

# COLLOQUE

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Congregation of the Mission



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## Editorial

Two of the articles in this edition are, in different ways, reflections on experience on the missions 'ad gentes', in Tanzania and Nigeria. Though separated by a number of years, there are similar themes linking both of them. Paschal Scallon's reflection on the state of the Church in Ireland links with both, as we note the huge sea-changes that have come over the Irish Catholic experience in less than half a century.

One of the major undertakings of the Irish Province in the past five years has been the setting up of the Vincentian Refugee Centre (VRC) in Phibsboro'; we publish its annual report for 1999 in full here.

Pat Collins reflects on a Vincentian prayer and on whom we call 'our brothers and sisters' and Niamh O'Flaherty tells of her experience of 'faith family' at the World Youth Day in Rome last year. Sr Judith Greville has contributed a short and humorous story of the past and the role of the Director to the Daughters of Charity.

The obituaries of Fr John Hewson and Fr. Maurice Carbery who died early this year will be carried in the next edition but the editor's attention was drawn to a significant error in the last edition. In the obituary of John Cleary, he was listed as being appointed to St Peter's, Phibsboro', from 1970-'83 and again from 1983-'88. As those of us who had him as superior well remember, John spent the years from 1983 to 1988 in DePaul House, Celbridge, then the seminary of the Irish province.

# Tanzania

Myles Rearden CM

My five years with the International Mission Team in Tanzania passed quickly. Had they, as initially I thought they would, been extended to the end of my life, they would hardly have passed more slowly. So I find myself in a peculiar Lazarus or Rip Van Winkel situation as I write these lines: almost *sub specie aeternitatis*. Over in Tanzania, I did what I have wanted more than anything else to do with my life – help form young religious who were really keen on their vocation. Now that I have been invited to come forth, what do I see or think I see in Europe, Ireland, Maynooth?

I certainly find quite a number of people asking for my help who are as eager as anyone in Tanzania to serve God, and doing so much better than I ever did. They represent the hidden growth of the Kingdom of God which is going on all the time. But the whole culture in which they, and now I, must live this call, is strikingly inhospitable to it. Those who went to Rome for the Jubilee Youth Day seem to have come away with the same impression. The present cultural setting of the faith is, you could surely say, as bad as the time when Mark wrote his gospel: it is a struggle to live the faith where it is not much wanted.

Let me explain some of the problems as I see them:

(1) The *Anamchara* Phenomenon.

John O'Donoghue, a Galway priest ordained here in 1981, is a gifted writer and philosopher. He went abroad (to Germany) and came back preaching a new gospel to those who could afford his quite lavishly produced book, the eponymous *Anamchara*. Heidegger and Christ figure often in its pages, but their sayings are only the garnishment and not the meat of what he has written. The meat is that “all's right with the world”. At least it is if you are well educated and reasonably well off. O'Donoghue underwrites the mental status quo.

Now one thing nobody can say is, “how different it all is in Tanzania”. On the contrary, it is exactly the same in Tanzania, as far as the broad sweep of society is concerned. People struggle to keep going, and are happy to have the Church's help. The commandments are not things that require observance to any troublesome extent. The economy, and in particular the activities of the Church, plod along, thanks to massive overseas aid. This rather normal mentality accounts for, say, two thirds of the population (of all creeds), with the committed laity covering the remaining third. The general atmosphere is of *Anamchara*-type complacency, on a shoe-string, to be sure.

Granted, this complacency is not to be despised – it is vastly better than the venomous internecine strife that is its most obvious alternative. The peacefulness of Tanzania, like that of most of Ireland, is a notable boon. And if the question is whether it can last, the answer must be, let's make sure it does. Even if it is the land of the lotus-eaters we are living in, who is complaining?

