

# Charles O'Neill, the Engineer of Charity

Stephen Utick\*

## *The Mystery and Aura of the Pauper's Grave*

When Charles Gordon O'Neill passed away at Sydney's St Vincent's Hospital on the 8 November 1900 at the age of seventy-two, it was likely that memory of him would fade quickly. An Irish-Scots bachelor, he had no family resident other than an equally poor elder brother John James, who would follow him to the grave within a year after being cared for by the Little Sisters of the Poor.<sup>1</sup>

Two years later, a handsome gravestone was purchased by voluntary contributions from Sydney Catholics and erected at Rookwood necropolis to mark the remains and those of his brother. Its ornamented cross urged the viewer to 'Of your Charity Pray for the Souls' of Charles and his brother John; added the initials M.I.C.E (Member of the Institution of Engineers) after Charles' name and proclaimed that he was the founder of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australasia.<sup>2</sup> A pilgrimage led by Father Pierre Le Rennetel sm of St Patrick's Church Hill marked the dedication of the monument on 6 July 1902. Six days later, also reporting the ceremony, an obituary was published in the *Freemans' Journal*. That obituary revealed a life of exceptional piety:

No two figures were better known in the streets of Sydney than those of

---

\* Stephen Utick is a PhD candidate in history at the Australian Catholic University, and has Masters degrees in Science and Society (UNSW), Letters (philosophy) (ANU) and Arts (theology) (ACU). He retired from the Commonwealth Public Service after working on science and research policy for twenty-five years. He has been a volunteer for the St Vincent de Paul Society since his early twenties. He served as Literature Advisory President to the Society in New South Wales between 1996 and 2007, and is the author of *Captain Charles Engineer of Charity: The remarkable life of Charles Gordon O'Neill* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2008).

1. *Ibid.*, 2.

2. *Ibid.*, 2, 242. Despite the inscription, the title of founder of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia should be shared with Father Gerald Ward who founded the first conference of the Society in Melbourne in 1854.

Charles O'Neill and his brother John, who was his inseparable companion...A lengthy volume could be written concerning the attachment of the two brothers, and the many anecdotes of pathetic simplicity, mutual forbearance, and self-sacrifice of the two pious men who lived more in heaven than on earth.<sup>3</sup>

During the pre-Federation Victorian era, the Australian public lauded the exemplary Christian or 'good' death.<sup>4</sup> Even so, the memory of the O'Neill brothers in the slums of Sydney's The Rock's district had been something much more than inspirational and would prove more enduring over time.

Apart from the monument erected in 1902, but one memento of Charles O'Neill remained. Shortly before his death, O'Neill had handed to a young volunteer of the St Patrick's Conference of the St Vincent de Paul Society, a small spiritual guidebook.<sup>5</sup> It was his copy of a *Manual of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society*, published in 1877 most likely in Dublin, containing the rules for the lay Catholic charitable association translated into English from French. O'Neill had inserted within it a curious series of written jottings and pasted cuttings, arranged in no particular order. Hidden away in closets, O'Neill's Society *Manual* remained unexamined for over sixty years.

Spiritual interest in Charles O'Neill was inspired by these two respective reminders of his death and life, and initially triggered after the Society in New South Wales had purchased a substantial plot of land at Rookwood in the early 1960s to bury Sydney's paupers. It was there that the remains of the O'Neill brothers and the monument were relocated on 23 June 1961 after exhumation.<sup>6</sup> A second pilgrimage on 22 July 1961, this time led by Monsignor F. Kerr, marked the end of the project. Kerr's panegyric captured the feeling at that point in time:

Lovely as this monument is to human eyes and pleasing as it must be to Almighty God, yet lovelier still and still more pleasing to Him is the monument of which Charles O'Neill with God's help, was the architect—the Society of St Vincent de Paul in Australasia.<sup>7</sup>

Within a decade of the 1961 pilgrimage, a spiritual aura surrounding Charles O'Neill had captured the hearts and minds of three prominent Catholic laymen.

- 
3. 'The Late Charles O'Neill, Founder of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia and New Zealand. Unveiling a Monument at Rookwood', *Freemans Journal*, 12 July 1902, 25.
  4. This perspective is discussed at length by Pat Jalland, *Australian Ways of Death, a Social and Cultural History 1840-1918* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002), 51-68.
  5. Utick, *Captain Charles Engineer of Charity*, 2.
  6. Harold O'Keefe, General Manager Catholic Cemetery Trust, Rookwood Cemetery, to Pat O'Flynn, State President, St Vincent de Paul Society, 23 January 2001, (Sydney: St Vincent de Paul Society Archives).
  7. Cec Foley, *Charles Gordon O'Neill, Engineer and Apostle* (Sydney: St Vincent de Paul Society, James Maloney Press, 1996 edition), 40.

