

THE DON GNOCCHI CENTER OF PARMA, ITALY

This year the "Don Gnocchi Centre of Parma" has celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the death of its founder. This event was particularly marked by the celebration of a solemn Mass in the Cathedral of Milan, during which His Eminence Cardinal Martini officially announced the introduction of the Cause for the Beatification of the Servant of God.

The "Don Gnocchi Centres", which were founded right after World War II, were intended by their founder to answer the urgent need of that period: that of accepting young people who had been mutilated by the war, and attending to their instruction and education.

Don Gnocchi, who had been the Chaplain of our Gonzaga Institute in Milan, confided this work, to a great extent, to the Brothers of the Christian Schools. As the number of disabled people began to diminish these were replaced by young people afflicted with polio. Eventually, thanks to the spirit of adaptability of those directing the operation, these institutions were transformed into Medico-Social Centres, accessible to all the citizens of the land. The Brothers, given the lack of vocations, were constrained to gradually withdraw from these establishments.

The Centre at Parma, where the Brothers have worked since 1949, is the only one we still have under our direction. This centre has also undergone changes dictated by the times, and its facilities once occupied by more than 400 youths, have been completely modified to respond to the present day needs of the Medico-Social Centre. This apostolic engagement represents a very particularized type of work. Without any doubt, it is an authentic service to the poor and is in perfect harmony with the indications of the General Chapter, which asked that we be sensitive to the appeals of those less favoured to such an extent that such service would become a fundamental element of renewal for each district. Our community accepts three distinct groups:

HANDICAPPED YOUTHS

This group is made up of boys and girls — some forty of them — the majority of whom are paraplegics who look to us to help them in the promotion of their health, but above all to help them ameliorate their human and social conditions in the fields of education and work and to extricate them from the isolation to which they are often condemned by their family and by society. The young people confided to our care, beyond the indications of their physical pain, bear themselves the pains of moral trials: some of them are without family, others have been simply rejected because of their handicaps; and one can merely guess at their economic situation. In us, they seek to find what they are deprived of: family, guidance, instruction, and a window to the future. To prepare them for the life of tomorrow and to render them autonomous, home-like experiences are used: small groups — always helped by the Centre — living together with former students who are already established and financially independent. This is the group of youths which receives most of our time and attention and which best justifies our presence in the Centre. Despite the notable diminution of these youths and considering the gravity of their handicaps — we also accept deaf-mutes — the presence of the three Brothers who are dedicated to this work is amply justified.

— To those in need and to those who suffer, our Centre offers AN ENTIRE GAMBIT OF MEDICO-SOCIAL SERVICES: Visits by medical specialists, therapy to counter pain, rehabilitation of the spinal column, respiratory rehabilitation, therapeutic sports, radiology, psychometric and orthophonic therapy. An impressive number of persons — above all the young — profit from these services, especially in the form of clinic care.

— For the past four years, our Centre has been offering "Hospitalization Service" to those persons who, afflicted by grave handicaps, need rehabilitation. There are some fifty of them who have spent time in our hospital even for as long as two months. The Brother's presence is a witness to the Gospel, and it is very much appreciated and sought after. One particularly significant moment is that of the Saturday evening celebration of the Holy Eucharist, in the corridor of the Hospitalization Section: it is quite moving to see these patients, both young and old, seated around the altar (they are unable to stand) to offer their sufferings in union with Christ who renews His own sacrifice!

This service of rehabilitation, both physical

and moral, is very much appreciated by the local Church, by the Civil Authorities, and by the public at large.

OTHER ACTIVITIES OF THE CENTRE

— Following the explicit wishes of Mons. Benito Cocchi, Bishop of Parma, the know-how and devotion of a group called "The Friends of Don Gnocchi" gave birth to the "Brotherly Meal". The parishes in turn each evening send from ten to fifteen volunteers to serve a complete meal (entirely free) to some thirty poor people. The first anniversary of this was celebrated last Christmas. His Excellency, the Bishop, was with us. Many people participated at the Holy Mass: The Friends of Don Gnocchi, volunteers, guests in the house, etc. Up until now, this new activity has been able to distribute more than 10,000 meals.

THE DON GNOCCHI SPORTS COMPLEX

This was started in Parma on January 2, 1983.

Sports Offered: Swimming, ping-pong, athletic games, volleyball, basket-ball, and water polo. The courses and competitions are carried out in wheelchairs. These are specially-designed wheel chairs and are operated by pressing the arms. Training in swimming takes place in the swimming pool and the young people, using only the strength of their arms, are able to do some extraordinary things. "The Sports Complex" is run by a team of friends of the Centre —:

— it is intended to be open to all. It even entertains those who do not belong to the Centre;

— activities are organized for the purpose of guaranteeing the handicapped psychophysical and social rehabilitation;

— it is allied with other sporting federations for meetings, cooperation and competition.

Since its foundation, the "Sports Complex" has been always moving ahead. Training and competition continue on. Victories multiply and this is attested to by the cups and trophies.

A friend writes: "Living along side them, I have learned many things. They have enriched my values, sentiments, and moral strength. Sports should not be an end in themselves, but they ought to make us discover the values which unite us in fraternal friendship".

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

In this beautiful assemblage of people, our walking along the long corridors and being passed by several wheelchairs as we go to the sickbeds, are the occasion of explaining what duty is all about; the Brothers, with their lay fellow workers-by their ATTITUDE, their KIND WORD and their SMILE help their guests to live with serenity these words of our Holy Founder:

"I adore in all things the will of God in my regard".

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