Only God, it would seem. The incarnation is God coming to arouse us to a degree of passionate commitment to God's own self and to our more marginalised fellow-humans. Can God not be satisfied to leave well enough alone? The point, it would seem, is whether things are good enough. There appears to be some kind of law of nature or of economics that the *Anamchara* level of contentment is only attainable at inordinate cost to a vast majority globally and a sizeable minority nationally. Justice as fairness can only be had in exchange for a rather Spartan lifestyle. It involves coming in like Christ at a lowish rung of the economic ladder and trying, like him, to persuade those higher up to come down or at least stop climbing. The only thing that could induce any rational person to follow that strategy is a divinely inspired share in Christ's transcendent outlook and divine love for human beings. Against which, it looks to me as if we have tried to domesticate Christ with the *Anamchara* strategy, which is probably no more than the age-old Irish solution to the problem of Christianity, Pelagianism. (See Brendan Devlin's review of *Anamchara* in 'Irish Theological Quarterly', Winter, 1999.) If Pelagianism means being satisfied with what can be managed without supernatural help, the least satisfactory response to it must be the one I have just given – that it cannot work. That simply challenges people to prove the opposite. The response that Pelagianism is not the line the Son of God tells us to follow overrides the contrariness factor. Christo-centricism and grace constitute a strategy all of their own, though admittedly it helps a lot when it is seen to work in practice. If the purveyors of Christianity are lulled into complacency by their *anam-chairde*, what unit of cavalry will come riding to the rescue? The only rescue is the grace of God, which comes through sharing the crucifixion of Christ.

### *The fin-de-siècle Phenomenon*

This affects the Church, the priesthood and perhaps most of all, the Vincentians. It feels like a crossbow-man discovering that his last bolt is shot, not like a David aiming his smooth stones at Goliath. Or, as an assistant archivist might be expected to remember, it feels like the last remaining Victorine Canons of Saint Lazare may have felt as they watched the bustling and pragmatic young missionaries taking over their

priory. Only, who is now taking over? Not Catholic clergy of any stripe, but clever young writers and poets, software entrepreneurs, media-people and financial managers.

There are not too many missionaries of the new world order in Tanzania, which probably explains why the old moderately Pelagian Church is getting on quite well there. That of course would end very quickly if the country could get itself locked into the global economy, on an equal footing with the rest, as it dearly wants to be. Then maybe the Church would be marginalised as it seems to be in Ireland. Curiously, forty years ago the present Cardinal Ratzinger was remarking how marginalised the Church was in Germany (*Ministers of Your Joy*, pp. 14-17) Yet there more than anywhere the Church has found itself able to dialogue with the controlling culture. Christianity has a respected place in public life. Germany has Catholic newspapers and thinkers who are listened to, as perhaps only Sean Healy and Brid Reynolds are in Ireland. It has put behind it the scandals, far greater than ours, of compromise with National Socialism. A *fin-de-siècle* has become *debut-de-siècle*. No doubt, it all conies down to leadership, and to an extent episcopal leadership, but leadership basically, I would think, of whoever is willing to make a plan and set out courageously as well as patiently along the road. Sean Healy and Brid Reynolds owe their influence to perseverance as much as to anything else.

Nobody knows that a new dawn is breaking until the sun is quite well up. When the young schoolmaster, Julius Nyerere, switched after two years teaching to full-time political activity in the Tanganyika of the 1950s, no one knew that the “father of the nation” had been born. He himself only knew that he had embarked on a risky journey. But he had enough Catholic faith, and enough ability, and enough good-humoured perseverance to stay with his people, cajoling them, rebuking them and making them dissolve into laughter, to mould them into a modern nation. Many of his hopes have still to be fulfilled. If his priesthood was that of the laity, he utilised it to the full. Vincent was a ministerial priest, and he too earned the title “father of the nation”. They both give some idea of what can be achieved by people of faith who put their hands to the plough and don’t look back.

#### *The sacerdotium aeternum*

It begins to look as if there is some kind of correlation between the Constantinian Church and a highly clericalised one. Now that all religions are legal provided they do not advocate outrageous practices, and few countries have officially established religions, spiritual leaders do not command any greater degree of public esteem than teachers or

prominent business-people, at the most. They are needed for internal church purposes rather than for public purposes. In other words they are needed for initial evangelization and on-going pastoral care. Hasn't religion been reduced largely to rites of passage?