These three were Ted Bacon, who subsequently served as National President of St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia; Justice John Henry McClemens, a former New South Wales Supreme Court Judge; and Professor Bede Nairn, a historian at the Australian National University's *Australian Dictionary of Biography* project. Each in turn became convinced of O'Neill's sanctity from the fragments of historical detail that they independently uncovered.<sup>8</sup> A few years before his own death, Ted Bacon encouraged the Literature Advisory Committee of the Society in New South Wales to continue the search about the details of O'Neill's life.<sup>9</sup>

Gradually, much of the mystery about Charles O'Neill's life was lifted. It subsequently became fitting to bestow on him the title of 'Engineer of Charity', for that was effectively what he was. Whether or not O'Neill is ever recognised by the Church as among 'the chosen ones in God's Kingdom', his life—influenced as it was by Vincentian and Franciscan spiritual ideals—represented a truly great lay commitment to the Christ of the Poor during the nineteenth century.

O'Neill's life is what historical biographers would now describe as translocational, that is, one lived across more than one nation or part of a nation.<sup>10</sup> He lived in Scotland between 1828 and 1863, New Zealand between 1864 and 1880, and New South Wales between 1881 and 1900.<sup>11</sup> It was in Sydney in July 1881 that, with the help of the Marist Fathers and the support of Sydney Archbishop Roger Vaughan, he established the St Vincent de Paul Society in New South Wales.

O'Neill was, however, no Celtic wanderer but someone ultimately driven by a mission that he interpreted as being driven by God's will. Nairn once described O'Neill's life of service to the Church and the poor as 'unobtrusive but resplendent and enduring.'<sup>12</sup> This article will expand on these qualities—that is, by examining O'Neill as a resplendent exemplar of lay service, of being a prophet of unobtrusive Christian charity, and as an achiever of an enduring outcome by accepting of God's will in undertaking a lay mission.

### *Resplendent Exemplar of Lay Service*

His service began in earnest in Victorian Scotland during the early 1850s when the young O'Neill was in his twenties. Born on 22 March 1828 in Inverary,

---

8. See foreword by Ted Bacon in Foley, *Charles Gordon O'Neill, Engineer and Apostle*, 1-4; John H. McClemens, 'Charles Gordon O'Neill, the Founder of the St Vincent De Paul Society in Australia,' *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society* 3, no. 3 (1971); Bede Nairn's comments are cited in Edmund Campion, *Great Australian Catholics* (Richmond, Victoria: David Lovell Publishing, 1997), 49.

9. The author, when serving as Literature Advisory President of the Society in New South Wales, was privileged to receive this request from Ted Bacon in 1996.

10. This biographical understanding is essential for appreciating a life such as O'Neill's. See for example Desley Deacon, Penny Russell, and Angela Woollacott, eds. *Transnational Ties: Australian Lives in the World* (ANU Lives Canberra: ANU E-Press, 2008).

11. Utick, *Captain Charles Engineer of Charity*.

12. Campion, *Great Australian Catholics*, 49.

Argyllshire, Charles O'Neill was the fourth of eleven children born to a spirits and general merchant John Ogle O'Neill and his wife Mary, an Irish couple originally from Sligo.<sup>13</sup> During the early 1850s, the father briefly held a lease on Elephant Inn in Dumbarton on the Clyde, where the family witnessed at first hand the appalling plight of victims of Ireland's potato famine fleeing to Scotland. If even fortunate enough not to be shipped back to Ireland or be thrown into the poorhouse, those escaping the famine faced lives of hard labour working in the factories and docks of Glasgow, then the British Empire's second city and industrial hub. Living in some of the foulest slums in Europe, they would also experience bigotry from many in the Protestant community who feared a revival of Catholicism in Scotland.

In 1851, Charles, a brilliant young apprentice civil engineer and architect, and his brother John James were moved by their plight and joined the Dumbarton Conference of the then very young St Vincent de Paul Society.<sup>14</sup> The Society had been established in Glasgow in 1848, fifteen years after its formation in Paris in 1833. The brothers also actively supported groups such as the Friends of the Irish Poor.

On completion of his apprenticeship, Charles obtained the position of Assistant Superintendent of Streets, Roads, Buildings and Sewerage in the City of Glasgow, moving his lodgings there in 1852.<sup>15</sup> Outside of professional duties, much of his life was committed to the service of the small but rapidly growing Catholic Church in western Scotland, then struggling to meet the pastoral needs of the influx of destitute Catholic Irish.

One aspect of O'Neill's lay service was as an architect of Catholic churches and schools, using his professional skills and appreciation of classical designs to inspire the poor of Glasgow with the images and symbols of an ancient faith.<sup>16</sup> O'Neill was probably responsible for the design of up to seven churches, and certainly including St Peter's (now St Simon's) Patrick (1858) and the East Wing of St Aloysius' Chapel, Springburn (1855-56), both of which still stand.<sup>17</sup> He continued some of this work in New Zealand and New South Wales, including redesign of the marble altar and organ loft of the original St Mary's Cathedral in Wellington (1878-1880), and the design of Sacred Heart Church Reefton (1878-79) and of Holy Name of Mary Church Rydalmere (1889-1890).<sup>18</sup> Of these latter, only the Reefton Church still survives.

