

5. ORPHANAGES

The story of the orphanages is included in this booklet because the children of the orphanage were always within the spiritual care of the priests of the Parish.

By 1854 immigration, dislocation, death and desertion had greatly added to the number of apparently 'orphaned' children in the new colony. The government had reserved ten acres of land at Emerald Hill for the Melbourne Orphan Asylum. Not long after, the Catholic Vicar-General sought land for a Roman Catholic orphanage in the neighbourhood of Melbourne. Two acres were granted in Emerald Hill, and the foundation stone for St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage was laid on 8 October 1855.

The orphanage cost 3,000 pounds, and The *Catholic Directory* described the orphanage as 'like some of the old Irish Abbeys ... the sole shelter of many a poor little child, who otherwise might be cast away hopelessly upon a sinful and treacherous world'. It was designed to accommodate 100 children of both sexes.

The driving force behind the establishment of this orphanage was Father Gerald Ward, who had arrived in the colony with Father Patrick Dunne in 1850 (Father Dunne established St Augustine's Orphanage at Newtown, Geelong in 1857). Early in 1854, Ward had established Victoria's first branch of the St Vincent de Paul Society. Soon after, in October 1854, he became aware of the case of five Collingwood children whose parents had drunk themselves to death. The court had appointed a Presbyterian minister as guardian to the parentless children. But when it became apparent that they had been baptised as Catholics, Father Ward applied for guardianship, although the two youngest children, both girls, were eventually allowed by the Supreme Court to remain with a neighbour who had cared for them since their parents' deaths. The three eldest children, all boys, however, were placed with a 'respectable' Catholic woman in Prahran, until they were moved, along with four other children, to the new St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage early in 1857.



Father Gerald Archbold Ward (1806-1858) was born in London and migrated to Australia in September 1850. On arrival he assisted for a while at St Francis' Church, and was later sent to Geelong. Father Ward became the first pastor in Williamstown, when that parish was formed in 1853. He was back at St Francis' Church from later in that year until 1857 when he became the resident priest at Heidelberg.

In March 1854 he established the first Australian conference of the St Vincent de Paul Society at St Francis' Church, to assist people affected by the rapidly expanding immigrant population.

Initially the orphanage housed girls and boys in separate dormitories, was staffed by lay overseers and teachers, and managed by a committee of management. Bishop Goold persuaded three Irish-born Sisters of Mercy, led by Ursula Frayne^{xxiv}, to establish Victoria's first Religious community in 1857.



Mother Ursula Frayne

The Sisters took charge of the St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage early in 1861. An almost immediate effect was a separation of the sexes. The Board of Management had applied for extra land for a separate girls' orphanage in the late 1850s, and the Sisters set about building a Girls' Orphanage in 1863 moving the girls before it was completed. Although it was separated from the boys' orphanage by only a laneway, the girls' orphanage soon became an enclosed world, with no contact, even for siblings, with residents in the adjacent orphanage. The Sisters continued to teach the boys until 1874, though they were anxious to hand them over to the care of a male religious order. Finally, in 1874, Bishop Goold was able to prevail upon the small band of Christian Brothers who had arrived in the colony in 1868 to take charge of the Boys' Orphanage.



St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage, Emerald Hill, 1862

Although described as an 'orphanage', less than half of the children left the orphanage for employment or apprenticeships, suggesting that this orphanage was providing temporary relief to widowed or deserted parents who could reclaim their children as circumstances improved. It appears that only a small proportion of children had lost both parents, and more commonly one parent was deceased, incapacitated or had deserted the family.

Education was intended to train the children to be virtuous, hard-working and pious. Religious education was also a high priority. Clergymen visited the orphanages to instruct and prepare children for their first communion and confirmation, but daily life was also interspersed with prayers, and lessons were 'infused' with religion, as they were in all Catholic schools. In Ireland, the Christian Brothers had developed a series of 'school books' that had gained wide acceptance by educationalists beyond the Brothers' own schools. The same books were introduced by the Christian Brothers to Victoria and presumably used by them in their orphanage schools. The Sisters of Mercy also began using the Christian Brothers' school books. This ensured a thoroughly Irish and Catholic tone to the material presented to the children in reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, geography and singing.