To a considerable extent the issues of the gender and marital status of the leaders of the Church have been overtaken by the decline of the ordained ministry. The situation that seems to be returning is that which Paul saw as the typical condition of the apostles: "Sometimes we are honoured, at other times insulted, we receive criticism as well as praise. We are regarded as liars although we speak the truth; as unknown although we are well known, as dead and yet we live... (2Cor 6:8ff). Was there, in fact, a kind of anti-apostolicism? in the Pauline churches to match the anti-clericalism of today? If there was, being an apostle like Paul himself, or having an apostolic ministry like his numerous assistants, must have been rather a clear-cut position. What were the positive elements in the litany Paul gives of the positive and negative aspects of his role? Perhaps something to do with the apostles' closeness to Christ, as the original twelve were called to be "with him", and perhaps with their representing the integrity of the good news and the world-wide unity of the Church. It was their task to urge the entire body of the faithful to be faithful, and thus to constitute the body of Christ.

Nevertheless, for many administrative purposes these apostles must have been under the authority of local church elders or householders. At their most imposing, they would have resembled the parish clergy of a medium sized Irish town. Often they may have looked more like the hunted and impoverished priests of penal times in Ireland than us, their comparatively well-off successors. They must have been markedly different from ordinary lay Christians, otherwise Paul's long list of contrasts would have made no sense – real "chosen ones" or "holy ones" inasmuch as they represented the person of Christ in a unique way, but enjoying no other kind of prestige.

That was not the kind of priesthood that figured in Vincent Depaul's original career plans. But it is probably close enough to the priesthood he ultimately came to exercise, and which his followers aimed at. It can hardly be doubted that at any time and in any place people who can be credibly presented as acting in "the person of Christ" would find a substantial niche to fill in society, no matter how post-Christian it became: like Sean Healy. And they would certainly encounter great opposition, as he does. The rigorism of the Pelagianism of long ago would not sit easily with their role of representing Christ, but neither would the easygoing modern version I talked about above.

Philip Murnion has a discussion of today's priesthood which catches very well how the priesthood must be different from, while being



utterly at one with, lay Christianity (“Common Ground, Holy Ground: A Ministry of Grace and Communion”, in *Priesthood in the Modern World*, 1999). He points to the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago as exemplifying what he means, and concludes: “I believe the fidelity of priests in pastoral ministry will be counted as the assurance of continuity in what was an age of discontinuity. It will be seen that the priest in pastoral ministry maintained the tradition and adapted to the present, provided for daily demands and laid the ground for the opportunities of the future.” It is what a Lazarus or a Rip Van Winkel might do, if he was a priest and actively rather than contemplatively minded. Would any Vincentian want to do more, or less, either here or in Tanzania?

# Beginnings

Bill Clarke CM

*Written in 1986*

The first book I ever read was *The Coral Island* by R.M. Ballentyne. It so fascinated me as a boy of eight or nine years old that when I finished the last page I turned back to the first and read it all over again. I lived on that tropical island with Ralph, Jack and Peterkin. I explored its interior forests and jungle. I tasted its coconuts, breadfruit and bananas. I swam in that azure lagoon among the exotically coloured fish and marine plants. All a far cry from becoming a missionary, though our town had a very strong African connection through the Legion of Mary missionary, Edel Quinn. She worked as a pioneering lay-missionary in East Africa and died in Nairobi in 1944. Kanturk, Co. Cork, the place of her birth, decided to honour her by building the Edel Quinn Memorial Hall. The concrete blocks for this Hall were being manufactured in the yard of the National School when I was a pupil there in the early '50s. (1)

What makes a man or woman leave home and country and come into the land that the Lord will show? This is the mystery of the personal relationship of each individual with God. For me, and I suppose for all Catholic missionaries, the call echoes through the Church to which we belong. Again, for most, the first echoes begin to sound in the domestic church of the family. People, events, places; we are so influenced by them all, especially in those early years of childhood when our picture of the world begins to form inside us.

Kanturk at that time was certainly a very Catholic place. Everybody seemed to go to mass on Sundays and Holydays: it felt as normal a part of life as eating potatoes. Many families, including my own, recited the Rosary every night. The Sacred Heart Confraternities for men and women packed the Church for their hour-long meetings once a month. More important was the warm, friendly atmosphere (non-violence in the air!) in both town and country. As a child you were welcomed easily into houses, many of which left their doors, or half-doors, open all day. I remember one day being given a slice of bread with sugar on top of the butter and I thought this was the sweetest thing I had ever tasted.