13. Utick, *Captain Charles Engineer of Charity*, 8.

14. 'Presentation to Charles O'Neill', *Freeman's Journal*, 25 July 1891, 15.

15. 'The appointment of Mr Charles O'Neill,' *Glasgow Free Press*, 18 July 1863, 9; Utick, *Captain Charles Engineer of Charity*, 12-15.

16. *Ibid.*, 15-17.

17. *Ibid.*

18. 'Consecration of New Marble Altar, St Mary's Cathedral,' *New Zealand Tablet*, 26 December 1879, 7; Catholic Archdiocese of Wellington, *To Commemorate the Centennial Celebrations of the Sacred Heart Parish, Reefton, 1874-1974* (Hokitika, New Zealand: Richards and Meyer Ltd, 1974), 6; Holy Name Parish Centenary History Committee, *Holy Name of Mary Parish Rydalmere, Centenary 1889-1989* (Sydney, New South Wales: W.R. Bright & Sons, 1989), 17.

Another more significant aspect of O'Neill's service developed amid the shadows of the slums and poorhouses of Glasgow, as he undertook the duties of Secretary of the St Vincent de Paul Society's Council for the Western Districts of Scotland. A surviving public address by the young O'Neill made in 1853 at the Glasgow Trades Hall, revealed his traditional Catholic understanding of charity based on mercy:

The smallest donation for the poor will be thankfully received, and distributed among the most deserving and the most destitute. However trifling it may be, it will assist in relieving their pressing wants—it may change a house of sorrow and long suffering into an abode of cheerfulness, industry, and peace; and it cannot fail to obtain for the giver a reward from Him, who, while on earth, pronounced those sublime and beautiful words: 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall find mercy.'<sup>19</sup>

By 1859, O'Neill became the President of that Society Council and, until his departure for New Zealand, brought his full organisational talents to the service of the poor through Catholic charity. By 1860, twelve years after its arrival in Glasgow, the Society in the Western districts of Scotland had distributed over £6000 and had made 100,000 visits to the poor.<sup>20</sup> Between 1859 and 1861, Society income rose to over £1100 per annum, practically all of which was disbursed to the poor. In 1861, membership had doubled to 268 active members and 136 honorary members, with eighteen conferences providing relief for over 21,000 individuals. In that year also, Society members in pairs were making over 12,700 visits to the needy in the slums, laneways and hovels of the city.<sup>21</sup> O'Neill presided over a significant charitable organisation providing both spiritual support and material assistance in the British Empire's second city. This inspiring effort preceded the establishment several years later in London of the Christian Revival Society, the precursor to the Salvation Army, by William and Catherine Booth.

O'Neill eschewed the sectarianism and bigotry of the era and, demonstrating his loyalty to the Empire, became a Captain of a Volunteer Regiment, the 3rd Lanarkshire Rifles.<sup>22</sup> He invented the 'Wimbledon', a system of rifle target scoring, and both he and John James formed part of a guard of honour to Queen Victoria at the opening of the Loch Katrine Waterworks in October 1859.<sup>23</sup> Frustrated at the lack of advancement in his profession, O'Neill went into private

19. 'The Brotherhood of St Vincent de Paul: Meeting of the Catholics of Glasgow,' *Glasgow Free Press*, 24 September 1853, 2.

20. Utick, *Captain Charles Engineer of Charity*, 38.

21. 'Report of the Proceedings of the Society of St Vincent De Paul in the Western District of Scotland, During the Years 1861 and 1862', *Glasgow Free Press*, 28 March 1863, 13.

22. 'Testimonial to Mr Charles O'Neill', *Glasgow Free Press*, 3 October 1863, 12.

23. Utick, *Captain Charles Engineer of Charity*, 44.

practice as a civil engineer in 1861 only to face bankruptcy two years later. However, he was recruited as a provincial engineer for the Otago Provincial Government in the New Zealand Colonies. He subsequently departed for New Zealand on the clipper *Brechin Castle* arriving at the Otago goldfields early in 1864.<sup>24</sup> Thereafter his personal fortunes took a remarkable turn. His father (the mother died in 1859) and a number of his siblings soon made their own way to New Zealand, and later on John James and his youngest sister Maria Gordon O'Neill would follow him to Sydney.