Moreover, the children were kept busy. The boys spent their evenings mending boots, while the girls made and mended clothes and knitted stockings. In addition, the boys cultivated the garden and worked at 'such domestic works as are suitable to them' and the girls were taught to 'wash, cook, etc as far as their strength permits'. Older children, both girls and boys, were also required to give out of school hours help with domestic duties and caring for the younger children. Physical or emotional ties among the children or with their carers were discouraged. The Sisters of Mercy followed the Irish-published manual, *Guide for the Religious*. While the Guide advised them to be 'maternal' and 'kindly' to the children, it frowned on emotional ties. Similarly, the Christian Brothers were forbidden to touch the children under the *noli me tangere* rule. But, while relationships were distant, there was constant supervision of the children.



Dormitory, St Vincent de Paul's Boys' Orphanage (This photograph, taken in the early twentieth century, shows the dimensions of one of the two original dormitories constructed in 1857)

The strict separation of the sexes into different institutions, and into dormitories segregated according to age, meant that children were frequently separated from siblings. Parents were not overly encouraged to visit their children. St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage Annual Report for 1870 advertised that parents were able to visit the orphanage on only four Sundays throughout the year.

There is scant documentation of how children viewed their experience of orphanage life in the nineteenth century. In the early days, some showed their disapproval by 'absconding', but as high fences and walls began to surround the orphanage buildings (in the case of St Vincent de Paul's Boys', complete with a topping of broken glass), the opportunities for escape became limited. Because the children were educated within the institutions and also participated in most of their religious rituals within the orphanage grounds, there was little opportunity to break the monotony of daily life through outings. The boys at least enjoyed some opportunities to move beyond the walls. The boys enjoyed the occasional treat, such as a trip down Port Phillip Bay offered by benefactors. Some of the boys also experienced the benefit of belonging to brass bands, which the Christian Brothers instituted in the early 1880s. But there was little respite from life behind the walls for the girls.

For siblings it was always a case of so near and yet so far. A large brick wall and a bluestone lane separated the parted siblings. A girl who thought she might have a brother would call out over the fence to inquire after her lost brother. If she was lucky one of the boys would find her a brother, and hoist him on to his shoulders. It was the only kind of family reunion they could hope for.

A former St Vincent boy said his time at the orphanage in the 1950s was a salvation from a terrible home life. Running away at every opportunity, he was considered a neglected child and at age nine was taken to St Vincents.

'From my point of view I would have ended up a habitual criminal. I was too cocky for my own good and looking for the easy way out. They (Christian Brothers) were tough; there were probably two or three times when I thought my punishment outweighed what I had done, but I owe them a big vote of thanks. Everybody in the home had a sense of belonging, of knowing where you were all the time. You knew the rules and you knew you could get six of the best (straps or canes) if you didn't obey them. By the time I was 13 1/2 though, I was stir-crazy.' He became a butcher and now runs a contract courier company. Others were less lucky. "Dan" was eight when he was found living in a bus shelter with his brother and mother. He was sent to St Vincent in the 1960s, where he was bashed for offences such as not eating all his dinner or wearing his clothes the wrong way. The sexual abuse was far worse; he was often taken from his bed to that of a Christian brother.

From *Holding on to Hope*, by Jill Barnard and Karen Twigg

In June, 1908, Mother Mary Sherlock^{xxv} the first Superior of the Girls' Orphanage, died. For nearly 23 years, the administration and management of the Orphanage was in her hands.

Brother O'Neill^{xxvi}, with the help of the Old Boys of the Orphanage, purchased three houses in St Vincent Place for the purpose of a working boys' Hostel to help the boys after they left school. In 1925, the Hostel was opened with Brother Molloy the first Superior.



The centenary of the foundation of the orphanage in July 1954 was celebrated with a reunion of old boys, a picnic for the present boys, and a Requiem Mass for the deceased old boys and Brothers. It was also decided to erect a statue of St Vincent de Paul in front of the school. At that time it was the oldest Catholic institution of its type in the Commonwealth, and it was estimated that in its first hundred years it had provided a home and education to more than 15,000 boys.

****At the end of 1965, it was decided by Mother Agatha, the Superior of Our Lady's Orphanage, that the time had come for the girls to move into cottage homes in Black Rock and other parts of Melbourne. The Orphanage closed in early 1966 and plans were announced to use the site for a Catholic Teachers' Training College. On discovering it was Crown Land, this had to be abandoned and the College ultimately opened in Chadstone.