

Daniel A. Lord, S.J., "A Catholic Social Center," *Queen's Work* 1, no. 6 (October 1914): 285-90.

CHICAGO'S longest street is also its most cosmopolitan and its most interesting. Somewhere along the length of Halsted Street, you can find almost any phase of humanity and almost every nation under heaven. It passes through a tiny but unmistakable bit of Greece, where the Homeric tongue, little changed since heroic days, is used in unpoetic haggling over American coins. It bisects the great Ghetto, not nearly so suggestive of Chicago as it is of Warsaw.

Sometimes the passenger in the crowded trolley feels that he has suddenly been transplanted on some magical carpet of the Arabian Nights, into a foreign land. And then the garish front of a "movie," the musty odor of stale beer and sawdust from a typical American saloon, or the familiar patent medicines in a drug store window, jolt him into a recognition of [f] his own prosaic land.

Side by side along the great thoroughfare, Europe and America live and rub elbows. Unchanged in custom and tongue, the immigrant is sucked up by the quiet, or oftener, alas, troubled waters of his own little colony, while his children go out to learn Americanism from the small shop-keepers, the bartenders, the unreal people who disport on the white curtain, and in fine, from every citizen of this cosmopolitan street.

The immigrant, poor, ignorant, shy, sinks, often enough, into a poverty so debasing, so consuming that the very necessities of life become almost as difficult to attain as if they were luxuries. Want and disease become the most ordinary guests of the fetid, overcrowded tenements, and meanwhile the child is being stamped with a brand of Americanism, the chief characteristics of which are vice, criminality, and contempt for law.

Not least interesting of the transplanted corners of Europe traversed by Halsted Street, and certainly not least populous, is the great Italian section of the West Side. It is Italy to the core, but Italy with little of the pretty poetry about it that we associate with that fair land. The language is the same sweet liquid tongue that sang in the Renaissance; but it sounds strangely incongruous in the cramped walls and dirty streets of an alien city. The children of Italy have brought the same volatile, art-loving temperament, even to their new land, but the poverty here snatches the sparkle from bright eyes, hangs dragging weights on buoyant feet, hushes the voice of song and uproots the flower of hope that blossomed so brightly even in the crowded steerage of an ocean liner.

The bright dreams of ready wealth and prosperity that drew the Italian from his native land, find but a sad fulfilment [*sic*] for the great majority who sink into the Italian quarter of Halsted Street. In place of wealth, a grinding poverty; in place of the clear, bright skies they had left, long monotonous miles of smoky clouds, rising above the roofs of hideous tenements; in place of liberty, long days with the traction gang and long nights in the mill. Shy, disappointed, bruised by rough contact with an unsympathetic stranger, the Italian immigrant drops out of sight, another of the teeming millions, miserably housed and wretchedly clothed; a new factor in the social problem.

The [1898] annual Retreat of the Alumnae Sodality of the Children of Mary in the old Taylor Street Sacred Heart Convent was drawing to a close. The Sodalist Retreatants were glowing with that generous enthusiasm which is the first fruit of a Retreat. They were cultured ladies of the finest breeding and most loyal Catholicity, mothers, many of them, and gentlewomen, all.

The Retreat-master, looking out over the enthusiastic, devoted Retreatants felt a strong desire to turn to the good of God's poor the undoubted generosity of these ladies. He had lived for years right on the threshold of that great hopeless colony of Italians, and had wondered in his heart how they could be saved to the Faith they were fast forgetting. If these ladies could be interested in the poor neglected strangers, of whose existence they hardly knew, if they could bring into the lives of these poor Italians something [end page 285] of the spirit of Catholicity that made peaceful their own lives; if they could teach the immigrants home-making, health-protection, true Americanism, a great stride would have been taken toward the solution of a mighty social problem. It was worth a trial. He spoke to them, and they responded generously.

That was fifteen years ago. A small group of these ladies, diffident, uncertain of themselves and of their strange protegees [*sic*], entered the heart of the Italian district and gathered the first class of forty dirty, unkempt little youngsters for Catechism. To-day, the Guardian Angels' Mission [717 W. Forquer Street], with its flourishing clubs and Sodalities and catechism classes, counts two thousand Italian children as its members, while Guardian Angels' Social Center [1226 S. Newberry Avenue] has begun a career of activity that can be measured only by the limitless possibilities for such a center and by the unbounded energy and enthusiasm of its projectors. The Retreat has borne its natural fruit; the Sodality had taken up its own providential work.

The difficulties of those pioneers have about them the romance of beginnings. In two tiny rooms in a dingy school building, the ladies gathered their pupils. Doctor E. M. Dunne, now Bishop of Peoria, became their devoted spiritual director, while Mrs. William A. Amberg [Sarah Agnes Ward, 1847-1919] was then as she is now, the soul of the Mission. It was slow work at first. The older people were quite hopeless. Long custom cannot be uprooted in a visit nor a

score of visits; and their harsh, unfeeling treatment at American hands had made them utterly distrustful. The only hope seemed to lie with the children, and to them the ladies devoted their full energies.

