

Iona Institute Talk

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Frank Duff's care for unmarried mothers and their children

On 1st October 1930, a hostel for homeless women, the *Regina Coeli*, was opened by Frank Duff in North Brunswick Street in Dublin. The hostel was located beside the *Morning Star* hostel for homeless men which Duff and his volunteer helpers had opened three years earlier in 1927. At the time Duff was a civil servant in the Department of Finance. In 1921 he had founded the Legion of Mary which was known until 1925 as the Association of Our Lady of Mercy.

In the first week fifteen women were admitted to the *Regina Coeli*. Soon after opening, a pregnant woman sought admission. Her entry to the hostel, remaining there subsequently, and keeping her child, led to the inauguration of the *Mater Dei* aspect of the hostel, a type of hostel within a hostel, specifically organised on the basis of units for mothers and children. By Christmas 1930, a couple of months after the hostel opening, the minutes of the hostel report that residents were going to the Coombe Hospital for the delivery of their babies.¹ Later on the Legion acquired some houses in North Great Georges which were divided into flats and could be used by the women and their children as step down facilities before moving on to independent living.

When the *Regina Coeli* opened there were over one thousand unmarried mothers with their babies in county homes'.² *The Local Government Act, 1923*, brought the administration of the Public Assistance services into Irish law and provided a framework for dealing with unmarried mothers. Unmarried mothers were divided into two classes: (a) First offenders, to be dealt with in the same institution as children until the children were fostered or boarded out and (b) Old offenders to be sent to a Magdalen Asylum. The Act stated, 'Persons in Class (b) who refuse to enter such Institutions as may be selected shall not be allowed under any circumstances to become chargeable to the public rates'.

¹ *ibid.* 5 December 1930.

² *Report of the Commission to inquire into Child Abuse*, Dublin 2009, chapter 3, p 8.

The *Report* of the Department of Local Government and Public Health, 1930-34 argued that specialised Homes where appropriate training could help to restore self-respect to the mothers were important and desirable on economic grounds also:

This policy of special institution recommends itself on the ground of economy, for unless active measures designed to enable them [the mothers] to return eventually to the work-a-day world are taken at the critical time, they are in danger of becoming a permanent burden on the ratepayers or of drifting into a life of degradation.

The language used about unmarried mothers during the first half of the twentieth century was marked by colours of economics (and I rank economics first) crime and sin. Phrases like “rehabilitation of the mother” or “girls who have fallen again” occur regularly.³ Because of attitudes at home, girls often fled to England when they became pregnant.

According to the First *Report* of the Department of Health, 1945-49, the Public Assistance Authorities paid a capitation grant for the maintenance of unmarried mothers and children in a number of homes: Pelletstown, Tuam, Castlepollard, Mallow and Roscrea. Efforts were made to foster out the children and when the children were boarded out, the mother was free to leave the institution. In 1949 there were 614 mothers and 1,014 children in the institutions run by religious orders. Public Assistance Authorities also sent children to Industrial Schools from the age of two, if they were not boarded out. In 1949 there were 2,325 children boarded out.

The official approach to unmarried mothers and their children did not appeal to Frank Duff. In a memorandum entitled ‘The Amendment of the Criminal Law’ which Duff wrote in 1930 in preparation for the evidence which he gave to the Criminal Law Amendment Committee (Carrigan Committee), he emphasised his concern for unmarried mothers. He compared the harsh treatment of mothers with that of those who fathered children outside marriage. He said that English law was ‘considerably in advance of our Irish law on this matter and it is relatively an easy matter to get an Affiliation Order in England’.⁴ He also pointed out how easy it was for a young unmarried woman who became pregnant, to be recruited into prostitution, because she lacked any form of financial support. He described her fate: ‘the girl in trouble leaves

³ LGD, 1934-37: 179.

⁴ Duff, Memorandum on the Amendment of the Criminal Law, 1930. An Affiliation Order is a Court Order requiring the father of an illegitimate child to make child-support payments.

home, if not driven out by her friends.’ After a period of great stress when she is unable to work because of her pregnancy, she enters the workhouse, is confined, leaves with her baby but has no home to return to. If she finds a job as a domestic servant, ‘The child must be supported and she herself clad on the miserable wages of the ordinary domestic servant’. Duff concludes ‘it is not a matter of wonder’ that the girl ends up on the streets.

