

REPORT ON THE SOCIAL WORK BEING CARRIED OUT BY

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ST. PAUL'S HOUSE

ST. PAUL'S ROAD

SOUTHSEA

St. Paul's Shelter is run by the FREE CHURCH WOMEN'S COUNCIL. Their main work consists in looking after girls of all denominations, with deep-seated problems which are many and varied. They are housed in a modern one storey building, with individual rooms which are nicely decorated and very pleasant to live in.

On September 16th 1963, I took up my appointment as Warden in this SHELTER! In my seven months experience, I have certainly seen a completely different side of life. I have my own self-contained flat, complete with telephone, attached to the building. Since coming here, I have not ceased to thank God for the security of my home and catholic upbringing because the degradation of these girls is brought about by the insecurity of broken and loveless homes and families. Consequently, I feel privileged to be at their service and to have the chance of bringing the Christ I know into their unhappy lives. You will wonder how I achieve this – how I became involved with them. Here is a brief summary of how I find myself doing it. The phone rings at any hour of the day or the night it might be the police, Social Security or the Children's Probation Officer. They may have a teenager who has run away from home, a drug addict picked up in the streets, a pregnant mother deserted by her husband and nowhere to go, or a young mother with a babe in arms having a sad, sad story. I am asked if I can accommodate one of these pitiful cases. Some time later, she is brought here and I admit her to the SHELTER. It is essential to take down some details of her case history.

The next step is to find out what she possesses in the line of clothing or worldly goods. In many cases, I find the girl has nothing to wear except what she arrived in, so I provide her with nightdress, towel, soap and other toilet requisites. While she is having a hot bath, I prepare a meal for her. Obviously meals on the whole are at a set times but as I can, and when the occasion arises, I prepare a little extra snack for her. I find that these small kindnesses have a lasting influence as can be seen from the following experiences.

An eighteen year old girl arrived one evening, being sent by the Children's Department. She looked dismayed and dejected and greeted my welcome in a very off-hand and indifferent manner. She looked at me with suspicion and mistrust as if to say "This is another jail-like place, ruled by very harsh and indifferent people so –I'll keep my mouth shut!" This attitude persisted for a few days despite my many efforts of kindness to her. She was silent at meals and all I could get from her was a "Yes" or a "No". She was indeed a closed book.

There was no dialogue there!! How could I win her trust? I was determined to persist in my acts of kindness towards her and at 9.30 one evening my efforts were rewarded. I prepared a tray - a few sandwiches and a cup of coffee, and took it to her room. I knocked gently on her door but got no reply. I repeated the action a second time with a louder knock but no response came. I prayed for guidance and opened the door and walked in. My friend was in bed and turned her back towards me. "Linda" I said, "I have brought you some coffee and sandwiches. I noticed you were tired when you came in". There was still no response. Suddenly, she turned in bed and looked at me with pity and despair. Then she looked at the tray in my hand. Instead of taking it, she grabbed the pillow, buried her head in it and cried and sobbed until I thought her heart would break. Here was my chance. Grace had triumphed. I put down the tray, sat on her bed, and put my hand on her shoulder in the hope of assuring her that I understood, and that in me she could find love and friendship. She calmed down after a while, then turned and looked at me again and screamed the following words at me: "I hate everybody...I hate my mother. Nobody loves me. I'll end my life". Then there was peace and she seemed to be thinking deeply. The next time she spoke she said: "Are you a mother?" "Well", I said, as I took her trembling hand "I'll be a mother to you". Then she added: "I never thought I'd ever again find anybody to be kind to me. Everybody hates me", and at this she cried again. I sat with her as she revealed her tragic story. The closed book had opened and what a sad story was fitted into her 18 short years! Another of God's children restored to his love and care. I went to get some fresh coffee and we both had a little snack together - friends in the love of Christ. I propped up her pillow, tucked her in for the night. I find these personal touches work wonders. She thanked me sincerely for my kindness to her as I left the room. How that look had changed! As I went along the corridor to my room, I thanked God for using me as his instrument. See how one has to get really involved in order to help!