It is sometimes difficult for the teachers at Guardian Angels' to understand how such bright, happy, responsive, affectionate souls can develop in conditions so utterly sordid. The deep-seated melancholy, the hopelessness in eye and gait that so often stamps their parents, find [end page 286] little place in their children. They are quick, and eager to learn. Music wakes a passionate response in their souls. A little kindness brings to their eyes a look of the most utter devotion to their benefactors. They are loyal; they are pure. They look on America as their only home, and they want to be Americans not "dagoes," or ginnies." Italian girls are wonderfully modest and innocent, for no Italian mother will risk her daughter's virtue in the doubtful practice of "company keeping," or in the dangerous expedient of "working out." As one teacher remarked to the writer, even with all the dirt and ignorance and often depravity that one finds among them, the Italian children have a fascination quite indescribable; after dealing with the volatile, quick, affectionate children of Little Italy, one finds other children ordinary and commonplace.

To save these children to the Faith, every energy of the teachers at Guardian Angels' was bent; and every energy was surely needed. Piety does not flourish readily in the midst of poverty. Ignorance is a bad complement to religion. The proximity of vice stifles the growing sentiments of virtue. And all these, poverty, ignorance and vice were, and even now are, arrayed against the children's faith.

In addition, another foe comes in the guise of friendship to rob him of his precious gift. In the Italian quarter of Chicago, there are five Protestant missions, which draw the Catholic

children to them and wean them almost imperceptibly from the Faith. Protestantism, the children are told, is American; they want to be Americans, don't they? Protestantism is not different from Catholicity in its essentials, and infinitely its superior in its possibilities for advancement and for comfort. And advancement and comfort come when they come in the form of substantial gifts, of Christmas spreads and baskets, of candy and fruit, have a potent appeal to the youthful mind. These Protestant centers are generously endowed; they are in the hands of experienced Social workers; they are attractive and well furnished, luxurious compared with the homes of the poor children. Were it not for such settlements as Guardian Angels', many Italians who escaped the clutches of vice and poverty would do so only at the cost of their Faith.

But Guardian Angels' is saving the children to the Church. Two thousand children gather for catechism and Sodality every Sunday morning. Every age from toddling youngsters who lisp their prayers in chorus to grown youths and maidens who are now learning for the first time the fundamentals of their religion are gathered under competent teachers. Some of the children come of their own accord; some are brought by members of the classes; but the majority, and especially the older boys and girls, those who have never been near a church since they were brought to the baptismal font, and who know little more of their Faith than the [end page 287] veriest pagan, must be sought out with the utmost diligence. It is sad to see how completely some of these young people have been lost in the unexplored depths of their colony. The jungles of Africa could not have more completely shut them off from their Faith—until the Missionaries found them and led them back to Christ.

The first great step toward winning the children to the practice of their faith is the gaining of their confidence. And in this the teachers of Guardian Angels' have been unusually successful. From all quarters of the city they come, and because they are devoted to the work

and show in their manner how thoroughly interested they are in their charges, the little aliens give them a ready confidence and trust.

Guardian Angels' is proud of its teachers and justly so. Collegians there are, teachers in the public high and grammar schools, young men successful in business and in the professions, young ladies from homes of refinement and culture. Without them, Guardian Angels' is a grim, unprepossessing structure; with them, it is a magnet to draw youthful hearts and win youthful souls.

No mere statistics can begin to tell of the good done in these catechism classes. Thousands of impressionable children are stamped with a religious conviction that will dominate their lives. Hundreds of young men and women are brought back to a knowledge and practice of their faith after the lapse of years. And not least, the young Catholic men and women of a great city are given a chance to exercise their charity where it is most needed. To solve our social problems, the upper and the lower classes must be made to know and understand each other. In return for material and spiritual aid, the poor will give their richer brothers a deeper pity, a truer fraternity, and in a common understanding and contact, mutual hatred and distrust, the basis of social unrest, will disappear.

Modern medicine and modern charity have this in common. Their aim is prevention even more than it is cure. The physician who devises a method of preventing consumption is really a greater benefactor than the one who perfects a cure for the disease; and the social worker who teaches the poor to avoid the effects of their poverty and to raise themselves to a higher level of living has done a greater service to mankind than one who merely relieves a temporary poverty.

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This constructive charity has found its most successful expression in the social center. There, the poor are taught self-culture, home-making, hygiene and sanitation. They are brought into contact with persons of refinement and education, learning from them the temporal value of virtue. They are taught to make the best possible use of their resources, and to improve their home environments. A sense of cleanliness and right living is developed; social virtues are engendered, and not only by any means least important, clean, wholesome amusement is afforded to these young people within the protecting circle of the Center.