Duff’s special sympathy for unmarried mothers was at odds with the mores of the time when the consequences of an extra-marital birth were disastrous, rendering both mother and child social outcasts. He was probably close to the view of the writer George Moore who in his powerful novel, *Esther Waters* written at the end of the nineteenth century, tells the story of a mother’s fight for the life of her illegitimate son. Moore wrote, ‘Hers is a heroic adventure if one considers it – a mother’s fight for the life of her child against all the forces that civilisation arrays against the lowly and the illegitimate’.

The opening of the *Regina Coeli* had been carefully planned in advance. The first meeting in connection with the women’s hostel was held in January 1929, almost two years before the hostel opened. As with other Legion of Mary activity, all work was undertaken on a voluntary basis with a number of legionaries opting to live in the hostels as full-time ‘indoor sisters’. These ‘indoor sisters,’ like the indoor brothers, were provided with subsistence in the hostel. Every homeless woman admitted into the Regina Coeli would pay a small contribution towards her keep and a ‘task system’ of laundry or domestic work would be avoided at all costs. If the women could not afford the tariff, bottles or jampots which could be redeemed for money in those days, would be accepted. The object was to create ‘A home-life feeling about the place.’⁵ Duff stressed that the surroundings should be as beautiful as possible as ‘The silent influence of beautiful and artistic surroundings is incalculable.’⁶ He said that the ‘conduct of the women will in great measure be governed by their surroundings.’⁷ The women should be encouraged to take an interest in their appearance and one legionary suggested the introduction of several panel mirrors.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Regina Coeli Minutes, 3 March 1929.

⁷ Regina Coeli Minutes, 27 January 1929.

Writing to a priest on the subject of industrial schools, Duff attributed difficulties encountered by the children when they left these schools as being due to ‘the absence of the children’s mothers during a period of life when such is necessary to the children. The consequence is that a peculiar and unnatural life is lived by those children.’ He referred to a nun whom he considered one of the best superiors of these schools but who had confided in him that ‘she does not believe in the schools, but only acquiesces in them as a necessary evil.’⁸ He cited the tremendous results that had flowed from the work in the Regina Coeli. ‘They live the ordinary life of the community; attend the ordinary schools and churches and move about in the city as they are brought up by their mothers.’ Writing to his friend Celia Shaw, a UCD graduate and one of the first women to hold administrative rank in the civil service, Duff reported in late 1930: ‘The Regina is doing excellently. The unmarried mother is the great development in connection with it. We will have to make fuller provision in this particular direction.’⁹

The carefully kept minute books of the Regina Coeli praesidia provide a unique record of life in the hostel. They are filled with detail of specific cases of women and their babies. The mothers showed varying degrees of interest in their babies from the very committed to the occasional mother who left her baby in the hostel and disappeared to another mother who was found washing her baby under a cold tap.

The health of the mothers and babies is a constant issue. There are frequent mentions of women going to the Lock Hospital (Donnybrook/later Townsend Street) for tests and of children being brought to St Ultan’s, Temple Street, Harcourt Street and other city hospitals. Frequently the hospitals are full and the children cannot be admitted. The hostel sisters encourage breast-feeding and there are references to attempts to get supplies of orange juice and cod liver oil supplement. The problem of supplies was particularly acute during World War II when the sisters were asked to be sparing in their use of sugar and to ensure that the lights were turned out. On one occasion in 1942 there is reference to the fact that ‘Two cwt. [hundred-weight] of blocks daily is at present being used to boil the water for the washing of baby clothes.’¹⁰

⁸ Duff to Langan, 18 December 1948.

⁹ Duff to Shaw, November 1930, NLI Ms 31, 670/2.

¹⁰ Minutes of Regina Coeli, 15 May 1942, LOMA.

It is clear that making ends meet was a huge task and for decades there are references to bazaars, flag days, ‘Rosetta Days’ when paper flowers were sold, Beetle Drives and even a special night of greyhound-racing at Shelbourne Park stadium. On one occasion an iced cake was presented for a raffle by the manageress of Woolworth’s Cafeteria. Funds also came from donations from relatives of hostel residents and from friends of Duff and supporters of the Legion. The minutes note contributions from W. T. Cosgrave and his sister Miss May Cosgrave and, in the 1940s, from Archbishop McQuaid.