About 1950 or '51, three Dominican priests came to give a mission and the town responded wholeheartedly to the call. One of the three, Fr. F. Hamilton Pollock had spent the war-years as a chaplain to the RAF and had written a book about his exploits called *Wings on the Cross*. His

preaching caused a great stir in Kanturk. Very little else was talked about except the mission. All kinds of religious articles were to be bought at a special booth in the church grounds. It was the month of May – all was fervour and enthusiasm. No wonder that the thoughts of many boys and girls turned towards the priesthood and the religious life. Our religion gave meaning and purpose to every other aspect of life. And in our little world, everybody seemed agreed on that.

Meanwhile year by year I continued reading any adventure books that came my way: *Treasure Island*, *Peter the Whaler*, *Old Jack*, *Masterman Ready*, and American books by Mark Twain, Louisa M. Alcott and Harriet Beecher Stowe. I had become an altar-boy, serving Mass in the parish Church and often getting up too late and missing my duty. My father said to me one day that if I wasn't going to get there on time I should give it up. Somehow I held on, but secretly I wanted to become a sailor and explore those fascinating continents outside Europe where fierce typhoons lashed the coastal villages and whales broke the swelling surface of the ocean.

Having a strong imagination led me to my first clear call to the priesthood through the images of the cinema screen. When I was about eleven years old I saw the film of Liam O'Flaherty's book, *The Informer*. Neither the book nor the film would normally be called religious, but they are both flavoured with a deep compassion for the poor which is a feature of O'Flaherty's work as it is also of the four gospels. I thought that if I became a priest I could help the poor. That was how the film helped to focus me into seeing how I could commit myself personally to the gospel.

About that time a missionary of the Columban Fathers came to our school. He spoke of overthrowing devil-worship in China, but that didn't attract me very much. He also re-told the gospel story of Jesus calling the fishermen on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Afterwards a group of us discussed this very intensely in the school yard, some saying 'yes' and others 'no'. The only decision I made was to buy the Columban magazine, *The Far East*, at a cost of 3d per copy. The magazine has now been jazzed up a lot, but in those days it always carried the same Chinese junk on the cover, always the calm sea and the undefined horizon. For years it arrived regularly at our house and I sometimes looked at the photographs, sometimes read part of it and sometimes left it there unopened. But somehow the ideas of priesthood, adventure, missions, helping the poor – all these merged in such a way that the only kind of priesthood that attracted me was the missionary kind.

By the age of fourteen, I had read the life of St. Francis Xavier which I won as a prize in a Wheel of Fortune at a convent bazaar. Xavier

seemed the ideal man; a good athlete, an intelligent and popular student, a great adventurer and a fearless missionary in India, Indonesia and Japan. While I admired him greatly, I also began to fear the sacrifices of this kind of life, fearing my own weakness, unworthiness and unsuitability. In my second-last year in school I prayed against my vocation, but it didn't work! I was helped by some of the priests in Castleknock to see that I would know no happiness unless I gave it a try. So in this frame of mind I entered the Vincentian Seminary in Blackrock, Co. Dublin on September 3rd 1958.

### *Answering a cry of distress*

In the seminary years, even as I tramped the streets of Hull in Northern England with the Legion of Mary, events were taking place about 4,000 miles away that were to land me in a very different mission territory a few years later. Already in that spring of 1966 the Republic of Nigeria had begun to feel the tensions, the anger and the bitterness that were to spill over into the civil war that became known to the world as the Biafran War. As in all wars the innocent populations in the path of the fighting suffered evacuation, refugee camps, hunger and the death of the weakest members, the children, the old and the infirm. All the Christian missions did their best to relieve the distress that surrounded them. In the Biafran area itself those foreign missionaries still working there at the end of the war were rounded up, tried and deported from the city of Port Harcourt.

This city and diocese of Fort Harcourt presented a serious problem to the catholic Church. Its bishop had been transferred to another diocese and it could boast of only one diocesan priest who belonged to it. At the end of the war three Nigerian priests on loan from other dioceses were working there, but the harvest was great and the labourers few so a request went out to the Vincentians in Ireland. After discussion with his Council our provincial decided to ask two others and myself to give a year to helping this weakened diocese. My two companions, Frs. Padraig Regan and Frank Murphy, knew about it before I did and both had said yes. I felt completely bowled over when they told me about the proposal. It came as a total surprise, a shock, a thrill of excitement. Suddenly my childhood dreams were to be fulfilled in a way I never expected.

