

' C A R I T A S ' S T U D E N T S

TO all young people equally, whether students, young workers, young teachers or others, we say: Look around you, witness the hunger and the poverty, and help in whatever way you can. And to all leaders and teachers of youth we say: Take your young people seriously. Don't suppose that you can give them as an ideal a sort of game of Red Indians or that Strong Man cult which belongs to a time which is now, thank God, passed. Do not be afraid of introducing them to hard facts, to the need that is all around us and to their duty to help as Christians. They will understand you better than perhaps you imagine. When you can show them all this clearly, you will have done more for their lives than any amount of book-learning can do.

We meet weekly. We begin with *Our Father* and then we beg St Vincent de Paul and St Elisabeth to stand by us. Then we read a chapter from a book or a paper having direct bearing on our work: we shall doubtless have to find new ways of doing things and we need to be shown how. This summer we took passages from Dostoevsky, from the Gospel, from Novalis, from a book of eleventh century prayers, from Lives of the Saints, from Professor Geramp's Styrian Folk Tales, from the Letters of St Justinus. In the light of what we have read we discuss our plans.

Our practical work starts at home, we want to help our fellow students. So many students are in difficulties, whether because the war has interrupted their studies, and the way is no longer open to them to return to their work unaided, or because normal facilities for eating and sleeping are no longer available for those whose homes are not in the town. We do what we can to help.

We want to help the new poor too: the so-called better classes have suffered as much as anyone else through expulsions and plunderings: they have lost land and living and hardly know how to start in life afresh. They are proud people who do not ask for help and we must be careful how we offer it and keep our eyes open for cases of desperate need, of which there are many.

Though we have small means to help, we have visited ill people too and tried to cope a little with that one overpowering evil which lies behind most illness today: we mean Hunger. To old people, who are perhaps the poorest people of all, we have brought what cheer we could and tried to help them not to feel unwanted.

In the overcrowded Homes for the homeless, we know the poorest people of all are to be found, for the bed they sleep on is not even

their own. They share a living room and can use it only for the latter part of the day, and so many of them are people who were only a short time ago living in normal comfort, in their own home, often on their own farm land. An American Catholic fund enabled us to help these people with two good food donations. We were able to distribute 1500 tins in all, and holy pictures too. Groups of young people visit at least one of these Homes every week, making a special point of seeking out those who are ill or in great need. We can cooperate with *Caritas-Steiermark* (the diocesan voluntary welfare association) in making clothing and food distributions. We are fortunate in being on very good terms with the men in charge of these Homes, even when they do not share our interpretation of life.

Through the war, we all know what life in barracks and huts is like. Such huts are now the homes of many otherwise homeless people, some of them Austrians brought home from abroad, others refugees from persecution in other lands. However large the family, it is lucky if it has a room to itself. Hundreds and hundreds of families are now living with one single room as their whole estate, and the barest necessities are scarcely to be found. They are lucky if they can find sacking to make straw mattresses, lucky if they have a blanket apiece. We cannot help much; we bring them a little food when we can. Their gratitude knows no bounds.

We have found a good deal to do in the working men's flats where we went visiting in the winter. We were able to help *Caritas* send the children to holidays on farms. Our women students sometimes spend an afternoon there, playing with the children, and keeping them out of their mothers' way. We long to start a Catholic kindergarten for this colony, and we know the parents would welcome it. We are very proud of the day when two of our girls went and did the week's washing for an overwrought mother of many. This was a very popular event, second only to the day when we were able to make a good food distribution throughout the colony. We distribute the *Kirchenblätter* on Sundays and make many friends then as the men are at home. We don't find working men standoffish when they see that we really want to be friends. And so we learn that here a child has not yet been baptised, there a marriage is waiting for the blessing of the Church. At our weekly meetings, some people always seem shy of the working man, almost afraid. And yet he was the first who was called to bear the banner of Christendom onwards. We have found out ourselves that *Caritas* is a way to the worker and that is the way we should go.

At the *Caritas* station hut the poverty of our time is most clearly visible. All the weary and heavy-laden come to it: home-coming prisoners of war whose parents have died, whose homes are gone;

refugees of all kinds. The hut, which is a gift of the Swiss Relief Fund, was blessed by the Bishop this summer, and one of our colleagues said on that occasion: 'We should see to it that whoever comes to the hut feels at home in it. For that was the hardest part of being a soldier, that feeling that one must always be on the move and be at home nowhere'. That boy knew what he was talking about. All who come in here for food and sleep should also feel able to relax a little and take comfort and new heart for their further journey.

Of course, we lose most of our students in the holidays, their homes are often far afield. But those who live in the town carry on, for need knows no reprieve. We were delighted with the warmth of the response we got from the parochial boys' clubs when we asked if they would help us out with our rota of duties at the station hut while our fellow-students were away.

Our plans for the future are mainly to continue what we are now doing. We want to help the parochial *Caritas* associations as much as we can too, and we want to find ways of increasing our supplies. *Caritas* knows no limits and is deterred by no difficulties. We want our people to be properly equipped for the work they have to do, so that each and every one of us can feel he is really helping, whatever job he is given to do. That sense of responsibility is all-important. And gradually, by working together, we are building up a real community spirit which is of the greatest value to us all. We want to have a weekly community Mass to clinch it.

Naturally, among all our young workers some are more expert in the art of giving than others. Whoever has once experienced the blessing of giving, whoever has really troubled to love others, knows that love gives him something he will never lose again. Our Bishop, at the blessing of the station hut, told us how delighted he was to see young men and women come forward in the love and service of their neighbours. 'You are in fact the torchbearers of the ideal of love in neighbourliness', he said. And so should it be. We do not want to disappoint our Bishop. A frightful war has plunged mankind in indescribable unhappiness. Suffering and hatred are far from being stamped out. Men long for justice and peace. We know the only way that leads to peace, and it is our duty to make it plain to others. Anyone can talk, and of little use it is, for war will always bring in its train the troubles we know too well. Deeds are what are needed today! Not without sacrifice and struggle. It is for the young to plunge into the heart of the struggle, knowing it is well worth while, and with love for weapon and shield. And we would summon all young people to join us in the fight, students, young workers, craftsmen, boys and girls, for 'Love is like a burning fire, waters cannot quench it nor the tides overwhelm it'.

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