

HISTORY

The latter part of the nineteenth century witnesses a tremendous growth throughout the United States in the number of Catholic institutions for the care of children. Some fifty of them were established during this period.

One would have to scan the list of institutions in Msgr. John O'Grady's History of Catholic Charities with great care in order not to overlook the name of St. Ann's Orphanage in Worcester, Massachusetts.¹ But behind that single unobtrusive line in a long list lies a most interesting story, the biography of St. Ann's, which began in 1889 and continues to the present, where some might say it stands at a crossroads. But to understand the present and to plan for the future, one must first understand the past. What forces brought these child-caring institutions into existence and what specifically were the circumstances in which St. Ann's Orphanage began its long life?

The romanticist may be thrilled at the thought of thousands upon thousands of people pouring into this land during the nineteenth century, coming to seek happiness, success and security. The realist without detracting from this view sees also the seamy side of the picture, the ravages of disease, and the scourge of poverty that decimated families and left thousands of children without care and protection necessary for their physical, emotional and spiritual development. The corporal works of mercy, particularly the care of children, have always been accepted by the Catholic Church as a part of its mission in the world. This then was the basic premise for the Church's interest in child-care, a general concern intensified by the added consideration that since many of the immigrants were of the Catholic Faith the Church's solicitude extended in a very special way to the spiritual welfare of the children.

In the space of seventy or eighty years, beginning with the little institution established by the Ursulines in 1830 in New Orleans, a large number of child-care institutions under the auspices of the Catholic Church were established around the country. A strong national flavor penetrated into this field, for the national groups were far from assimilated into the community. Each nationality felt an obligation to take care of its own children, and thus in some communities there were Polish orphanages, in others the Irish orphanages and in Worcester and other cities in New England where the element was strong, French-Canadian orphanages were established.

In 1889 Fr. Brouillette, Pastor of Notre Dame Church in Worcester, organized a layman's committee to aid the orphaned children of the city, and confided the care of these children to a secular institute. We may well imagine the group's impatience with this "stop-gap" measure and their desire to establish a real institution. When the committee sought a Religious Community to carry on this charitable work, they presented the request to the Sisters of Charity of Montreal known simply to all who had experienced their charitable ministrations as the Grey Nuns.

1. John O'Grady, History of Catholic Charities, (Washington: National Council of Catholic Charities, 1931), P. 151.

Already well known for their labors in Canada, the Grey Nuns had extended their activities to this country with the establishment of St. Vincent's Orphanage in Toledo in 1855 and much more recently with a similar institution in Fall River, Massachusetts. Reverend Mother Julie Deschamps on behalf of her community and with approbation of the Most Reverend R.P. O'Reilly, Bishop of Springfield, accepted the responsibility for the care of the orphans. The institution known as St. Ann's French-Canadian Orphanage became a reality on January 31, 1891, when three Sisters came from Montreal to begin their work, the setting being a house on Southgate Street in Worcester.

Such an arrangement was only temporary, for within a few months the Ellsworth Farm, consisting of house, barn, and some one hundred and sixty acres of land was purchased, and construction was begun on a building to house the children and the Sisters. On January 30, 1893, ten Sisters and fifty children moved into their new home, a four-storied structure, which in architectural style is so typical of the institutions of that period. In 1904 Mrs. George Crompton Wood willed her home to St. Ann's with the stipulation that it be used for religious purposes alone, a condition satisfied by the utilization of the building, which was moved to a location contingent to the main building, as a convent and a chapel.

In 1923 the Fire Department declared the top floor unsafe as a residence for children. Since the vast majority of the children were housed in that area, the continued existence of St. Ann's necessitated the immediate construction of a building. This edifice consisting principally of four large dormitory areas was erected and presently houses the children and the Sisters. With the discontinuance of the school and the consolidation of other facilities for economy reasons, the original wood building now houses the kitchen and dining areas, a temporary chapel, and the administrative operation of St. Ann's.

