

ST. MARY'S ORPHANAGE FIRE

(From our Auckland correspondent.)

Little did the inmates of St. Mary's Orphanage think on Monday night when they retired to rest that the call in the morning would find their home in flames. Nothing is known of the cause of the outbreak, which originated certainly in the gas meter cupboard, in the children's playroom. In a small room adjoining this, Miss McGruer, a teacher on the staff, slept, to accommodate two Sisters who had come over on school business for the day. But for this arrangement, the building would in all probability have been partially destroyed and many lives lost before the fire would have been discovered. At 5 o'clock Miss McGruer was awakened by a slight noise, which she attributed to the drawing of water from the pipes, but, on looking overhead, discovered flames issuing from the wall at the head of her bed. She rushed out, and called the two Sisters in the adjoining room, who, on going to the playroom, could see nothing but the red lights of the fire between the chinks of the gas-press door. The Sister tried to open the door, but as it was evidently charred on the other side the catch refused to turn, and she then prized it open with the point of a patent extinguisher, and saw that the gas meter was aflame. The pipe leading from the meter to the wall was severed, and the walls of the cupboard were burning. By this time the gardeners and a neighbor had arrived, and though they succeeded in extinguishing the meter the fire had meanwhile got such a hold of the ceiling and walls that nothing could be done but to try and save some of the furniture. It was very dark, and as there was no light in the building save that of the fire, little could be saved. Whilst all this was being done in the playroom, the Sisters had quietly been getting their little charges down, and it was marvellous to see how quickly the children came on to the lawn in front of the doomed building. Very fortunately Right Rev. Mgr. Brodie was in residence at the cottage, and his first care was to secure the Blessed Sacrament and the sacred vessels. He then assisted the men to save some of the furniture. Isolated as it was, the fire lacked all the exciting features that are usually in evidence. There was no crowd, no noise, nothing but a group of Sisters quietly trying to save a few essentials. One tossed blankets out on to the verandahs to shelter the little one, who stood shivering in their nightdresses; another collected the account books and records, without which they might be seriously inconvenienced later on; and the rest collected the clothing from the laundry. By daybreak the boys from St. Joseph's Orphanage had arrived, and soon there was a crowd of willing helpers, who did valiant service by saving the laundry, and bathroom from burning. The Northcote Fire Brigade directed this part of the work, but the building itself, owing to its compactness, was doomed from the start. Had the telephone and fire brigade been available the fire might easily have been put out, but however much we may regret the destruction of a building that was

practically a new one, we have much to be grateful to God for that it happened at such a time, and that none of the little ones in the care of the Sisters was injured in any way.

The building was one of the finest of its kind in Auckland, and was in splendid working order. The original building had stood on St. Mary's Point, Ponsonby, where it had been erected by Mother Mary Cecilia, of the first Sisters of Mercy, in 1876. When the Gas Company purchased the ground upon which it stood, it was removed to the site at Northcote, and no expense was spared to make it a thoroughly up-to-date establishment. Mr. Watkin, the Government Inspector, who was to have examined it on Tuesday, expressed his opinion that it was the most efficient orphanage in New Zealand, and that its record was one of the best. Excellent work had been done in it for the long term of forty years, and visitors, who have seen the place since its opening at Northcote, have stated it to have been superior to anything of the kind in New Zealand. The children received an excellent education, and special training in domestic arts. It is the upsetting of the work that the Sisters regret most. Everything was in excellent working order, and after the hardships of the recent removal from Ponsonby to Northcote, they greatly regret having to face another period of unsettlement. The insurance on the building being only a little over £1000, and as it had cost nearly £4000 to remove and renovate it last year, it is a serious position for the authorities to face. The beds and bedding alone had cost over £200 last year. Sewing machines, workroom, and cookery appliances are also gone, so that though the children may be comfortably housed for the present, the work of the institute is at a complete standstill. Still the Sisters have had many assurances from Catholics and non-Catholics all over New Zealand that an appeal to the generosity of a public will not be in vain.

The best thanks of the children and Sisters are due to the Right Rev. Mgr. Brodie, whose care through all this crisis, has been truly paternal, and to the rev. manager (Father Ormond), of whom the like may be said; to Messrs Murtagh, Sullivan, and Roper, for their heroic efforts to stop the progress of the fire; and also to Mr. W. Colgan and the Maori boys, who helped so nobly on that night; and to the people of the district for their kind gifts of clothing and hospitality to Sisters and children. In that one short hour from 5 to 6 they were left homeless, but God, the Father of orphans, and our Lady of Mercy, will soon secure another home for them. For the present the children are divided into two companies—one-half with three Sisters in the gardeners' house, and the other in the house rented for them by Father Ormond at Takapuna. Expressions of sympathy have poured in from all sides, and the Sisters have been much praised for their presence of mind and skill in dealing with the children in such a crisis.

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