

AFTERTHOUGHTS ON AFTERCARE

“When I first took up rescue work,” wrote Canon J. Bennett, Administrator of the Liverpool Catholic Children’s Protection Society, “the late Mgr. Hudson drew up for my guidance ‘Ten Commandments of Rescue Work’. The last was, ‘If a child fails, examine your own conscience’.”

The same Mgr. Hudson also wrote, “The test of good rescue work is aftercare.” It was his view that the best method of aftercare, for boys at any rate, was to be found in a well-conducted Working Boys’ Home. It may be that he was right. I cannot say, for it so turned out in my experience that Working Boys’ Hostels, as they were called, were practically a failure. “A Working Boys’ Home is a most difficult and a most expensive organisation to run. The Superintendent in charge must be a man of deep spiritual instincts, a man of practical faith, a man of refinement and education, a man of business mind who can win the confidence of employers, a man whose very presence is a joy to the boys, one who inspires them with his justice and Catholic character. Given such a man, I can unhesitatingly say that the great majority of the boys will become steady workmen and practical Catholics.” That, also by Mgr. Hudson, is certainly a very good description of the right man for the job.

There have been of recent years some half-dozen different attempts in London to run Working Boys’ Hostels under such management, and all ended in failure. I believe there were as many attempts in the past which ended in much the same way. A few years ago, a house was taken in Steele’s Road, Hampstead, N.W. One couple after another went in, and after a few weeks, or months, threw up the job, or were practically thrown out. Single men, and even a spinster, all without success, tried to run the house; meanwhile the only thing the boys wanted to do, and in fact did do, was to get away as soon as they could find somewhere else to live. At last the Home was shut down, and the house handed over to someone else for some other purpose.

“It is perhaps too much to say,” wrote Mgr. Hudson, “that without some systematic aftercare the whole work of the Homes is wasted, for no one can tell what influence a Catholic education may have in after life. But it is true to say that the boy is not given a fair chance, that we are failing in our duty in not giving him a fair chance, and that if he fails, as he probably will, the responsibility is ours.”

The problem, as far as London was concerned, being still an ur-

gent one, the authorities decided to open another hostel, but with Religious in charge. For this purpose a Community was invited to take charge, and provided with a fine, spacious, and well-equipped premises in the heart of London, admirably suited and placed for the purpose. And yet this venture rather surprisingly also turned out a failure. Boys simply would not stop in the hostel, and much the same happened when another was opened elsewhere in London.

What was wrong? Was it the boys, those in charge, or the premises? Perhaps, in part, it was all three. For one thing neither religious nor laity had yet provided a man whose very presence was a joy, otherwise the boys would not have left as they did. How much else had been lacking we may never know, but with the golden words of Mgr. Hudson in mind it will be worth while to try to find out where these endeavours went wrong, for they certainly began with every hope and prospect of success.

It was not until I was asked to take over the aftercare visiting of Crusade of Rescue boys in 1941 that I gained any notion of what was wrong. Of course I had seen the failures and, by hearsay and personal judgment, drawn my own conclusions. In all fairness I must insist that these things were no small worry to the administration. With no lack of goodwill and earnest endeavour, everything thus far attempted for the aftercare of boys had either failed, or had proved ineffective. True, a new hostel under religious was then running with fewer than the usual troubles, but all was still far from perfect, and the authorities and the religious themselves were not happy. Boys were in trouble at their jobs, or they would or could not find jobs, and all sorts of problems had arisen which threatened to defy solution, but which it became my task to try and solve.

It was not long before I came to realise the value of a good-hearted working-class woman and her husband to a homeless boy. The boys seemed to pine for such a home, and were not happy until they had found it. It should be remembered that they work with other boys who live in such homes, and the accounts those boys give of father, mother, brothers and sisters make them hungry for a share in some such family circle. Further, it cannot be denied that a Working Boys' Hostel, no matter how well-conducted, is to all intents and purposes a continuation of the institutional life of which the boys have already had their fill. Rightly or wrongly (and I think rightly) they have pictured a freer and more individual life on going out to work, only to find themselves still subject to the rule—however easy—which they hoped to have done with for ever. Small wonder they become dissatisfied and kick over the traces. I

had one boy whom the religious found so intractable that it was impossible to keep him any longer. I placed him with one of my foster-mothers, a very good woman with a husband who was prepared to take a fatherly interest in the lad. They got him a job, and under their care he soon became a promising, and cheerful member of society.

As Mgr. Hudson wrote: "Given such a man, (as earlier described) the great majority of the boys will become steady workmen, and practical Catholics." But where find such a man? The truth is that he is so rare that he might almost be said to be non-existent. In my experience of aftercare the answer at least in part is to be found in the extraordinary kindness and motherliness of the average working-class woman. No trouble was too great, nothing was too much trouble. In some cases they went to untold lengths to combat the unpleasantness of dirty habits in the boys, rather than turn them out into the street. "Aftercare", to quote Mgr. Hudson once again, "is a problem that bristles with difficulties. But the good of the boy, and the very purpose of the Home demands that these difficulties be faced. The time and thought given to the problem of aftercare is the best contribution we can make to the success of our children."

Boys with these dirty habits—in particular nocturnal enuresis—present a very serious problem. And although it is no part of this account to go into the reasons for their trouble, it seemed to me that often they might with real benefit have been more effectively treated for their complaint during the many years they were in the Homes. Perhaps Canon Bennett, whom I have already quoted, touched the spot when he wrote: "If there is any danger signal, it is a tendency to forget that children must live, and work, and play, and pray in this world first, and that on their success, or failure depends their destiny in the next world." And once again let me quote the invaluable advice of Mgr. Hudson: "It is desirable that the Superintendent Matron of a Home should be qualified by systematic study. Most of our Homes for Children are staffed by Religious. It is entirely with the idea of helping them that I make the suggestion of social study." Those words were written in November, 1932, by a man whose whole life had been devoted to the welfare of children. Superiors of Children's Homes to-day are qualified by social study for the positions they are called upon to fill. For my part I view the life in the actual Home solely as one who has come up against the full force of the problem after the child has left the Home, and is no longer a child. Finally, the doctor should not be neglected in these difficult cases of bad habits.

To quote once more from Canon Bennett: "Are we satisfied, however, that we make best use of the doctor? Sometimes minor ailments are disregarded to the detriment of the child in after life." A matter that cannot be too strongly impressed upon all who have the care of children in Homes.

To return to aftercare, I am certain that the best person is the motherly landlady whose husband is prepared to take a fatherly interest in the boy. A couple like this provide—though themselves unaware of the fact—an atmosphere that does not exist in any other class, or order of society. Most of the virtues listed by Mgr. Hudson are to be found in such a woman and her husband. Hence their success with homeless boys. Put into this atmosphere the boy comes almost at once to regard the house as home. He calls the woman "mum", and doesn't mind if she is a bit on the grubby side. Indeed, if he hasn't got to be too particular, and can sit down to meals like his foster-father—coat, collar, and tie off—he'll be perfectly happy. A good Catholic couple on these lines will make a success of a boy who has proved a complete terror in a hostel.

To sum up: Hostels are failures because they are physically unable to reproduce within their sphere of influence the atmosphere of a Catholic, working-class home. They continue, and often emphasise the very things the boy most wants to forget. That they do fail is not a condemnation of the hostels, but is, if anything, a convincing proof that the foster-mother system for the working boy is beyond all else the very best solution to most of his troubles, and incidentally, to the troubles of those who have his welfare at heart.

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*(Late Aftercare Visitor for
Crusade of Rescue).*