The Regina Coeli was not without its critics. The writer Sean O’Faolain questioned its work in an article in the June 1944 issue of the magazine, *The Bell* in which he implied that, in contrast to himself, the Legion of Mary was not interested in the slums. This annoyed Duff who wrote to O’Faolain telling him that ‘it was unquestionable that you keep talking about the slums, while legionaries were actually visiting them continually’. This evoked a response from O’Faolain in which he described the Regina Coeli as a slum.¹¹ Duff responded that a rough definition of a slum would be a place that is very poor and overcrowded and he agreed, ‘Yes, the Regina Coeli conforms to that definition’. He then went on to ask whether O’Faolain was dishing out the old shibboleths about ‘dulling the revolutionary edge of poverty’?

A girl comes to us in trouble – most of them almost demented – and we should refuse her because of some doctrinaire stuff or other! Likewise we should let the down and out man or the prostitute rot in the interests of world revolution, or of a future reform of the system! As you are over forty, I decline to believe you are serious.¹²

The exchange between O’Faolain and Duff took place in wartime when poverty was rife. In 1941 a wages standstill was introduced while the cost of living soared during the war. Maternal and infant mortality were extraordinarily high by today’s standards. This was particularly so in Dublin where, in 1945, almost 12 per cent of children were either born dead or had died by the age of one. The infant mortality rate was significantly worse for illegitimate children – the overall rate was 66 per 1000 births while it was 194 per 1000 for illegitimate births.

¹¹ O’Faolain to Duff, 19 July 1944.

¹² Duff to O’Faolain, 27 July 1944.

In general, the relevant public health authorities were supportive. During a bad outbreak of enteritis among babies in Dublin in 1942, Dr Tom Murphy of the Department of Local Government and later President of UCD, tried to help with supplies of medicines from the chemists Messrs May Roberts.¹³ Dr Robert Collis, a noted paediatrician at the Rotunda Hospital, claimed that conditions at the Regina Coeli Hostel were very poor and that babies were dying there. Dr Deeny from the Department of Local Government and Public Health went along to see for himself. He described how he had met ‘an extraordinary little man called Frank Duff. His brother was a friend of mine in the Stephen’s Green Club and was Secretary of the Department of Justice.’¹⁴ Deeny confirmed that some of the babies did have enteritis. His secretary, Miss Howett, organised a ‘whip-around’ in the Custom House and collected £25 ‘and with this I prevailed on Frank Duff to give me a little room, which we furnished as a kind of quarantine station’. In this way the problem was gradually solved. Later in the year Dr Collis visited the hostel himself. Afterwards he wrote to Duff saying that although he had worked with the poor since his youth, he had never seen anything like the work of the Hostel and looked upon it as ‘the work of Christ.’¹⁵

Both the Legion of Mary and the Regina Coeli Hostel were praised in a letter dated 18 June 1945 from the Parliamentary Secretary of the Department of Local Government and Public Health to the Private Secretary to the Taoiseach, regarding the provision of homes for unmarried mothers and their children. The letter provides an overview of existing institutions, including St Patrick’s Home, Pelletstown. It states that the problem is greatest in Dublin since girls came from all parts of the country to Dublin in order to hide their pregnancies from people in their locality. The letter continues, ‘The Regina Coeli Hostel under the auspices of the Legion of Mary performs admirable work for the unmarried mother but the resourcefulness of the administration of the hostel is often sorely tried by the pressing need for additional accommodation’.¹⁶

Despite a determination on the part of the hostel workers to safeguard the privacy of its residents and the conscious avoidance of publicity, word of the work of the Regina

¹³ Minutes of ReginaCoeli, 12 June 1942, LOMA.

¹⁴ James Deeny, *To Cure and to Care, Memoirs of a Chief Medical Officer*, pp. 96-97, Dublin, 1989.

¹⁵ Minutes of Regina Coeli, 11 December 1942, LOMA.

¹⁶ Record 15950, Department of Taoiseach, 18/6/45, s 108154, Adoption of Children general file.

Coeli spread. A surprise visitor in October 1948 was Seán McBride, the Minister for External Affairs who accompanied Mgr Suenens from Belgium. McBride, who had initially intended a brief visit, remained for two hours expressing his approval of keeping mothers and babies together.¹⁷ In February 1952 twenty-three social science students from TCD visited the hostel and it was noted that the student who showed the greatest interest in the work was ‘Egyptian Mohammedan’.¹⁸ In November 1948 another report entitled ‘Regina Coeli Hostel’ and initialled, possibly by Dr Conor Martin, Director of the Maternity Section in the Department repeats the need for a visiting children’s doctor, trained nursing staff and provision of equipment. However the report went on to say that ‘The spirit of self-sacrifice which motivates the Legionaries who work in the Hostel is to my mind the fine flowering of a selfless humanity. It is certainly not something which may readily be replaced by paid labour’.

