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Beth R. Crisp

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Mark Smith
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Residential childcare in faith-based institutions

Mark Smith

Introduction

Much of the history of social welfare can be traced back to Church involvement in care provision deriving from a monastic tradition. The post-Reformation period witnessed the growth of different kinds of religious congregations that were not monastic but sought to provide an active religious presence in the towns and cities that began to emerge with industrialisation. In moving away from a contemplative ideal, this new form of religious presence challenged the previous Church order. Much of it was expressed through educational action on behalf of the urban poor, which saw education as both a means to instill moral probity but also as a route out of poverty. Indeed, until the later nineteenth century most education, especially of the poorer classes, was reliant on the work of religious orders or religiously-inspired philanthropists and often involved residential provision. In this sense, the focus of the emerging orders on the education of the poor might be contrasted with the role of more traditional Catholic Orders such as the Jesuits, Dominicans and Benedictines in providing schools for a Catholic elite.

This chapter sketches some of that movement of religiously-inspired involvement in social care and education through identifying some of the main congregations involved in this mission. The outline is neither comprehensive nor systematic and does not claim academic or theological expertise in this area. I write from personal experience of having worked as a lay social care worker for a Catholic teaching order, the De La Salle Brothers in a residential school in Scotland, over the course of the 1980s. While I recognise the international reach of the religious congregations, my focus is primarily the UK and Ireland. My perspective is that of a critical Catholic, but one whose experience in working for the Brothers was formative to my understanding of child care and is one I have taken with me into my subsequent career in child care and as a social work academic. Contrary to the picture that has come to the fore in recent decades (see Chapter 23 by Philip Gilligan), I found the Brothers I worked for to be humane and generous men who created a culture of discipline but also of fun and forgiveness and whose pastoral mission extended to their care of staff. This generally positive experience of working for them has made it hard for me to recognise some of the reports of abuse that have subsequently emerged, including in relation to the school I worked in, and of the assumptions in the press and in wider policy communities about regimes within which abuse was systemic and entrenched.
The disjunction between personal experience and popular account has led me to take a particular interest in the vexed issue of historical abuse and I offer some reflections on this.

Some of the main orders

**De La Salle Brothers**

I begin this brief tour of religious orders with the De La Salle Brothers, one of the earliest teaching orders. John Baptist de La Salle (1651–1719) was born to wealthy parents at Reims in France. He was ordained a priest in 1678 and two years later received a doctorate in theology. During that period he became involved with a group of young men, themselves having only an elementary education, in order to establish schools for poor boys. He undertook to use his own education for the service of the poor; he abandoned his family home, moved in with his group of teachers, renounced his position as Canon of Reims Cathedral and his wealth, and formed the community that became known as the Brothers of the Christian Schools.

Although himself a priest, De La Salle decided that members of the Order of Brothers should not be ordained, but should dedicate themselves exclusively to the education of youth. His method represented a new form of religious life, a community of consecrated laymen with a mission to provide free schools. Members of the order take vows of chastity, poverty, obedience, stability in the institute and association for the educational service of the poor and are required to give their services without any remuneration. Lasallian spirituality was built around a spirit of community, a spirit of faith, a spirit of zeal and a ‘practical’ spirituality (Rummery 2012). Unlike traditional education, which was still largely delivered in Latin, students were taught in the vernacular. Other features of the Lasallian method included grouping students according to ability and achievement, integration of religious instruction with secular subjects, well-prepared teachers with a sense of vocation and mission, and the involvement of parents. The vernacular and practical core of their mission, the fact that many of the Brothers came from relatively poor backgrounds themselves and their lack of theological education led Voltaire to call them by the nickname ‘Frères Ignorantins’ (Ignorant Brothers). More generally, the relatively poor educational background among some of those attracted or sent to the religious orders remained a persistent feature of their work (Crisp 2014).

Nevertheless, De La Salle and his Brothers created a network of schools throughout France, which included programmes for training lay teachers, Sunday courses for working young men, and one of the first institutions in France for the care of delinquents. Their work provided the foundation of modern popular education and the teaching profession. De La Salle wrote text books and guidelines for teachers. His work quickly spread through France and, after his death, continued to spread internationally. The order was approved by Pope Benedict XIII in 1724. In 1900 John Baptist de La Salle was declared a Saint and in 1950 was made Patron Saint of all those who work in the field of education. The Order has gone on to operate in nearly every country of Europe, America, Asia and Africa, becoming the largest Catholic lay religious order of men exclusively devoted to education.