After two years undertaking gruelling road survey work along the Clutha River in New Zealand's Southland, he was elected by nomination in February 1866 to New Zealand's Colonial Parliament as one of the MPs for Otago Goldfields.<sup>25</sup> Five years later in February 1871, he was narrowly elected by ballot to become the first MP for The Thames, based on the booming goldfields of the North Island's Coromandel Peninsula.<sup>26</sup> He still had to support himself financially and served briefly as Engineer-in Chief of Auckland Province between 1869 and 1871. He was never inspiring on the hustings, and ultimately paid the price in the 1876 elections for too eagerly supporting government development promises that were never delivered. Nevertheless he spent a decade in New Zealand's Parliament in Wellington. His main election platform was to support the rights of miners (many of whom were Irish Catholics), and his parliamentary record demonstrated an interest in economic and technological development, tramways, town planning, health and industrial safety. It should also be on the record that O'Neill has been (belatedly) recognised as an 'eco-hero' for championing the cause of forest conservation and wider environmental protection.<sup>27</sup> In October 1873, he predicted that the poor would pay the price of the wanton destruction of forests, then rampant in New Zealand:

It affected the poor man more than the rich, for a time would come when timber would become so scarce and valuable, that houses would cost more to erect, and rents would become higher, which the poor man would feel more than the rich.<sup>28</sup>

While in Parliament, he strongly supported the Catholic position on divorce and the provision of public funding for denominational schools, this latter championed unsuccessfully by Bishop Patrick Moran of Dunedin.<sup>29</sup>

24. *Ibid.*, 50-52.

25. 'Editorial', *Dunstan Times*, 24 March 1866.

26. 'Thames Election', *New Zealand Herald*, 11 February 1871, 2.

27. Tom Brooking, 'Green Scots and Golden Irish: The Environmental Impact of Scottish and Irish Settlers in New Zealand—Some Preliminary Ruminations,' *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies* 3 (2010): 57.

28. New Zealand Parliament, *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 15, 1 October (Wellington, New Zealand: Didsbury, 1873), 1546.

29. Bishop Patrick Moran is not to be confused with Cardinal Patrick Francis Moran. See Utick, *Captain Charles Engineer of Charity*, 72-73, 95-97.

Between 1876 and 1880, O'Neill settled for a while in Wellington serving first as an Acting Engineer for Wellington City Corporation before moving once again to private practice. In the secular world he would gain some esteem for his achievements, being elected to the Wellington Philosophical Society (the precursor to the Royal Society of New Zealand) in 1877, acclaimed by Julius Vogel (then New Zealand's Prime Minister) for promoting tramways in the colony, and gaining prestigious Membership of the Institution of Civil Engineers in 1880.<sup>30</sup>

O'Neill became a prominent lay spokesperson among the Catholics of Wellington Diocese and a close friend of Bishop Francis Redwood sm, an English Marist theologian.<sup>31</sup> In addition to his church architectural work, he raised funds for the works of the Sisters of Mercy in that Diocese.<sup>32</sup> By 1877, he became the President of a Wellington Conference of the St Vincent de Paul Society, established by the Marist priest Father Jean-Baptiste Petitjean sm two years previously. Sometime during 1877, O'Neill wrote to the Society's headquarters in Paris, seeking that conference's aggregation (that is, formal affiliation with the body of the Society). The written reply of 4 September 1877 by Adolphe Baudon, the Society's Secretary General, not only provided that requested affiliation but also made a request that would change the course of O'Neill's life yet again. In his reply, Baudon commented on the disappearance of the first conference in the Australian colonies, one founded in Melbourne by Father Gerald Ward in 1854, adding:

Could you not, with the assistance of the good Marist Fathers, re-establish it; and found new Conferences in Sydney and the other chief cities of Australia? It is much to be feared that the Masonic lodges are very numerous in those cities. Why should Catholics always allow these lodges to surpass them in zeal and energy?<sup>33</sup>

With his Scottish and New Zealand background, O'Neill understood the influence of freemasons and their then anti-Catholic activities, although he was to find more significant challenges to the task ahead of him. At the prime of life and at the peak of his professional career, O'Neill set aside all personal objectives to embark on a mission to re-establish the St Vincent de Paul Society in the Australian colonies.

---

30. Royal Society of New Zealand, *Transactions and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New Zealand 1868-1961, Meetings Wellington Philosophical Society 21 July 1877 and Appendix, Ordinary Members of the Wellington Philosophical Society*, vol. 10 (1877), xxx; 'Public Opening of the Wellington Tramway', *New Zealand Mail*, 31 August 1878, 19; *Evening Post (Wellington)*, 17 March 1880, 2.

31. Utick, *Captain Charles Engineer of Charity*, 123-125.

32. 'Convent Schools Wellington', *New Zealand Tablet*, 4 July 1879, 19; 'Preliminary Announcement,' *Evening Post*, 25 July 1879, 3.

33. Baudon's correspondence was reproduced in the report 'The Society of St Vincent de Paul', *New Zealand Tablet*, 11 January 1878, 15.

During 1880, O'Neill gained the support of Archbishops Goold and Vaughan in Melbourne and Sydney respectively but, after numerous voyages back and forth across the Tasman, could not interest sufficient Catholic laymen.<sup>34</sup> Much of this reticence could be put down to the supreme confidence in an age of prosperity built on sheep and gold—why would the wealthy Australian colonies need an organisation such as the St Vincent de Paul Society, when individuals could build prosperity by their own efforts?