If you are not already bored with this story, I would like to recall another incident. One evening, a call came from the Children's Officer asking if I could take a mother and her six daughters, aged 1 - 14 years, who had arrived from the North of England. I did a bit of quick thinking and said "yes". They arrived, or should I say, were brought here by the Child Department. They were hungry and tired, having travelled all day - eleven hours in the coach. We prepared a good meal and soon they were ready for bed. The father and three boys were put up in the boys' hostel. The family were sent back the next, day at the expense of the Social Security as there was no work or accommodation for them in Portsmouth.

You may wonder how long we keep these girls. To start off with, we get in touch with Social Security. They are wonderful to deal with. The girls receive from them a voucher for five guineas which pays their rent here for a week. Then I send them to the Labour Exchange about getting a job. I also help them to get a flat. This takes a week to ten days or perhaps longer. Some I encourage to go back home. I have in mind now a girl of 17, who came from the North of England. Whilst down here she got in with bad company and as a result, became pregnant. I advised her to go back home but she was fearful saying: "I could never face my mother in this state". I asked her if she would like me to write and explain all and she gave her consent. It was a shock to the poor parent, but in her live, -

strong and forgiving, characteristic of mother love – she phoned me and said: “Of course I’ll have Lorraine back. She is still my child”.

Many of the girls find a job before they get accommodation. I call these girls for work each morning, and prepare a breakfast for them. As they leave for work I say: “Remember God loves you and I’ll be looking for you when you return”. I feel this gives them new hope, fresh courage and the knowledge that somebody cares.

Because this is an Interdenominational concern, I attend services and engagements in other churches. Some weeks ago, I attended a ceremony in a Methodist Church, so not only am I committed socially but also at an ecumenical level. Incidentally, I am the only catholic on the staff. This never ceases to surprise the Catholic clergy of the area and the Catholic Probation Officer too, especially as I am a nun. May I hasten to add, none of them was as surprised as myself when I found myself on the administrative staff of the SHELTER!

I know that the more I open myself to these girls, the more I become a witness of Christ to them and I consider the SHELTER is also my community – gathered together to have but “one heart and one soul in God”.

My apostolate or witness is not confined to the SHELTER precincts. One morning on my way to Mass in the Cathedral – a 15 minutes walk – I was stopped by a man who said: “excuse me, nurse, I am an alcoholic, where can I go for the cure?” – I can say a great need in this work is sense of humour.

Meeting the needs of my present apostolate demands constant self- giving. But all acts of kindness meet with success. In this work one has to become involved to help people and this involvement, of its very nature, entails frustration and disappointment and I get then in plenty – the Gethsemane of the human condition. In a situation such as this, one is made keenly aware of the need of a good community backing. That is why I look forward so much to my day off when I can return to the community. It is good to be renewed both spiritually and physically by the interest and encouragement of one’s sisters. This brings to mind my early days in St. Paul’s House when I felt lonely and inadequate in my new enterprise. On these occasions I went to Mother Mary Peter, often with a feeling of despair. Her words of encouragement never failed me. She reminded me of my life long dealing with youth and added that a natural capacity of patient understanding and love was as invaluable in this work as professional training and competence. It was only after weeks of experience that I realised the wisdom of her words and I would like to take this opportunity of thanking her very specially.

Before I conclude, I would like to mention the constant co-operation of many organisations such as the Child’s Department, Social Security, and the Irish Club – but above all I have special admiration for the dedicated way in which the police carry out their task with these girls. The Drug Squad are to me, models of Christian living and I have good reason for this statement.

Every night when I say the Compline Collect, - “Visit, we beseech thee, Lord, this house and family” – I cannot help but visualize the entire family of God – the underprivileged and lonely who represent Christ in his sufferings; those generous souls bringing comfort and relief, who represent Christ the Comforter and healer of mankind. For one and all, who look to Christ in his Resurrection, I pray –

“Visit, Lord, we beseech thee this dwelling and drive far from it all the snares of the enemy, let thy holy angels dwell herein to preserve us in peace and let thy blessing be ever upon us.”

And now, would you remember the SHELTER at St. Paul’s in your good prayers and please, remember me too.