In a lengthy letter written when the Regina Coeli Hostel had been in existence for just over forty years, Duff explained his thinking on the position of the unmarried mother and her child:

As far back as one’s knowledge goes this was always a torturing problem. Its older aspect was that a girl in trouble either went to England or into her own Union or into one of the specialised Homes ... the system operated uniformly to separate mother and child, the latter going off into fosterage and then into the Industrial Schools..... 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.¹⁹

He described how many of the Regina Coeli women married and how their husbands accepted the illegitimate child. He detailed a tiny minority of problem cases among the hostel children, including three boys who got into trouble over theft and looked as though they might ‘be heading for crime but were now living ‘without fault.’ Some of the residents had further illegitimate children, but Duff remarked, ‘Usually those girls show themselves to be admirable mothers, and bring up their flock well.’ 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

¹⁷ Minutes of Regina Coeli, 1 October 1948, LOMA.

¹⁸ Minutes of Regina Coeli, 1 and 8 February 1952.

¹⁹ Duff to Mahon, 13 October 1970.

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’.

Who was Duff and from where did he get his motivation to do extraordinary work ?

Archbishop Diarmuid Martin has described Frank Duff as ‘a man who in the face of a major social challenge did something. He did not write a Letter to the Editor’.

Authenticity was the quality which struck Archbishop Diarmuid Martin when Duff visited Clonliffe College in the 1960s when Martin was a student for the priesthood.²⁰ Martin recalled that there was nothing false about the man who arrived on his bicycle at the College to speak to him and his fellow deacons in the months prior to their ordination in 1969.

An entrepreneur, as clearly demonstrated from his capacity for new ventures, an administrator as demonstrated by his work in the civil service and in devising the Legion system which operates in almost every country of the world, Duff was also a fighter. He once gave a Christmas present to a friend of a copy of Rembrandt’s *Knight*, saying, ‘You know I’m a fighter’.²¹ He was a risk-taker. Duff had a remarkable range of natural gifts – intelligence, judgement and an enormous capacity for work and prayer. His sense of humour and love of practical jokes provided a necessary release for tension which occasionally broke out in a bout of bad temper. He believed that faith should be manifest in ‘easy joyousness’, not in ‘grim repression’. Duff had a remarkable capacity for friendship though there are examples where friendships broke down. He was not a great public speaker but the content of what he said was first rate without fail.

A summary of Duff’s life is difficult to separate from the Legion of Mary – *saol agus saothar*. Frank Duff’s father and mother, John Duff and Susan Freehill, were educated in the Model School in Trim, an interdenominational school under public management, where Susan’s father, Michael, was headmaster. Both John Duff and Susan Freehill entered the civil service, as would their sons, Frank and John. Frank

²⁰ Diarmuid Martin, Opening Address, Priests’ Conference held at the Emmaus Centre Swords in County Dublin, May 2007.

²¹ O’Carroll, 1998, p. 136.

was born 7 June 1889 at 97 Phibsborough Road, Dublin. He was the eldest of seven – two boys and five girls. He attended Belvedere and then Blackrock College. At Blackrock his closest friend was Michael Davit, son of the Land Leaguer. The Duffs moved house from Phibsborough Road to St Patrick’s road Drumcondra to Clarinda Park in Dun Laoghaire then back to St Patrick’s Road. Later the family moved to Dartmouth Square and finally to Morning Star Avenue beside the hostels.

In 1903 when FD was a 14-year old schoolboy, his father retired on health grounds from the civil service. His father died two days before Christmas in 1918. The family was not especially religious; the parents were ambitious for Frank but there would be no university education for him as he would become the family breadwinner. He started work in the Land Commission (Merrion hotel) in May 1908. He remained in the civil service for 26 years until 1934. He worked on 1923 Land Act directly to Minister Patrick Hogan. In 1924 he was assigned to the Department of Finance where he served until his resignation in 1934. During the 1920s and 1930s he wrote a number of substantial memoranda, including one on the ESB, one on air transport and a fascinating one on devaluation, which he favoured in place of tariffs. He was briefly - for two and a half days, the final days of his life - secretary to Michael Collins

Frank Duff enjoyed a good social life belonging to two tennis clubs and taking a glass of cider. A work colleague, Jack O’Callaghan, persuaded him to join the St Vincent de Paul. This proved a life-changing experience. He met real poverty in the Dublin slums depicted by Sean O’Casey as he embarked on his life work of serving Christ in his fellow human being. At the same time he began to develop a prayer life often attending two masses daily. In 1917 under the guidance of Michael Browne, SJ, he began to pray the Divine Office each day.