There was however at least one district in Sydney that was the antithesis of the pastoral prosperity desired by the colonists. Sydney's wild Rocks, where the Marist Fathers now had pastoral responsibility at the parish of St Patrick's Church Hill, had achieved a reputation not only for vice but for the worst slums and poverty in the city. It also had a sizeable Irish community. It was there on Sunday evening 24 July 1881 that O'Neill, with the support of the local Marist fathers led by parish priest Father Charles Heuzé sm, encouraged a group of parishioners to form a conference of the St Vincent de Paul Society at St Patrick's.<sup>35</sup> Following Heuzé's death in 1883, Marist Fathers Le Rennetel sm and Peter Piquet sm worked closely with O'Neill in spiritually sustaining the Society volunteers and referring families and individuals for Society assistance.<sup>36</sup>

Within days, Archbishop Vaughan gave his approval and in his letter of reply referred O'Neill to the support of his Vicar-General, Dean John Sheridan.<sup>37</sup> Sheridan had been active in promoting the Society from his parish of St Francis de Sales in the Haymarket. A group of mostly young volunteers from the Haymarket had also gathered independently on 26 July 1881, proposing to form a St Francis's Conference; they met with O'Neill at a subsequent meeting on 1 August and enthusiastically welcomed his leadership. O'Neill gained two additional conferences before the end of 1881, one at St Mary's Cathedral (28 August), the other at St Benedict's Broadway (11 September) where he addressed an audience of 250 people. All four conferences were aggregated with Paris very quickly and O'Neill also received a qualified approval from Baudon to pay—in exceptional cases—the rents of poor Sydney families struggling under the threat of eviction. The reality was that O'Neill's practice here was liberal, tempering such rules with charity.<sup>38</sup>

In 1883, O'Neill presided over about sixty members and twelve honorary members within four conferences, who were relieving over two thousand cases that year.<sup>39</sup> His Society literature emphasised that the giving of alms was a

34. Utick, *Captain Charles Engineer of Charity*, 143-147.

35. Charles O'Neill to Archbishop Roger Vaughan, 25 July 1881 (copy) (Sydney: St Vincent de Paul Society Archives, Folder 29).

36. Utick, *Captain Charles Engineer of Charity*, 163-164.

37. Archbishop Roger Vaughan to Charles O'Neill, 27 July 1881 (copy) (Sydney: St Vincent de Paul Society Archives, Folder 29).

38. Utick, *Captain Charles Engineer of Charity*, 174-175.

39. St Vincent de Paul Society, *Report of the Council of Sydney, New South Wales, 24 July, 1881, to 31 December, 1883* (Sydney: Express Office, 1884), 8.

scriptural obligation with alms-giving proportionate to means. Clergy and laity were encouraged to work together in alleviating cases of distress in their midst.

Using the skills that he first learned in Glasgow, O'Neill publically promoted charity across Sydney in the name of the St Vincent de Paul Society, a point which probably inspired Nairn to describe O'Neill's service as 'resplendent'. From the humble poorbox, to charity balls, raffles, magic lantern shows, charity bazaars and entertainments—O'Neill gathered and applied all the techniques that the late nineteenth century had at its disposal for such activities.<sup>40</sup> These also supported the charitable works of religious orders, particularly a Providence Home in Cumberland Street, The Rocks, run by the Sisters of St Joseph founded by St Mary Mackillop.<sup>41</sup> Despite the financial support O'Neill was providing to her order, there is no record yet uncovered of his actually meeting her.

By January 1884, O'Neill achieved the next stage of consolidation of the Society. A Particular Council of Sydney was formed in the Inspector's Room at St Mary's Cathedral in the presence of Dr Ernest Michel, a French lawyer and member of the Society's Council-General in Paris.<sup>42</sup> Archbishop, soon to be Cardinal, Patrick Francis Moran, gave his own blessing to the Society by presiding over a meeting of the New Council in November 1884.<sup>43</sup> Thereafter, Moran provided strong support for the Society in New South Wales in its formative years. During this period, O'Neill worked well with the public authorities in representing the needs of the poor.<sup>44</sup> There is no record of him engaging in any sectarian argument.

By 1891, the final year of his Presidency of the Particular Council of Sydney, he had presided over the establishment of twenty conferences across Sydney and its suburbs, with over 310 members making 11,000 annual visits to the poor in their homes.<sup>45</sup> State politicians, aldermen and medical practitioners could be counted among the members, along with working men of the inner city. Ladies' charity associations were formed as well a conference for youth. New charity initiatives were established, such as the penny banks for children set up with the support of Le Rennetel in 1889.<sup>46</sup> Between 1881 and 1891, O'Neill

---

40. Utick, *Captain Charles Engineer of Charity*, 183-184.

41. *Ibid.*, 183.

42. St Vincent de Paul Society, *Report of the Council of Sydney, New South Wales, 24 July, 1881, to 31 December, 1883*, 5.

