently confined had not even a bed of straw or scarcely a particle of covering and she from want of food or drink was unable to give

sustenance to her child. Our visitors report that they consider that the lives of the mother and child would have been lost but for the timely aid of the society.

A tradesman, once comfortable and respectable, but reduced to poverty by an unfortunate speculation was found with his daughter in one of the city lanes. He with no clothing except a piece of carpeting wrapped about his middle, the daughter with an old piece of stuff tied round her with a piece of cord which was their only clothing both by day and by night. When first visited by the brothers they were totally without food. Now they were provided with clothing, food and occasional employment.<sup>6</sup>

A shoemaker of the better class so reduced as to be unable for want of clothes to go to mass on Sundays which he appeared to regret sincerely. Having got a suit of clothes he has since been remarked by our visitors for his attendance at chapel not only on Sundays but on week mornings.

By the time of the second general meeting, held in the sacristy, St James's on Sunday 6 August 1848 an analysis of the society's finances was under scrutiny. The rapid diminution of funds with no prospect of replenishment meant that disbursements had to be reduced by nearly one half their amount long before harvest time when there would be an increase in employment among the poor. In the first seven months of the society's existence, receipts had been £214 3s 11d and disbursements £173 6s 1d. The amount of weekly relief, at one time upwards of £9 was now scarcely £5 not because of any decrease in destitution, but from exhaustion of funds. Precarious finances involving a scanty distribution of relief to a few out of the dense mass of misery, equal in its claims on the society's compassion, fostered ill-will and bickering among those excluded from the lists which would raise up more enemies than friends for the society. The moral evils which would spring from the heart burnings of disappointed applicants refused bounty, for reasons which they could never be made to understand, would more than counter balance the advantages they were able to confer from limited funds. The receipt of £35 from the council of Ireland and a donation of £40 from Rev. Mr Hennessy momentarily relieved the situation.

Side by side with this evidence of general penury, a weekly

collection was taking place in the city for funds for the new cathedral of St Mary's then in the course of erection.<sup>7</sup>

The fluctuation in funds continued to restrict the activities of the society; on 20 November 1849 the balance on hands was 1s 7d. However, the charitable impulse of the brothers flourished in adversity. The conference, centred in St Mary's parish, spread its benefactions by stages to cover the whole city, with divisions in St Canice's, St John's, St Rock's, St Patrick's, St Dominic's and St Francis's. The mode of distribution of assistance was by suppliers who were designated on a monthly basis to exchange food in return for tickets, e.g. meal – Mrs Guilfoyle; meat – Mr Joe Hickey, bread – Mr John Buggy; groceries – Mr D. Cullen. When Michael Sullivan declined to fulfil his meal contract, Mr Timmins was appointed in his stead to provide meal at £13 per ton. The earliest recipients of relief, granted at the second meeting on 15 February 1848 were Mrs B., Poyntz Lane 2s worth of bread and 2s worth of food to Mrs K., Switzers Asylum.

Not merely were food and clothing provided but also financial support to help families get on in trade or overcome specific difficulties (which continues to be a feature of the society's work in 1997). For example one recipient received a grant of 6s 3d to purchase sixty bundles of straw for bedding. Other examples from the first minute book of the conference, covering the period 9 February 1848 to 29 March 1853 are:

M.T., to buy a horse skin 8s.

M.C., school master, to purchase a table, chair and two forms 5s.

M.M., to purchase fruit 2s 6d.

M.D., widow, for the repairs of a car to enable her family to live by drawing water etc. 10s.

E.K., for the purchase of clothes to enable her to go into service 5s.

J.W., hatter, Wolf's Arch, for the purchase of  $\frac{1}{4}$  stone lamb's wool 5s 6d.

M.D., nailor, for  $\frac{1}{2}$  cwt rod iron 3s 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ d.

E.G., butcher, St Mary's parish, for purchase of calfs 5s.

Widow D., St Dominic's, for purchase of an ass 5s.

P.B., brazier, St Rock's, for purchase of gold leaf 7s.

J.S., for the purchase of basil leather for covering trunks 10s.

P.D., comb maker 7s.

W.E., shoe maker, for the purchase of leather to enable him to get on in business 10s.

G.K., John St, for the same purpose, a like sum.

W.M., hatter, to release hat and working materials formerly pledged 10s.

P.D., John St, shoe maker to enable him to get on in his trade 10s.

A.C., St Canice's, fruit dealer, for the purchase of fruit 2s 6d.

J.D., St Francis, for the purchase of a spade, by which he got employment 1s 6d.

Another aspect of this social work was the aid given to emigrants:

To P.H., weaver, St Mary's to enable him to go to Leeds in quest of employment 7s 6d.

To T.H., St John's, to enable him to go to Liverpool 7s.

To R.F., to enable himself and family to go to England for employment 5s.

To B.F., to enable herself and child to join her husband in Birmingham 8s.