Things didn't work out quite so smoothly, however. We had to wait in a limbo of uncertainty for seven months before two visas came through, Padraig Regan's and mine. Frank Murphy had to wait a further year. Having a name like Murphy wasn't a great advantage. Any list of Irishmen is bound to contain a few Murphys and the list of deported

priests was mostly Irish. A lot of oaths had to be sworn to prove that our Frank was not one of the deported ones but another man of the same name. Pádraig Regan and I landed at Lagos airport in March 1971 and were met by Roderic Crowley, who had moved into Port Harcourt diocese about a year previously. We spent the night at the airport hotel and the following day we drove through the rather monotonous plantation-country of Western Nigeria. As we neared the Niger river the military check-points grew in number. We got a thorough checking at the Niger bridge (half-repaired) and once across it we had entered the former Biafran Republic, now divided into three states in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Soon we were driving along Uli airstrip which formed part of the main road. On one side of the road we saw the wreckage of several planes which had crashed during the war and were now being guarded carefully by soldiers of the Nigerian Army. On through many more check-points until darkness fell and it got a bit scary approaching the armed soldiers in the dark. We were all very glad to see the lights of Port Harcourt and to reach the safety of our little mission-house.

In the next few days we met the four Nigerian priests in the diocese and about a fortnight later an Irishman drove up and introduced himself as James Masterson, a Holy Ghost Father who had worked in the diocese before the war and had just returned to start off again. As he was the only Irish Holy Ghost Father to return to Port Harcourt he used to refer to himself as 'Oisín í ndiaidh na Féinne' (Oisín after the Fianna). In the Irish legend, Oisín had gone off to the land of youth and when he came back a few hundred years later he met St. Patrick but all his warrior companions of the Fianna were long since dead. So Port Harcourt now had eight priests, four Nigerian and four Irish with an administering bishop, Dominic Ekandem, (later Cardinal) who came down from his own diocese of Ikot Ekpene whenever he could. Small in number certainly, we never went above eight priests for the next two years and when some went on leave or suffered illnesses we dropped below it. Before the war the diocese had been staffed by forty-two priests who were involved in fourteen parishes, a Junior seminary and a system of primary and secondary schools now taken over by the Government. The rural parishes contained anything from twenty to fifty villages each and though the Catholic population had been greatly reduced by the departure of so many Igbo people from the area, we were still faced with a fairly bewildering task.

What a change for me from my previous work in a boarding-school in Ireland where we had 14 priests for 400 students; nothing so very unusual by Irish standards. Our fewness of numbers in Port Harcourt gave a fresh sense of importance to everything we did: every Mass celebrated, every confession heard, every sermon preached, every

village visited, every religion-class taught, every candidate prepared for Baptism, Confirmation or Holy Communion. Each Sunday morning we disappeared in different directions to celebrate the Mass with two or three different communities, knowing that there were no substitutes lined up on the bench: either *you* got there or there wouldn't be any Mass. It soon occurred to me that no matter how much we rushed around, most of the rural villages wouldn't have a Sunday Mass anyway because there were far too many of them and far too few of us. But for the moment it seemed very important to encourage our people, and assure them that the departure of their former priests didn't mean that they were totally abandoned. We could rise again from the bitter ashes of the civil war.

Being so few in number we naturally found ourselves pulled in many different directions, trying to answer all the calls being made on us and wondering where best to concentrate our efforts. Our energies quickly evaporated in the humid climate of the tropical rain-forest but we tried our best to bring life back into the parishes and at the same time build for the future. Our bishop saw the hope of the future in the Junior Seminary which he re-opened even though the Nigerian Army occupied most of the buildings. Time has proved him right. A number of these students who started in '71 have now become priests of the diocese.

My own first year was divided between the Seminary and the parishes. In the Seminary, which was the only Catholic school in the diocese, we formed a little educational and spiritual community surrounded by the soldiers, some of whom proved quite sympathetic to our cause. But when I went to visit the towns of the Niger Delta, I entered completely unfamiliar territory. The first white men came here as traders, adventurers and dealers in human cargo. The 'Slave Coast', it was sometimes called, and also the 'White Man's Grave'. Thus the old doggerel verse:

The Bight of Benin,  
The Bight of Benin,  
'Tis few that come out  
Though many go in.