43. St Vincent de Paul Society, *Report of the Particular Council of Sydney, New South Wales, from 1st January to 31st December 1884* (Sydney: O'Hara & Johnson, 1885), 3.

44. In 1888, for example, O'Neill assisted the New South Wales Government's Centennial Celebration Commission in the distribution of charitable rations to Sydney's poor. See Utick, *Captain Charles Engineer of Charity*, 197.

45. St Vincent de Paul Society, *Report of the Particular Council of Sydney, New South Wales, to the Council-General in Paris for the Year 1891* (Sydney: O'Hara & Johnson, 1892), 17.

46. St Vincent de Paul Society, *Report of the Particular Council of Sydney, New South Wales, to the Council-General in Paris for the Years 1889 & 1890* (Sydney: O'Hara & Johnson, 1891), 22.

presided over the disbursement of £12,000 worth of assistance to the poor of New South Wales, in an era before unemployment relief or old age pensions.<sup>47</sup>

During that decade, O'Neill's private professional work became increasingly overshadowed by his charitable mission. During the late 1890s, he increased his devotion to St Francis of Assisi and, at the opening of the Waverley Friary in March 1891, attended as Lay Head of the Third Order of St Francis in Sydney.<sup>48</sup>

### *The Prophet of Unobtrusive Christian Charity*

The full significance of what O'Neill had done for the poor dawned only after his death through appreciation of the work and of a growing presence of the St Vincent de Paul Society in New South Wales. As the *Freeman's Journal* obituary of 1902 pointed out:

As in most undertakings that are destined to flourish, his efforts met with considerable opposition, many assuring him that there was no need for such an organisation in Australia. But with the eyes of charity he saw differently from others, who, though more worldly wise perhaps than he, had the interest of indigent humanity less at heart.<sup>49</sup>

Beginning in the 1890s, the Australian colonies experienced a major depression and significant unemployment, with many reliant on the support that voluntary charity agencies could provide. Slum suburbs were growing in inner Sydney and in 1900, bubonic plague made its appearance in Sydney's Rocks district, spreading to other parts of the city. The laypeople whom O'Neill recruited were continuing to visit the growing numbers of poor in their homes, and provide food, medicines, and blankets, as well as lodgings for the night for the homeless. O'Neill's actions were prophetic in a number of ways; his final years of living among the poor with his older brother in a cheap lodging house in 200 Cumberland Street remained a powerful symbol of solidarity with them.

Equally significant is that O'Neill championed a kind of charity that respected the dignity of the recipient and did not judge. He promoted the slogans 'the title of the poor to our commiseration is their poverty itself' and 'charity without reference to party or sect'. Several of the exhortations pasted into his Society *Manual* that had been extracted from a Roman Catholic liturgical calendar, emphasised the way that alms-giving should be practised: 'Greet

47. St Vincent de Paul Society, *Report of the Particular Council of Sydney, New South Wales, to the Council-General in Paris for the Year 1891*, 11.

48. Celsus Kelly ofm (ed.), *The Provincial Chronicle of the Holy Spirit Province Australia—New Zealand Calendar of Source Material and Chronological Epitome, Franciscan Community in Australia 1879-1905*, Volume 7, January 1953, 48; Utick, *Captain Charles Engineer of Charity*, 226.

49. See *Freemans Journal*, 12 July 1902, 25.

cheerfully the importune person who visits you. God sends him to you', and 'Do not refuse an alms which is asked of you, and give to God by giving to the poor.' Such maxims reflected O'Neill's recognition that the demands of the poor needed immediate action, and every approach from the needy demanded a response.<sup>50</sup>

The philanthropy and charity of colonial Australia experienced before and during the era of Charles O'Neill was quite different from this ideal. The colonial authorities and colonists alike had rejected anything resembling the poor laws of England that had given rise to the ignominies of the workhouse, yet discouraged any charity that would encourage dependence and create paupers.<sup>51</sup> Benevolent societies and religious missions were subsidised by the authorities, and relied heavily on the commitment of volunteers. Such philanthropic enterprises were founded on Christian principles, but instituted strict practices to avoid assisting those deemed as undeserving (that is, the less worthy). Evangelical fervour became the hard public face of charity; and recipients of charity suffered intrusion by philanthropists into their lives.<sup>52</sup> This selectivity also countered any notion of a right to assistance.<sup>53</sup> Evangelical faith-based charitable movements, providing the same kind of 'outdoor relief' as that offered by the St Vincent de Paul Society, provided assistance to the poor but often through the approach of first saving them from their vices.<sup>54</sup> All the faith-based Christian charities shared a theological understanding of the fallen state of humanity, but the evidence suggests that O'Neill promoted a more sympathetic Christian response that respected the dignity of the poor.