Following the restoration of the Catholic hierarchies in England (1850) and Scotland (1878) the Order expanded in the UK, establishing a number of grammar schools in England, thus contributing to the growth of a Catholic middle class. They made a particular contribution to the provision of Reform or Industrial Schools (brought together under the title Approved School in 1933). It is their work in such schools that has retrospectively become the focus of so much negative publicity, an issue I return to.
Salesians of Don Bosco

Another of the great teaching orders is the Salesians of Don Bosco. John Bosco (1815–88) was born in Piedmont in Italy. His early years were spent as a shepherd until, in 1835, he entered the seminary. On his ordination, he went to Turin to embark on his ministry. One of his duties there was to accompany another priest on prison visits. The conditions of the children held in prisons resolved him to devote his life to their care and education. In the course of his parish duties he struck up a relationship with a street urchin, Bartolomeo Garelli, and began instructing him in prayer and education. Bartolomeo’s companions joined him in the parish ‘Oratory’ and within a few years numbers had grown to over 400 (Saxton 1907).

In the autumn of 1844, Don Bosco was appointed assistant chaplain to the Rifugio, where another priest, Don Borel, joined him in his work. The members of the Oratory now gathered at the Rifugio, and numbers of boys from the surrounding district applied for admission. About this time, too, Don Bosco began night schools and once factories had closed for the day, boys made their way to his rooms where he and Don Borel offered them a rudimentary education. The evening classes grew and gradually dormitories were provided for many who wanted or needed to live there.

The municipal authorities came to recognise the importance of Don Bosco’s work and he began a fund for the erection of technical schools and workshops. In 1868, to meet the needs of the Valdocco quarter of Turin, Don Bosco built a large church. Fifty priests and teachers who had been assisting him formed a society under a common rule that was approved by Pope Pius IX, in 1874. The organisation was called ‘Salesians’ after St. Francis de Sales, the Bishop of Geneva in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, who was renowned for his kindness and humanity.

Don Bosco’s educational philosophy was largely set down in a brief treatise entitled The Preventive System in the Education of the Young. He was a practical educator rather than an educational theorist, although many of his educational methods resonate with later educational theory (Morrison 1979). His educational philosophy was based on ‘reason’, ‘religion’ and ‘kindness’. His method was largely free of external discipline, being based on intrinsic measures of guidance, correcting and counselling. A Circular to Salesian Schools, 1883, advised against the use of general and corporal punishment and stated that any punishment administered ought to be based on justice and the hope of pardon. He wrote that as far as possible, teachers should avoid punishing but should try to gain love before inspiring fear. Great emphasis was placed on the importance of play and of music.

Although largely eschewing punishment, the Salesian Method was not permissive. In his rules Don Bosco identified frequent Confession and Communion and Daily Mass among the pillars of his educational method, the chief object of which was to form the will and to temper the character. In one of his books, he has discussed the causes of weakness of character, which he claimed derived largely from a misdirected kindness in the rearing of children. Discipline was maintained through what might nowadays be called relationship-based practice. Teachers were expected to act as ‘loving fathers’ or brothers. The preventative method was based on presence and assistance offered at the opportune moment, through personal encounter. Outside of the classroom, teachers were encouraged to mingle freely with pupils, breaking down age barriers and generation gaps.

At the time of Don Bosco’s death in 1888 there were 250 Salesian houses worldwide, working in hospitals, asylums, prisons and nursing the sick. The founder was beatified by Pope Pius XI in 1929 and canonised in 1934.
**Christian Brothers**

The Irish Christian Brothers were founded in Waterford in 1802, by a local merchant, Edmund Rice. At that point in Irish history, it was illegal for Catholics to educate their children as Catholics or for a teacher to do so. In 1802 Rice devoted his fortune and future life to opening his first school, assisted for a time by a few teachers. Soon after, some young men, drawn by Rice’s example, joined him and in 1803 the citizens of Waterford built a monastery for them. As the work of the Brothers became known they were approached to open houses in Cork and in Dublin. In 1820 the Vatican accepted the Brothers as a religious institute of the Church, the first Irish Order to be so approved.