Having obtained this brief outline of the historical development of the physical facility, it is important to return to the history of service offered by St. Ann's over the years. The original residents were no doubt true orphans whose parents had perished in the early days. Tuberculosis, pneumonia, - these were the killers that thrived in the poverty of the people. A custodial program for these orphans constituted the "raison d'etre" of St. Ann's for many years. Gradually, however, as the immigrants began to improve their economic status and the advances of medical science reduced the number of true orphans, the type of child at St. Ann's changed. Some of the children were unwanted, rejected by their parents and the institution offered opportunity to get rid of these children under various guises. The Sisters were not insensitive to these situations but felt that the care they offered was preferable to the home situation.

Then too without discounting from the supernatural charity of St. Ann's, the Sisters faced many financial problems. A farm maintained on the premises complete with pigs and chickens, and the people of Worcester opened their hearts and larders to St. Ann's directly and through the Community Chest, but these were surely days of financial hardship.

If a bed were empty and a parent willing to pay for board of the child, with the result that the board payment here would help to meet the expenses of other children for whom no one made any contribution, the natural inclination was to accept the child.

In the field of Social Services meanwhile, much discussion had been held about the place of an institution like St. Ann's in the constellation of services in the community. In St. Ann's lifetime, positions have swung back and forth to diametric poles: the institution as a panacea, the institution as a monster, and then settling at a middle-ground that the institutional setting is useful in certain circumstances. Although there were no doubt some worthwhile cases at St. Ann's, the method of intake left much to be desired. A survey of the agencies in the Worcester area in 1957 recommended that the administration
must move to transform St. Ann's into an institution
 in which both charity and sound concepts of child
 care are present.²

The Sisters themselves realized the need for such a reappraisal and redirection for the program, and under the directorship of Msgr. David Sullivan, Catholic Charities agreed to assist the Sisters in this activity. In 1959 Rev. Timothy Harrington, then assistant and now director of Catholic Charities and a graduate social worker, studied all the cases at St. Ann's and as a result the number of children was sharply reduced. This was a milestone in that it re-focused the total program of St. Ann's. At the same time, the Sisters were educated to this approach in institutional child-care. Change is not easy for anyone, but many of them had seen the damage that could result from a non-selective placement policy.

With Msgr. Timothy Harrington's appointment as director of Catholic Charities, he was no longer able to continue in the same capacity at St. Ann's. At that point he delegated a member of his staff to continue the work begun in social services, looking always toward the goal of the best service possible to the children in care.

In 1962, Sister Marie Doucette was appointed administrator. With many years in child care and a graduate from a university child care sequence, she developed the outlines of professional child care programs which began to emerge from planning to reality.

Child care staffing was re-aligned with the development of an adolescent girls' unit. Separate programs were added for the various units. Admission policies were refined and an admission committee formed composed of the administrator, the child care worker into whose group the child might be admitted, and the social worker. At admission, parents were seen as an integral part of planning. Parent counselling groups were established. Group counselling groups were established. Group counsellors were added to the recreational therapy program. A training program for all child care staff was initiated with the Simmons College School of Social Work in conjunction with the New England Association of Child Care Personnel.

2. Planning for Community Welfare. (Worcester: Worcester Community Chest and Council, 1957), P. 13.

In-service training programs were added to each year's program in conjunction with such agencies as the Division of Child Guardianship and Catholic Charities. At an earlier time, the program of in-service training was under the direction of a professor from the Boston College School of Social Work. Over the last several years, these programs have been directed by a local eminent board certified psychiatrist.

Additional professional social workers were added to the staff under the direction of a director of social service. The professional disciplines of psychiatry, psychology, and nursing were brought into the family of professional child care at what now had officially become known as Mount St. Ann.

Volunteer groups were established through local colleges for the dual purpose of a big brother-big sister association as well as in certain areas providing tutorial help for a certain child. Religious instruction for children of all faiths, although always an integral part of Mount St. Ann's, was refined and embellished.

Because of community need, but more importantly because of the needs of children, emergency, temporary care of children, as opposed to group care planned after careful study and assessment with many community agencies, was retained as an integral part of professional programming. Possibly the most far-reaching development, however, was the institution of a lay advisory board. It's availability to the administrator for programming has been especially noteworthy. At this point in time it is enmeshed in the momentous task of building a new Mount St. Ann.