To Mrs K., Patrick St, in case she is able to make up a sufficiency to bring herself and family to America £1.

Then there is the intriguing case of Miss D. who was offered a grant of 10s later increased to £1 if she went to England. Then it was discovered that she was getting a free passage to Newport through the St Vincent de Paul Society, Waterford, so she was to be provided with her car fare to Waterford and 10s expenses out of the pound that was voted her.

At the general meeting on 4 May 1851 the president spoke about the Emigration Protection Society recently established in Dublin and about to be established in Liverpool and elsewhere. The secretary was instructed to write to Mr Frederick Marshall of Liverpool for 200 placards regarding the emigrants home about to be opened there under the auspices of the clergy, and it was agreed that 100 placards regarding the Emigration Protection Society should be printed for posting and distribution.

The conference was always conscious of attending to the material needs and moral welfare of the school children of the

city. At the general meeting in August 1848 the president, Dr Lalor, as well as urging young men to join the society, said there was a great want of additional schools for the poor of Kilkenny. Incalculable advantages would proceed from the establishment of the Sisters of Charity and Christian Brothers in the city. Those religious bodies were, in fact, indispensable and the thirst of our young people for religious and literary instruction deserved to be gratified.

Again at the general meeting, 17 February 1850, Dr Lalor reverted to the great neglect of the children of St Mary's parish in the areas of religious and moral education. At Christian doctrine classes on Sundays, the average attendance of boys was about eighty, whereas it should be about 300. In like manner at the national schools. It had always been held as a condition to parties receiving relief that their children attend both Christian doctrine classes and school regularly.

Mr Mark O'Shaughnessy spoke of the introduction of the Christian Brothers as the most effectual means of checking the rapid growth of ignorance and immorality, of which unfortunately every day there were too many examples. He had seen the Christian Brothers in another town and found their labours crowned with success.

Fr William Hayden said that our venerated bishop (Dr Walsh) was most anxious to have them here if their expenses and permanent support could be calculated on. A committee was established to consider the best course to be adopted for the introduction of the Christian Brothers into Kilkenny. The members were the council of the conference, the Roman Catholic clergymen of the city, the mayor of Kilkenny Michael Banim, Edmond Smithwick JP., Thomas Hart JP., Henry Potter JP., Daniel Cullen, Cornelius Maxwell, Thomas Cody, Edward D'Evereux. The committee obviously went to work with a will, for four years later, in 1854, the Christian Brothers opened their school in St Mary's parish. However, it was another eleven years before the Sisters of Charity arrived in Kilkenny (August 1861).<sup>8</sup>

At the general meeting held on 7 December 1851 it was resolved that active members undertake to adopt the best means of providing the poor children with clothes as an inducement to them to attend school. Visitors were appointed

to call at the national school, Chapel Lane, and report on the number of boys attending, the quantities of relief that might be desirable to give, same not to exceed 5s for this week (13 January 1852).

Over a ten day period, 482 boys were given 213 lbs of bread, at a cost of 21s 5d. This service was extended to St John's National School in May 1852 when in one week 130 boys got 62 lbs of bread, costing 6s 4d. St Canice's National School had the largest roll of pupils evidently. In eleven days in January 1853, 694 boys were fed 287½ lbs of bread, at an expenditure of £1 16s 11d.

In parenthesis, putting all these sums into some context, on Colonel Byran's estate at Jenkinstown, six miles outside the city, in 1846 labouring men were paid 1s per day for a six day week, labouring women 8d per day and a boy 6d for 'keeping pigs in clover'. In one week in December 1846 1 cwt of oatmeal was fed to dogs, priced 14s.<sup>9</sup>

The Society of St Vincent de Paul, in Kilkenny, with a view to economising, due to the low state of their funds, decided that Indian meal should be substituted for oatmeal in the tickets (31 July 1849). Four months later, funds were even lower, and cases given aid were reduced to 11s per week. (November 1849) The low state of funds was attributable to the general depression of all classes, not to the want of confidence towards the society by the public 'which increases daily as the knowledge of the working and object of the Society becomes more generally known'.

Then an honorary member gave the gift of a pianoforte to be raffled, which event was to be held in the assembly rooms of the Tholsel on Monday 4 February 1850, same to be advertised in the *Kilkenny Journal*. After expenses, the raffle netted £33 0s 6d, and better still, the winner, Mr Patrick Phelan, Newpark, left it with the society for disposal, bestowing half the amount it would realise to the society, which brought in an extra £2 16s 6d. In Christmas week 1849, it was decided to give meat in addition to other relief – 49 lbs at 3s a lb.