A vast network of creeks and rivers crossed and recrossed in every direction between mangrove swamps and small islands which supported gigantic trees. In its later history the area became a centre of the palm-oil trade, called at the time 'legitimate trade' to distinguish it from slaving. Then some of the oil companies made strikes in the early 1960s so that Port Harcourt grew into a centre of the oil industry.

Travelling in the riverine areas I got used to spending 3 or 4 hours in a canoe, getting out at our destination and walking up the sandy streets

of an island town where few if any motor cars were to be seen. Up to the priest's house at Abonnema, for instance, a house that had been preserved from looting during the civil war by the vigilance of the local Catholic community and the presence of a Sierra-Leonian night-watchman. The priest himself had withdrawn at the approach of the Federal troops. His sunken boat lay rotting in a narrow channel beside the house, his photograph album kept a vivid record of youthful scouting trips and picnics in the Dublin mountains. It felt like taking over the possessions of a dead man.

What life could we bring here? Our Catholic communities had become pitifully small and had depended mainly on the school system now dismantled. Most of the Igbo Catholics had left our area and returned to their birthplaces further north. Where should we begin to build now? Especially when we reached these places only once in three months or so. The problem nagged at me a lot as I made my rounds, celebrating the Mass and the sacraments, encouraging people preparing for baptism and being in turn encouraged by one particular village who had just finished a Church building and asked me to come and bless it. What a great effort on their part, since they were only about twenty in number and poorly instructed in the faith. The grace of God showed itself in the most unexpected places.

Near that village I remember celebrating a Mass with a group who were mostly not baptised nor instructed in the faith. I could sense their lack of understanding, their curious gaze at the chalice, the wine, the little white wafers of bread. But why were they here? I had nothing to offer them in terms of schooling or material advancement. They must have some interest in the gospel. They didn't know much but they wanted to find out. Who would teach them? In the whole diocese there was only one catechist who had undergone a course of training. A few others had learned a lot from working a long time in a parish, but there were so many villages and some of them so scattered from each other. And even if someone taught them about the Mass and Holy Communion, they might only experience the celebration once every four months or so. In European parishes people would be shocked and angered if they were deprived of Sunday Mass. This is a very large and touchy issue to which I will return at a later time.

We couldn't complain of shortage of work, but the over-busy man sometimes gets a bit muddled in the head and forgets his prayers in the rush. Not always, of course. I know a very busy Franciscan sister who prays for three hours every day and her deep prayer-life makes her busier because people want her to pray with them and for them and to speak far and wide about the following of Jesus. For myself at that time I did not see things as clearly as my companion, Padraig Regan. He devoted

a lot of his time to training and teaching his catechist, showing him how to prepare classes for the children and supervising his teaching. Clearly he placed greater value on forming another evangelizer than on trying to do everything himself. Years after we both had passed from the scene that catechist was still working away and he may still be working today. While I agreed with what my companion was doing I did little of it myself – due to a muddled sense of values, or lack of organisation, or lack of appreciation of catechists – still seeing the priest as the complete evangelizer, in spite of my Legion of Mary experience. I have often been quick enough to criticise this fault in other priests but there is no doubt that I suffered from it myself too. I did sense this failure on my part but only once did I do anything very constructive about it. That was to participate in giving a course for catechists and Church leaders whom we assembled for a week in the Seminary while the students were away on holidays.

So much seemed to happen in those first two years that it seemed as if a life's work was telescoped into them: Sunday Mass in the prison followed by the parish Mass and various meetings. After a bite to eat I sometimes took off for the river and spent the afternoon voyaging down to one of the delta towns to celebrate an evening Mass; praying with patients of all religions in the wards of the General Hospital, (with Romanus particularly, dying of cancer far from his native village); helping with development projects such as providing sewing machines and carpentry tools for the prison work-shops; helping individuals to move along another step in the discovery of Christ as with a lorry-driver who told me he was teaching the catechism to his mate when they stopped on their journeys; experiencing the heart-felt devotion of the people at the Stations of the Cross on 'the Fridays of Lent; celebrating our feasts and our friendship with fellow-missionaries with singing, guitar-playing and similar entertainment ('the crack'); suffering the irritating stings of many insects, seen and unseen, and the illnesses that sometimes followed.

