



**LETTER OF MOTHER MARY AIKENHEAD  
REGARDING THE CONDITION OF THE POOR OF RINGSEND  
PARISH IN 1833**



**Convent of the Sisters of Charity, Sandymount  
30 December 1833**



My Lords and Gentlemen,

A copy of the “*Queries for Parishes in Large Towns*” has been sent to me, requesting that I will favour “*The Commissioners of Inquiry into the State of the Irish Poor*” with an early reply to such of them as may come within my cognisance.

There are many of the *Queries* which I cannot be expected to reply to; therefore, I have preferred furnishing the Commissioners with such information on the state of the poor, in the district in which our convent is situated, as I have been able to collect in discharge of the duties of a Sister of Charity.

Our convent has been established at Sandymount, Parish of St Mary, Donnybrook, City of Dublin, about three years. The object of our Institution is to attend to the comforts of the poor, both spiritual and temporal; to visit them at their dwellings and in hospitals, to attend them in sickness, to administer consolation in their afflictions, and to reconcile them to the dispensations of an all-wise Providence in the many trials to which they are subject.

The education and relief of orphans, and the religious instruction of the lower orders, is part of our duty. The villages of Sandymount, Ball’s Bridge, Irishtown, and Ringsend are more immediately within our care. It would be painful to describe the instances of heart-rending misery which we daily witness. Many in the prime of life are reduced to debility from want of food, subsisting for forty-eight hours on one meal, without sufficient clothes to cover them, their wretched furniture and tattered garments being pledged as a last resort. Within the last year we have witnessed forty cases of men willing to work, if they could procure employment, who were reduced to sickness, which in some instances terminated in death, from excessive misery. There is no dispensary in this neighbourhood, and the poor have no other medical aid than such as we can bestow.

In the course of the last summer, the *cholera morbus* broke out in the villages of Sandymount, Irishtown, Ball’s Bridge, and Ringsend, and raged for five weeks with great violence. We found some in the agonies of death, without the means of procuring even a drink; many perished without medical aid, till at length the bounty of Lord Anglesea, who contributed £20 from his private



purse, added to £20 given by the Hon Sidney Herbert, and a private subscription of £30, enabled us to open an hospital containing twelve beds, which were constantly full to the termination of the epidemic. The same subscription enabled us to give medicine and relief to 100 extern patients, attacked with incipient cholera, and since that period we have continued to administer medicine under the charitable advice of a medical practitioner in Dublin.

When the poor are confined to bed by fever, they frequently fall victims to the want of medical aid, and more frequently relapse for want of proper food when in a convalescent state. It is difficult to imagine how the population of these villages is supported. There is a factory at Ball's Bridge, which employs a few families, but the wages are so low, and the rent of their wretched hovels so high, that they have not the means to procure wholesome food.

The distillery at Dodder Bank employed eight families; it has been closed within two months, and they are now obliged to pawn their clothes and furniture to procure a scanty subsistence. The glass work at Ringsend has been closed since last May, in consequence of which a great number of individuals are thrown out of employment. The proprietors of salt works, which formerly employed a great number, and of a foundry once in a flourishing condition, have so much curtailed their establishments, that we now find many reduced to the utmost misery, who formerly earned an honest livelihood in these establishments. The fishermen and poor sailors, often without friends, and reduced to sickness by cold and want, are objects of great compassion. Excessive poverty produces a want of cleanliness which aggravates their misery.

The lanes and streets are filled with filth in Ringsend and Irishtown; there are no sewers; no attention is paid to the ventilation of the houses, and the poor are obliged to buy even the water which they drink; it is of the worst description and tends to promote disease as much by its scarcity as by its quality. The poor have no bed clothes; we have often seen them expire on dirty straw and are frequently obliged to furnish them with covering before we can approach to administer to their wants. Their sufferings from want of fuel, want of water, and of covering, can only be credited by those who have witnessed them. The poor are inclined to indulge in spirituous liquors; they often resort to it in despair to drown the recollections of their sufferings. The



small sum which will procure spirits is insufficient to provide a meal, yet we have reclaimed many from the habit of drinking by remonstrance and a small supply of food.

The poor are, generally speaking, very docile and remarkably patient under their sufferings and privations; they are grateful beyond measure for the least kindness shown to them and are most anxious to procure employment even at the lowest wages.

The sufferings of the poor children cannot be described; many perish, and those who survive are in many instances so debilitated by want as to become sickly and infirm at an early period of life. There are no public establishments in this populous district for the relief of the poor. Some charitable persons send small sums to our convent for the relief of the distressed, which enables us to distribute broth to the most destitute—three pints of broth being the only subsistence, for two days, of families consisting of eight persons. In this way, we are enabled to assist twenty families out of the many who require it. It is most painful to witness distress beyond all description without having the means of relieving it.

We shall be most willing to furnish any further information on the state of the poor in this district which may tend to their relief. We are at all times ready to lend our assistance in superintending hospitals or administering relief to the sick at their own dwellings in fever or *cholera morbus*; and most sincerely deplore that we have not the means to erect an hospital, where our care of the sick might be attended with more beneficial results than any we can possibly affect amid the desolation of their wretched homes.

In any provision which you may recommend for the relief of poverty in any of the towns where the Sisters of Charity are established, I pray you to recollect that we are ready to lend our humble assistance in those works of mercy which may tend to alleviate the sufferings of our fellow creatures of every creed.

I have the honour to be, my Lords and Gentlemen,

Your obedient servant,

MARY AIKENHEAD

“*To the Commissioners of Inquiry*”, etc, etc



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