### ***An Enduring Outcome through Acceptance of God's Will***

Remaining correspondence and records reveal that O'Neill believed that his mission was the will of God. For example, speaking to the young volunteers of St Francis's Conference in August 1881, he observed:

It appeared to be an inspiration from Divine Providence that caused them to form this Society here in Sydney and the most wonderful part of it was that they in St Patrick's had actually formed a similar society

- 
50. A. Kelly cssr, *The Spirituality of Charles Gordon O'Neill (1828-1900): The Evidence of a Manual* (Sydney: unpublished report, St Vincent de Paul Society Archives), 29-30.
  51. For understanding this historical context see Brian Dickey, 'Why Were There No Poor Laws in Australia,' *Journal of Policy History* 4, no. 2 (1992); John Murphy, 'The Other Welfare State, Non-Government Agencies and the Mixed Economy of Welfare in Australia,' *History Australia* 3, no. 2 (December 2006). <http://www.epress.monash.edu.au/doi/full/10.2104/ha060044>; Anne O'Brien, 'Charity and Philanthropy,' *Sydney Journal* 1, no. 3 (2008), 18-28, [http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index/sydney\\_journal/index](http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index/sydney_journal/index).
  52. Stephen Garton, *Out of Luck, Poor Australians and Social Welfare 1788-1988* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1990), 52.
  53. O'Brien, 'Charity and Philanthropy,' 19.
  54. For example, in insight in the charity approach by the Sydney City Mission may be found in Malcolm Prentis, 'City of God, City of Man: Images of the Slum 1897-1911,' in Lynette Finch and Chris McConville (eds.), *Gritty Cities: Images of the Urban* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1999), 97-115.

on the same day. In this he considered that God had shown his great concern for the poor in Sydney. He ventured to predict that although at present the numbers were few there was a great future for the society.<sup>55</sup>

That prediction came true. By the time he died in 1900, the Society in New South Wales had over 31 conferences, more than 550 members and was providing assistance worth £1800 per annum.<sup>56</sup>

O'Neill's bachelor status enabled him to commit so much time to assist less fortunate families; there is also evidence in his *Manual* that he pursued a celibate life for religious reasons.<sup>57</sup> But his charitable mission was not done in isolation; both his family dependents, his sister Maria Gordon and older brother John James, were themselves supporters of the Society in Sydney.<sup>58</sup> This was the kind of model of Christian family service to the poor that the O'Neill family had undertaken in Scotland during the 1850s.

Ironically, many of the people O'Neill visited and supported were women and children abandoned by their husbands. This is reflected in a *Daily Telegraph* extract of 31 July 1886 pasted in the *Manual* by O'Neill, containing a quote attributed to a British MP John Morley from Ireland:

What more Christlike than this sentiment of Mr John Morley's 'I count that day basely passed in which no thought is given to the hard lot of garret and hovel, to forlorn children and trampled woman (sic).'<sup>59</sup>

The reference to the garret echoes another by Society founder (the now Blessed) Frédéric Ozanam: 'in climbing the stairs of the poor man's garret, sitting by his bedside, feeling the same cold that pierces him, sharing the secrets of his lonely heart and troubled mind.'<sup>60</sup> Thus, for O'Neill, the miserable world of the slums became the focal point of a practical Christian life.

The spiritual bases of O'Neill's approach to charity were prayer (to which there are numerous exhortations in the *Manual*), reflection on the examples of the saints, and humility. The *Manual* indicates that that he would have been among the first to promote Ozanam's life and works in Australia.<sup>61</sup> Faithful to

55. Thomas Dwyer, *St Francis' Conference Haymarket Minute Book 1881* (Sydney: St Vincent de Paul Society Archives.), Minutes 1 August.

56. See statistics in St Vincent de Paul Society, *Report of the Particular Council of Sydney, New South Wales, to the Superior Council of Australasia, for the year 1900* (Sydney: Boy's Home Westmead, 1901).

57. Kelly, *The Spirituality of Charles Gordon O' Neill*, 21-22. The key exhortation, pasted by O'Neill, suggesting this is: 'What the lily is among flowers, so purity is among the virtues.'

58. St Vincent de Paul Society, *Report of the Particular Council of Sydney, New South Wales, to the Council-General in Paris for the Year 1885* (Sydney: O'Hara & Johnson, 1886), 15; Utick, *Captain Charles Engineer of Charity*, 176, 225.

59. *Ibid.*, 3, 232.

60. Right Reverend Monsignor L. Baunard, *Ozanam in his Correspondence*, English translation (Dublin, Ireland: Veritas Publications, 1925), 279.

61. O'Neill's *Manual* contains an extract of an address by Cardinal Laurenzi about the 'The Illustrious Ozanam'. See Utick, *Captain Charles Engineer of Charity*, 180.

the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 6:1 about almsgiving, O'Neill avoided promenading his own charitable works and preferred to provide spiritual encouragement to his growing band of volunteers. At a testimonial dinner in 1891 attended by Society volunteers, the Catholic New South Wales parliamentarian Thomas Slattery confessed that, despite many years of friendship, he was totally unaware of O'Neill's charitable works.<sup>62</sup> O'Neill learned much about humility and acceptance of God's will from his own unusual life journey.