The Brothers’ work in Ireland grew to encompass primary and secondary schools but also orphanages and industrial schools. The Institute spread to the UK and the first of what was to reach around 50 Australian communities was opened in 1868. Another establishment was opened in St John’s Newfoundland in 1875 and the Order’s reach later extended to India and the United States. It had a clear aim of providing an education that would otherwise have been denied them to clever boys, irrespective of their social class.

**Daughters of Charity**

It was not only male orders that responded to the needs of the urban poor. From the mid nineteenth century, the Company of the Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul identified the UK as a potential mission field and its presence grew rapidly over the second half of the century. The Daughters’ mission was based on a Vincentian theology of poverty, which sees those who are poor and despised by the world as representing Jesus Christ. The Daughters took annual renewable simple vows.

After an abortive attempt to open a house in Salford, Manchester, the Daughters established bases in Drogheda in Ireland in 1855 and in the industrial northern English town of Sheffield. Between 1857 and 1900, 48 houses were opened across England and Scotland with a further eight being established in Ireland (O’Brien n.d.). By 1900 the Daughters had grown to be amongst the largest religious institutes in Britain, becoming a new Province of Great Britain (encompassing Ireland) in 1885. They undertook a range of social welfare functions including parish visiting of the sick poor, the distribution of food and clothing, crèches for the children of working mothers, night schools for working men and women, hostels for working girls and prison visiting. The Daughters also became responsible for the management and staffing of a wide range of institutions for those in poverty: children’s homes and industrial schools, homes for those with disabilities, reformatory schools for young people in the criminal justice system, and mother and baby homes (O’Brien n.d.). So while the focus of most religious congregations was primarily educational, the Daughters assumed a broader social welfare function with education being one among many roles.

Residential care took several forms: the orphanage was the most common, but there were also Industrial Schools and Reformatories for young offenders and residential schools for poor children with disabilities, which became something of a specialism for the Daughters in Britain. In Scotland, the Daughters’ orphanage and Poor Law School near Lanark took sight and hearing-impaired children from across Scotland until a separate specialist residential school was established by them in 1911:

By 1884 two thirds of the Daughters’ houses in Britain were dedicated to residential care of poor and neglected children or to those with some kind of disability making them unique
in their concentration of effort on welfare with children from impoverished backgrounds
and children with disabilities.

(O’Brien n.d.: 6)

One of the unusual features of the Daughters’ work was that it extended to working with
destitute boys and young men, an area that was unusual among women teachers or indeed
among other women’s religious congregations. In 1862 the Daughters took over the running
of St Vincent’s Industrial School for Boys’ in Liverpool, which had been struggling under lay
management. Under their management, the school was returned to disciplinary and financial
control within three years. The management committee applied successfully in 1868 to have
it registered as a Home Office Industrial School and St Vincent’s was approved to receive 210
boys under the age of 14. By 1900 the Daughters were responsible for running and staffing nine
boys’ industrial schools and orphanages.

The discovery of abuse

Over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century, the role of religious orders in resi-
didential care began to decline for several reasons; at a general level the state(s) began to assume
greater responsibility for education and care. In addition, vocations began to fall off as the
demands of religious life became less attractive than they might once had been, in terms of
the security and status it had provided and when considered alongside the growing number of
opportunities opening up in secular life.

A particular body blow for the congregations, however, came with revelations of historical
abuse, which emerged over the course of the 1990s. Although early complaints of abuse did not
involve Church schools or homes, when the floodgates opened they quickly went on to engulf
just about every religious congregation that had been involved in education and care across the
Western World. One of the first and largest scandals centred around the Mount Cashel Boys
Home in St John’s Newfoundland, operated by the Christian Brothers of Ireland in Canada.
Over the late 1980s and 1990s, more than 300 orphanage residents claimed to have been physi-
cally and sexually abused by staff there. When revelations emerged, it was claimed that earlier
attempts to raise concerns had been subject to the by now all too familiar charge of having been
covered up.

