

Iona Talk 27 April 2017 Summary

Frank Duff's care for unmarried mothers and their children

On 1 October 1930 Frank Duff, a civil servant in the Department of Finance, together with volunteer helpers in the Legion of Mary, the organisation founded by Duff in 1921, opened a hostel for homeless women. The hostel, named the *Regina Coeli*, was located in North Brunswick Street in Dublin beside a hostel for men, the *Morning Star*, which Duff had founded in 1927.

Soon after opening the residents of the *Regina Coeli* included unmarried expectant mothers. Every woman admitted into the *Regina Coeli* paid a small contribution towards her keep. This might take the form of bottles or jam jars which at the time could be redeemed for cash. A 'task system' of laundry or domestic work was avoided.

A small number of houses were acquired and divided into flats to be used by the women and children as step down facilities before moving on to independent living.

Duff's special sympathy for unmarried mothers and their children was highly unusual, if not unique, at the time. Prior to the *Regina Coeli* the methods used were based on the separation of mother and child. In a letter written to a friend over forty years after the opening of the *Regina Coeli*, Duff said:

So we began to work for a place which would provide for the mother keeping her child. On 1st October, 1930, the Regina Coeli Hostel was opened and it sought as part of its work to provide for that particular problem.

At once it was found that it met a dire need.... The success of the method has been positively incredible. About three thousand five hundred children have been dealt with in the intervening time. All but the handful at present resident in the Hostel have gone out into the world and have been living the ordinary life of the community. ¹

Duff remarked, 'Usually those girls show themselves to be admirable mothers.' He said that the fruits of the system of enabling the mother to retain her child were so striking that one would imagine it to be impossible that any sensible person would gainsay them 'But the fact is that almost everybody seems to be in opposition. This has been the lesson of our forty years of work'.

¹ Duff to Mahon, 13 October 1970, Legion of Mary archives.