Tragically for O'Neill, his mission came to a sad end when in December 1891 he became embroiled in the collapse of the Northumberland Banking Company during a wave of banking failures at the beginning of the 1890s depression. As he had joined the bank as a Director a year previously, he resigned from all Society offices to protect the Society's reputation.<sup>63</sup> In February 1892, he stood trial with the other Directors and the Managing Director but was acquitted when it was revealed that he played no direct part in the bank's financial malpractice.<sup>64</sup> The Managing Director and an accomplice were found guilty, but O'Neill's naivety in business affairs was exposed and all his remaining business assets were wiped out.<sup>65</sup>

O'Neill returned to Society service a few years later at the St Patrick's Conference he had founded over a decade before. His charitable mission had seen him forgo much of his professional ambition and sacrifice his time and resources. In this context, the loss of a public reputation through business betrayal was a terrible humiliation. O'Neill's last recorded statement was that he saw in his sufferings and trials the will of the Almighty, to which one 'must bow in holy submission'.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, as he had grown older, he had also grown closer to the poor. The first liturgical calendar extract in his *Manual*, was a saying attributed to the patron of the Society, St Vincent de Paul, namely 'that those who love the poor in life shall have no fear of death.' This sentiment of St Vincent, reflecting also the promise of Jesus in Matthew 25:40, was a consolation that would outlast all his tribulations.<sup>67</sup>

### ***Conclusion: Signs of a Life of Holiness***

O'Neill's resplendent lay service, his championing of the dignity of the poor through unobtrusive charity, and his acceptance of God's will to achieve an enduring outcome for this mission, were all signs of a life of holiness. His promotion of the slogan 'charity without reference to party or sect' in an age of

---

62. Slattery's comments may be found in 'A Noble Order, Society of St. Vincent de Paul, £10,000 in Charity', *Australian Star*, 20 July 1891.

63. Utick, *Captain Charles Engineer of Charity*, 217.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*, 219.

66. 'The late Charles O'Neill M.I.C.E.', *Freemans Journal*, 17 November 1900, p.12.

67. Kelly, *The Spirituality of Charles Gordon O'Neill*, 7.

sectarian bigotry was a prophetic reminder that charity was a universal commandment by Christ to all, not to be blinded by prejudice or presumption about who is deserving or not. Further, his mission was inspirational in that he encouraged a community of charity, with the collaboration of the hierarchy, priests and laypeople working *together* to visit and serve the poor within their respective cities, towns and suburbs.

Like Caroline Chisholm, O'Neill demonstrated that Catholic laypeople in the Australian colonies could exercise an active ministry in the world, although O'Neill himself would probably not have expressed it in those terms. O'Neill's understanding of the role of laity was grounded in an earlier tradition, and his mission ended in the same year as Leo XIII issued *Rerum Novarum*. Acceptance that a layperson could have a mission is a relatively recent phenomenon in the Catholic Church, emphasised in *Lumen Gentium* 33 and *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 2.<sup>68</sup> His life and mission is an example of what *Christifideles Laici* describes as a vocation of holiness lived in the secular world, and importantly the perfection of charity.<sup>69</sup> *Christifideles Laici* also emphasises promoting the dignity of the human person, which was exemplified in O'Neill's commitment to promoting the dignity of the poor.<sup>70</sup> Important elements of O'Neill's approach towards charity can also be found in *Deus Caritas Est*—recognising the immediacy of needs and circumstances, the independence from parties or ideologies, and a pure and generous love rather than proselytism.<sup>71</sup>

He came from the Victorian age of technological progress that saw the growing pursuit of wealth, the generation of slum poverty, and an economic depression in the Australian colonies that followed the long boom between 1860 and 1890. Today, Christian laypeople throughout the developed world experience contemporary counterparts to these—overwhelming technological dominance, growing social disparity and economic uncertainty on a global scale. How in this world does one approach service to the poor, which is so central to the gospel? O'Neill's responses to what he understood to be the vicissitudes of life are both relevant to this challenge and well worthy of examination.

68. Aurelie Hagstrom, *The Emerging Laity, Vocation, Mission and Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 2010), 67. *Lumen Gentium* 33 describes the lay apostolate as a participation in the salvific mission of the Church itself; *Apostolicam Actuositatem* 2 notes that the Church is a living body, and as such has no passive parts; as with all living bodies, so too, in the body of Christ, each member is called to make his or her proper contribution to its development.

69. John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici, on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the world*, Australian edition (Homebush, Sydney: St Paul Publications, 1989), 39-45.

70. *Ibid.*, 97-100.

71. See Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est* (On Christian Love), n. 31 (Strathfield, Australia: St Pauls, 2006), 51-55; and points made by Neil Ormerod 'The Argument has Vast Implications: Part II of *Deus Caritas Est*' in Neil Ormerod (ed.), *Identity and Mission in Catholic Agencies* (Strathfield, Sydney: St Paul's Publications, 2008).