The climate itself moved between extremes of heavy, rain-filled humidity to stunning mid-day heat, to tropical thunder-storms of frightening intensity. The nights provided a peaceful contrast to the sweat and struggles of the days. You could sit outside the house relaxing, listening to music, watching the moon and the stars, chatting and sipping a beer or playing cards. Our lives, like the climate, seemed to move on a level of intensity from great joys to deep disappointments and set-backs. The Lord tested us very severely at times (telling us that this was his work rather than ours?) It was hard for us to understand why we should have suffered the loss of James Masterson for about nine months through breaking his leg very badly in several places, but the very day he arrived



back in the diocese we had a new priest ordained, Fr. Charles Agu, only the second indigenous priest in Port Harcourt.

At times it seemed a wonderful thing to be a priest where priests were in such short supply, but at other times we asked each other why our diocese should have been left like this? On Christmas evening of '71, five or six of us got together for dinner and a few songs and stories, but we couldn't help feeling isolated and far from home where, to our view of things, priests were competing with each other for work. Roderic Crowley actually wrote a letter that very evening to a religious community describing our little Christmas gathering and asking them whether they might be able to send labourers into our particular vineyard. He read the letter to us that night and we all agreed it should be sent. Some time later we received an answer in the negative. Another religious community replied to the bishop's invitation saying they didn't intend coming to the diocese because there were not as many Catholics now as before the war. The bishop's comment was, 'I thought this was supposed to be a mission. What about all the people who do not know Christ?'

We all carried on in our parishes and other works, each feeling the strain in his own way, until in the beginning of 1973, St. Patrick's Society (the Kiltegan Fathers) began to send priests to the diocese. By February we had risen above eight priests and we never sank below that number again.

In July of that year, I boarded a plane for home. I felt very weak from the effects of a fever I had recently suffered, but as I saw the palm trees get smaller and smaller beneath us I thought that, even if I never came back, it was worth it being a priest in Port Harcourt for those two and a half years.

### *Public Executions*

I think it was sometime during the Biafran War that the Nigerian government decreed the penalty for armed robbery to be death by public execution. This penalty remained in force for years afterwards and we had special cells in Port Harcourt prison to house the condemned prisoners. These men were not allowed to join their fellow-prisoners for the celebration of Sunday Mass or Service in the prison chapel, but the prison chaplain could celebrate in the corridor outside their cells on weekdays at specified times.

During my time as prison chaplain we used to celebrate the Mass on an old packing-case which had just enough room to hold the chalice, paten, small book and candles. We sweated in the intense heat in the enclosed conditions under a zinc roof which had no ceiling or insulation under it. In spite of the rough and ready conditions, however, the

prisoners threw themselves fully into the celebration and sang every hymn with great gusto. Our catechist always brought hymn-books along, *Ancient and Modern*, the most popular one in Nigeria. From this they always selected a hymn whose first verse went:

Guide me, O Thou great Redeemer,  
 Pilgrim through this barren land.  
 I am weak but thou art stronger;  
 Help me with thy guiding hand.  
 Strong Redeemer, strong Redeemer,  
 Feed me ever with thy bread. (Repeat last 2 lines).

I may not have that word-perfect, but I certainly remember how our choir-leader, an Anglican, used to imitate the notes of an organ in order to give us the first line of the music. Usually we consisted of six prisoners, the catechist and myself – with a prison guard looking on. The other prisoners who were either Moslems or something else used to listen very respectfully to our celebrations. And it wasn't long before they were all personally brought face to face with the mystery of death.

I returned from a long journey one night to find a letter stamped *SECRET* and other official markings. When I opened it I learned to my dismay that 14 condemned prisoners were to be executed publicly at the Recreation Grounds on the following day. As Catholic chaplain I was required to attend and minister to my people.