From the early 1990s onwards just about every jurisdiction in the developed world has faced
allegations of historical abuse carried out by religious congregations. In Canada and Australia,
in particular, the policy of removing indigenous children from the influence of their families
and culture and placing them in residential schools in order to assimilate them into dominant
Christian cultures has come under particular scrutiny. In Australia, this population has become
known as the ‘Stolen generation’.

The easy way to interpret this and the way this period in history has been presented is such
that abuse was understood to have been ‘systemic, pervasive, chronic, excessive, arbitrary, (and)
endemic’ (Bunting 2009) in Church-run institutions. Undoubtedly, the Irish Commission to
Inquire into Child Abuse (also known as the Ryan Report 2009) provides ample evidence of
practices that broach little dissent or defence. A visceral urge to condemn, however, has largely
prevented a more considered reflection on events that are still very raw.

Part of the difficulty in coming to a measured position on the subject of historical abuse is that
the historiography of residential schools is, according to Maguire (2009), largely non-existent,
and for the most part reliant on non-scholarly media sources, the credibility and objectivity of
which she regards as questionable. One of the flaws Maguire identifies in this approach is what
she identifies as an uncritical reliance on the accounts of those who claim to have been abused and the failure to set such accounts alongside other sources of evidence.

One attempt to inject some broader perspective into the Ryan Report and its impact on Irish society is provided in Fr Tony Flannery’s edited volume (2009), *Responding to the Ryan Report*. The starting point of the book is to acknowledge some of the abuses that took place but to try and understand some of the conditions that might have allowed this to happen. A number of contextual factors are raised, not least what Sean Fagan (2009) identifies as the ‘bad theology’ at the heart of Catholicism and especially Irish Catholicism, in matters of sex. In this aspect it had failed to move beyond St Augustine’s personal angst regarding sex and its association in his mind and writings with mortal sin. This has left a legacy, reinforced over the centuries, of attitudes towards sex that have not been healthy.

Yet, while it is an easy target, it is probably too simple to make a direct link between repressed sexual feelings and sexual abuse. In fact, Philip Jenkins’ (2001) work suggests that priests and religious individuals are no more likely to sexually abuse than the population as a whole and indeed the problem of child abuse is one that affects every denomination. Marie Keenan (2009) in the Flannery book tellingly advises that we need to move beyond a search for individual pathology and blame. Nevertheless, the abuse scandals have undoubtedly cast a spotlight on the difficulties with the Church’s views on sex; even if celibacy and all that goes along with that in terms of the mortification of the body did not directly lead to sexual abuse, it must, in some cases, have contributed to a sense of sexual tension and resentment, which may on occasion have manifest in other less than healthy ways in attitudes and relationships from the religious towards those they cared for.

Another structural feature of the Church that perhaps allowed abuse to continue involved internal Church hierarchies. Orders such as the Jesuits, Dominicans or even Diocesan clergy often drew recruits from a different social class to the Religious who ran the schools. These may have been regarded within the Church, as well as by literary commentators such as Voltaire, as *Frères Ignorantins*; as a result, Church hierarchies did not pay too much attention to the day-to-day work of the Orders. A further aspect to this class dimension, Coldrey (2006) argues, is that the working-class origin of many of the religious congregations might bring with it a relative class affinity to children in care. He claims that this could lead to a clash of the solid, respectable values of the religious Brothers and Sisters being set against the seemingly indigent and delinquent behaviours of children in care, the result of which could be resistance and (over) reaction.

At another level still, the work of the Orders perhaps lost much of the charm of their founders as the roles they were expected to fulfil became institutionalised in compulsory and state provision, with all that entailed in terms of the ‘dirty work’ of daily caring for often badly behaved youngsters in difficult circumstances. Wardhaugh and Wilding (1993: 5) outline a number of dimensions by which residential care of children becomes contaminated, but note that, above all: ‘(t)he essential element (of corruption) … is that it constitutes an active betrayal of the basic values on which the organisation is supposedly based.’ This perhaps happens when initial moral impulse becomes institutionalised and reified.