It was decidedly discouraging to spend Sunday morning teaching children principles that the course of their lives during the other six days made difficult to put into practice. That is the way the teachers at Guardian Angels' felt about their work. It was the old story of lifting water in a seive [*sic*]. Something must be done to overcome the squalid poverty so blighting to a sense of spiritual and bodily cleanliness, if the Catholic element in the lives of their charges was to be more than an affair of holiday use. Something of true home life must come into the lives of these bright happy youngsters before the spring had left their step and the light their eye. Something, finally, must be substituted for the dangerous amusement resorts that lie so enticingly at the very doors of their colony. And something was done—the Guardian Angels' Social Center was thrown open.

To see the Center in the height of its activity, stroll down through noisy, garish Twelfth Street some winter evening, and turn thence into the more quiet neighborhood about Newberry [Avenue]. You enter the building and are welcomed—(though you feel that you do not look like a “case”)—by one of the smiling, cultured volunteer workers. In the course of its two years' history, Miss Mary [Mary Agnes Amberg, 1874-1962] has welcomed some thousands of persons to the Center, and Miss Mary has always made a friend of even the most timid girl and the most

restive boy who ventured within the radius of her influence. The instinct of childhood is strong in detecting the true friend from the false.

There has been real tact displayed in the arrangement of the rooms in the Center. Nearest the door—it is made purposely easy to slip in and to slip out—is the boys' lounging room. The billiard table is being used by a quartette of Italian youths who, Miss Mary reminds you, almost sadly, acquired their skill in the sort of pool room hardly conducive to a sound manhood. About the room, talking, smoking, playing games, are twenty or more youths. "It is a feat, sometimes," remarked Miss Mary, "to get them this far, and still more of a feat to get them farther into the Center. But we are thankful that here at least we can keep them out of [end page 289] mischief. Think where they might be were the street their playground."

This room and the gymnasium beyond are sacred to the boys, who average about eighteen years. Miss Mary can tell you strange cases that come to her; boys with records in the reform school, boys who have been the bane of the truant and probation officers; boys on whom the police have looked with a suspicious and almost fearful eye. Now they are her boys, started, she confidently predicts, on the road to a happy, useful manhood.

The strumming of a piano down the corridor leads us to a group of happy boys and girls who are dancing as joyously as only young, active people can dance. The sanity of this feature of the Center's program will impress any sensible man. Young persons must dance; it is as natural to them as the instinct to sing and to play; and if they cannot do so under proper supervision and in pure, honorable surroundings, almost against their wills, they seek out the dance hall which is the recruiting ground for Satan's cadets.

In another room, a crowd of more serious minded young people are gathered in a study club. Professional story tellers have given their services to interest and attract the little tots,

while many a school teacher at the close of a hard day, journeys down to the Center to preside at their debates, their reading clubs, and their little concerts. Each club meets on its own night in the week; friendships are formed, ideas exchanged and each of the clubs in turn entertains the others. As soon as a boy or girl has become acquainted at the Center, he or she is encouraged to join one of the clubs. In this way, each comes to have a circle of fast friends, and this binds them closer to the Center and to one another.

But what of the Home-making? Visit this now silent room during the morning hours, and you will find thirty or forty little girls gathered about the long tables and bright, clean gas-stoves, white-capped and aproned, mixing and stirring, gazing anxiously into hot ovens and standing over pots and pans redolent of healthful foods. Under a competent instructor, these little strangers learn the first principles of culinary hygiene and are initiated into the mysteries of the hundred and one ways of preparing potatoes. And when potatoes are a staple at home, thanks to their cheapness, a variety of methods of preparation is a blessing to dulled palates.

In another room, you would find more little girls spinning and weaving baskets. A class, seated in a circle, chatter merrily as their busy fingers ply their needles to and fro; while elsewhere, some of the older girls are being drilled in modern methods of housekeeping. Many of these children, so the writer was told, had come to Guardian Angels' from the five Protestant Missions, in one of which they had been told, for example, that the teachers there would be glad to prepare them for their first Holy Communion!

You cannot hope to reach the parents, says the director, Miss Amberg, but the children return to their homes full of these new ideas, and often effect a transformation. The ideas of cleanliness they have learned at the Center, they carry into their poor, squalid tenements. Their newly acquired knowledges of food preparation enables them to do undreamed of wonders with

even the scanty provision at hand, while a new sense of values make possible more economic buying. In this way, the whole standard of living is elevated. And when evening comes, the young man and woman need turn no longer for their amusement to the cheap theater and foul dance-hall. The Center opens inviting doors to them, and they accept its invitation.

With the Guardian Angels' Mission saving the souls of the children, and the Guardian Angels' Center caring for their bodies, Chicago Catholics may be said to be in a fair way to solving the Italian problem. The workers at Guardian Angels' are not the first missionaries who have saved a nation by saving its children.

*At Los Angeles, in California, a very flourishing settlement house, called the Brownson House, is being conducted by zealous Catholic ladies. An account of this interesting work has been promised to the readers of Our Lady's magazine by one of the chief workers in the settlement house. [ends on page 290]*