Another life-changing experience for Duff was his introduction to de Montfort’s *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*. In 1918 the twenty-nine year old Duff was introduced to the *True Devotion* by his fellow Blackrock College alumnus and member of the SVP, the architect Vincent Kelly. In a letter to Kelly more than fifty years later, Duff spoke of the event as ‘something which definitely affected the course of my whole life’. He recalled the way in which some of the SVP members would stay around

after their Thursday night meetings of the VdeP in Myra House to discuss a range of topics. One night Duff noticed a group of the brothers gathered around Kelly. He joined the group and found that they were discussing de Montfort's *True Devotion*, a copy of which Matt Lalor had recently given to Kelly. Duff recalled that Kelly's description of the book 'was vivid and stuck in my mind'. Some days later, 'by a surpassing coincidence', he encountered the book on the second-hand book stalls on Aston Quay. Struck by the coincidence, Duff said that he bought the book for the sum of fourpence. It was the first English printing of the work, the translation being that of Fr Faber:

I applied myself to the reading of the book with results that may be said to have been far reaching. It was definitely that book which threw my life into the Marian channels which it has ever since followed.²²

The impact of de Montfort was, according to Duff, 'like an electric shock'. At the time teaching on the Blessed Virgin in the Catechism placed her in a general section on saints – it was 'lawful' to be devout to her. In relation to this statement, Duff later made the acid comment, 'In other words it was not a sin, a ludicrous description which would almost amount to placing it in the same category as backing horses or moderate drinking'.²³ On a first reading, the *True Devotion* even seemed to Duff to 'border on the absurd'. Duff tried again perhaps half-a-dozen times, at the urging of another friend Tom Fallon, with the same result and was engaged on 'the final forced reading' when he experienced 'the sudden realisation that the Book was true'.²⁴ Years later, Pope John Paul II would say that he also found de Montfort's book difficult but described his reading of the *True Devotion* as a decisive turning point in his life, or rather a long inner journey.²⁵ Pope John Paul took his motto, *Totus Tuus* ('I am all thine'), from de Montfort.

A range of activities were coordinated in Myra House by members of the Pioneers which Duff joined somewhat reluctantly. One evening Matt Murray reported on visiting the cancer wards in the South Dublin Union. A couple of young women engaged in making the tea asked if they could do the same. A day was fixed – 7 September 1921 at Myra House. From that single small group other groups sprang.

²² Duff to Kelly, 13 October 1973.

²³ Frank Duff, 'St. Louis Marie's way is also Pope John Paul's', *Victory through Mary*, p. 460.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 462.

²⁵ Address by Pope John Paul II to the Participants in the 8th Mariological Colloquium, 13 October 2000, Rome.

Frank Duff had not set out to found an organisation, but one step led to the next. An early venture was the foundation of the Sancta Maria hostel at No 76 Harcourt Street as a refuge for prostitutes. Other works included ecumenical outreach to other Christians via the Mercier Society and to Jews via the Pillar of Fire Society. At the age of 75 he attended the final session of the Second Vatican Council. He met Pope Paul VI after the Council in private audience. The Council represented an endorsement of the role of the laity.

On 7 November 1980 Duff died in his own home. His funeral some days later was immense. The Taoiseach, C. J. Haughey, who had two sisters in the Legion, visited the Legion HQ to pay his respects. In his 'Irishman's Diary' column in *The Irish Times*, Kevin Myers concluded: 'A final note. Dublin was paralysed by the huge traffic jam resulting from Frank Duff's funeral. Allow him a small chuckle from the grave. At the age of 91, he spent his last summer on a cycling holiday around Ireland.'²⁶ Duff had planned a short trip with some friends around the Hill of Howth for 8 and 9 November, 1980. When he died, his bicycle was in the hall downstairs and his packed bag was on the carrier ready for the planned departure the following morning.

In a world in thrall to celebrity and all that accompanies celebrity it is something of an enigma that a man of Duff's achievement appeared 'ordinary' to many who met him. Yet, given his insistence that the organisation which he founded represented ordinary Christianity for ordinary people it is not an enigma at all.

²⁶ *ibid.*