A backdrop to all of these developments was that the Orders were confronting broader societal trends, which included growing secularism. With the growth in Freudian psychology from the 1920s onwards the focus of social interventions shifted from the soul to the psyche (Hacking 1995). And, while some religious Sisters and Brothers embraced some of the growing psychological discourse (for example, in the work of the Notre Dame Clinic in Glasgow), the primary work of the religious orders remained practical and spiritual (and indeed structural in the sense of consolidating Catholic communities). This practical/spiritual foundation could begin to appear anachronistic within an increasingly secular and therapeutic world.
Butler and Drakeford (2005) in their book on scandal in social work note that scandals occur, not when political and social structures are solid and successful, but rather when they are in crisis, when society’s tectonic plates are shifting. Young (2011) goes on to argue that when societies are in crisis, personal and social unease is displaced onto a scapegoat; scapegoated groups are not chosen by accident, but are closely related to the source of anxiety (Young 2007: 141).

In some respects, what we have witnessed over the past few decades is not merely a reaction to some of the undoubted scandals that have engulfed the Orders but the deflection of wider social anxieties around losing erstwhile moral certainties onto the institution that sought to assure us of these.

Discussion

When the dust settles on (relatively) recent scandals, there may be the opportunity to consider the role of the religious Orders in social care provision with some sense of perspective. This will surely involve recognising their many and massive achievements. The breadth and scope of their work over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in particular have spanned every area of social welfare provision but, in the case of a majority of Orders, with a particular focus on education. Their concern was not just direct care but extended to teacher training colleges and writing educational manuals, many of which have continued resonance today.

The Orders brought a sense of mission and purpose that could rarely be matched by lay organisations. The work of the Daughters of Charity, for instance, reflected a Vincentian spirit of caritas or ‘indiscriminate charity’. Contrary to most secular institutions of the time, they recognised no distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor. In their London maisons de charite, they imposed no admissions criteria, unlike those operated by better-known foundling hospitals run by Victorian philanthropists such as Thomas Coram. Additionally, unlike the foundling hospitals where once an infant was admitted it could not be taken back by the mother (Ramsland 1992), the Daughters allowed the mother free access to the child (O’Brien n.d).

In the UK, the Orders’ educational mission reflected the priority of the Catholic hierarchy, priests and leading laity to enhance and consolidate the role of the Catholic community in the face of an often hostile Protestant majority. The Catholic hierarchy was clear that poverty and ignorance must be tackled if individual and community status was to be lifted. In the UK, this involved some fairly sophisticated negotiation with state structures and expectations for funding, requiring accommodation to the state’s demands at one level, while resisting cultural norms and practices that the Orders perceived as being at odds with a Catholic understanding of poverty, charity and the practice of care. In the Catholic state of Ireland, the Orders worked hand-in-glove with the state. It is this relationship that, arguably, allowed some of the less acceptable practices that have since come to light to continue for so long.

In moving towards a conclusion to this chapter, I am drawn to David Webb’s (2010) article ‘A Certain Moment’ in which he reflects on the life and work of a great aunt who had been matron of a Church of England children’s home. He contrasts earlier certainties about the moral order and carers’ consequential obligations towards children, with the confusion, ambiguity and doubt that characterises much present day child care. I am writing this chapter in the aftermath of recent scandals in Northern English towns, in which young girls, many of them in state care, were identified as being sexually abused by groups of men in the community. Residential care workers in such cases are accused of adopting what Webb (2010) identifies as a free-floating and laissez-faire approach to welfare. It is clear that we have still not got the balance right in the care of troubled children. As Webb concludes, in contrasting a religiously-inspired version of care with present day provision; ‘the drawing of any invidious comparisons with what takes
place today in “corporate care” might invite a brief reflection on the parable of the mote and the beam’ (Webb 2010: 1400).

In all of this, there is a sense of looking back in time. The care and education offered by the religious congregations was ‘of its time’. At its best it was fluid, dynamic and responsive. Like all religious provision, once institutionalised, it could become complacent and resentful. But it has, largely, fulfilled its mission. In developed countries, the state has rightly taken on responsibility for the provision of social welfare and education. The religious orders might justifiably reflect that their job is done in such societies and that the focus of ongoing mission work is in the developing world.

References