Besides the raffle for the pianoforte, other methods of fund raising were pursued. The band of 2nd Battalion 60th Royal Rifles performed a concert (20 June 1851); after outgoings of £4 3s 5d, there was a net profit of £8 8s 6d. Greater effort went



into preparations for concerts held in the Tholsel a year earlier (15 July 1850). Sheet music was purchased, which was later presented to Mr McGlynn as a token of respect for his services at the concerts. Singers Misses Connery and Tracey got a performing fee of £14. Costumes worn by Thomas Carroll and Miss Kelly cost £2 2s 11d. Refreshments, car hire, printing and other expenses amounted to £6 18s 8d. Takings at the door and pre-sold tickets brought in £38 4s 0d. So a lot of organisation netted a profit of £15 2s 5d, but the enjoyment given to the citizenry was not negligible, and Misses Connery and Tracey gave back £1 from their fee.

Efforts to provide employment and inculcate a sense of independence among the poor was always in the forefront of the thinking of the society. In September 1848 a subscription of £2 was forwarded to the Irish Work Society in London. This was an agency through which needlework done by poor females could be marketed. A female industrial school was started towards the end of 1848, under the management of the Presentation Sisters. One charitable lady paid the expenses for an intelligent female to go to London for instruction in the various modes of straw plaiting best suited to the English market. She would then return and instruct a class of females in that manufacture, which would ensure profitable employment for a large number of hands. Young women recommended by the visiting members of St Vincent de Paul Society were given, not alms, but money to purchase materials. Benevolent ladies gave expertise and advice, and the society envisaged the trade as making it in some degree self-supporting.

A letter from the general council in Dublin, dated 15 May 1849, declared that the conference had done a very meritorious act in introducing the straw plait manufacturer into Kilkenny city. There was a great demand for its product and it was necessary to encourage cleanly habits among those entrusted with such work, as otherwise it could not be satisfactorily executed.

In March 1852, Dr Joseph Lalor submitted his resignation from the office of president of the society which he had held continuously since its foundation four years earlier. He wrote: 'I shall ever remember with pleasure the years of our

connexion, and love to recall the example of your zeal in the cause of the poor'. He did not give any reason for his resignation, but it may readily be assumed that it was because of pressure of work in connection with Kilkenny District Asylum which opened that year, and of which he was the first resident physician. He would no longer be residing in King Street in St Mary's parish.

Richard Smithwick JP, Birchfield was appointed his successor as president, possibly because of his status, as he did not attend the weekly meetings. They were chaired by Martin J. Walsh, vice-president, and only at the quarterly general meetings did Richard Smithwick exercise the president's prerogative. One such meeting was held on Sunday 12 December 1852, attended by seventeen active and eighteen honorary members. There John Carroll of Earlsrath, spoke of the utility of issuing cheap Catholic publications to counteract the indecent and libellous ones being circulated by the Protestant 'souters'. Also having seen a great deal of immorality in the Waterford Union, of which he was a guardian, he recommended that the active members visit the Kilkenny Union.

Alderman Michael Banim, graduate of G.C. Buchanan's English Academy at Wolf's Arch – so vividly depicted in the pages of *Father Connell*<sup>10</sup> – stressed the importance of providing breakfasts in the schools, insofar as the society's funds would allow, this being the best means of preserving the faith and morals of the children, besides securing to them a good sound education.

It can be said, in conclusion, that Frederic Ozanam, founder of the Society of St Vincent de Paul, would have been proud of the conference in Kilkenny, which lived up to his highest ideals. Meetings were held and families visited in their homes every week without fail, even on St Stephen's day when burghers might have been excused to slumber off the excesses of Christmas in the bosom of their families. They did not rail against the insuppressible mass of poverty; they set about alleviating it. Shortage of funds did not curb their work; they devised new modes of collecting funds, like placing alms boxes in churches and principal stores – twelve boxes with locks,

paintings and lettering cost 18s. Not one penny was spent unwisely or unaccountably.

In a world where so many institutions come and go, born in enthusiasm, expires through inaction or because their original function has been outgrown, it is an indication of the human condition that the St Vincent de Paul Society, still serves the community in 1997, and unostentatiously fulfills the duties perceived by its founder.

### Acknowledgements

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Note: The ethos of St Vincent de Paul Society respects the privacy of their clients; accordingly their names have been abbreviated to initials.

### References

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2. *Kilkenny Journal*, 1 July 1848.
3. *Ibid.* 25 August 1849.
4. *Ibid.* 9 May 1849.
5. For further information see T.K. McKeogh's, Dr. Joseph Lalor (1811-1866). "A credit to Ireland" in *Old Kilkenny Review*, 1996.
6. *Kilkenny Journal*, 25 April 1849.
7. *Ibid.* 19 February 1848.
8. *Sisters of Charity, St Patrick's, Kilkenny 1879-1996 (n.a.)*.
9. Bryan papers in writer's possession.
10. *Father Connell* by the O'Hara family (London: 1849).

### Biographical Note

Frank McEvoy is a former editor of the Old Kilkenny Review (1984-1986); a co-founder of The Kilkenny Magazine (1960-1970). He is now a retired civil servant and antiquarian book dealer who lives in Kilkenny city.