The following morning news of the executions spread like wildfire through the city and since it was a Saturday, a lot of people were off work and the crowds began to flock to the place of execution which was a large field where football was sometimes played. I was clearly aware of a conflict within myself, hating the thought of the executions and at the same time wanting to be with the men I had come to know from our prison Masses. In the pocket of my white soutane I carried a small bottle of water and a pyx with four Holy Communions in it. I walked towards the field with a certain grim determination to do my duty no matter how disgusted I felt. When I reached the field I could hear above the general buzz of conversation from the large crowd, the clear sound of hymn-singing. It came from a prison-van where the condemned men were being held before being led out to be chained to 14 stakes placed in a line at one end of the field. A troop of soldiers waited around to be formed up as a firing-squad. An Anglican chaplain with some assistants was getting ready to give a service of readings and prayers. He asked me to join in the service and I agreed, but when I saw the men actually chained up to the stakes and when I saw the press reporters pushing the microphones of their tape-recorders up to the mouths of the prisoners, I decided that

they would never be able to listen to a combined service given for the whole 14 of them spread out in a long line. So I went up to each one individually to listen, to talk and to pray with them.

I heard the confessions of the two who were baptised Catholics and I baptised the two who were catechumens. For this I used the water from the bottle I had brought in my pocket. Then I took out the pyx and gave Holy Communion to all four. In those final moments I felt very glad of those prison Masses we had celebrated together. A bond had been forged between us which was now proving stronger than death itself; "O death, where is thy victory?" I was able to remind them that Jesus himself was publicly executed between two thieves and when one of them said, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom," he had replied, "Truly, I say to you, this day you will be with me in paradise." The Holy Communion they had received gave them a foretaste of the heavenly feast they would shortly enjoy.

After that I went and prayed with the others, including the Moslems. Then I returned to join the Anglican chaplain and his assistants in their service until we were ushered back to allow the firing-squad to get into position. I noted the perspiration on the faces of the soldiers, the strained expression on their faces which seemed to say, 'we would much prefer to have nothing to do with this business of shooting people in cold blood.' When the black hoods were put over the heads of the condemned men I withdrew, not wishing to see the bullets and the blood.

For some years after this I felt very reluctant to speak about these executions and, even writing as I have above, I felt some embarrassment about appearing as a hero-priest. The truth is that I have never quite got over why God had wanted to choose me for that hour and that moment. It was nothing to do with being Bill Clarke and everything to do with being a Catholic priest. And if I have written about it now it is because I have been asked and encouraged more than once by very sincere followers of Jesus to tell this story so that God might be glorified. It is all about how God uses us in the weakness of our human condition to carry his divine realities through the simple waters of baptism, the words of prayer and forgiveness and the food of Holy Communion. It is about the commitment of one person to the other in the Church, the basis of any Church structure, without which we would never maintain thousands of missionaries in the work. It is about putting all that at the service of bringing the love of Jesus near and far, so that the fires of the kingdom may be kindled from one end of the earth to the other. Mind you, I met at least one man who certainly did not see me as a hero. We were both sitting on the roof of a passenger-boat going from Port Harcourt to Bonny about a week after the executions. He turned and said to me quite abruptly, 'I don't so much like to see these photographs of Reverend Fathers praying

with the armed robbers at their execution.’ (My own photo had appeared in the papers exactly like this.) He continued, “Those men should have their bodies thrown into the river to be eaten by the vultures.”

### *On the Niger Delta*

When I went back to Port Harcourt after my home leave in 1973, I was appointed to the Junior Seminary. In August of the following year, one of the St. Patrick’s priests asked me to help out by spending a week visiting stations (villages where we had a Catholic community) in the rivers’ area. With the help of two junior seminarians, Joseph and Cletus, I gathered my materials for the trip: camp-bed, air-pillow mattress, mosquito-net, blankets, sheets, pillow, food (tinned and other) purified water, changes of clothing, washing and shaving gear, a pair of Wellingtons, anti-malarial tablets (2 paludrine a day) and a strong metal box containing the materials for celebrating Mass. We packed all this lot into my Citroen *deux-chevaux* and set off together for the village where we planned to leave the car and take to canoes and walking. All went smoothly until we got to about 100 yards of the house where we intended to leave the car. The tarred road had expired and we sank deeper and deeper into the mud. We shoved and pushed and lifted – to no avail. We begged some passers-by for help and at first they demanded money but when assured that I was a priest and not an oil-company man (oil-wells are very plentiful in the area), they agreed to lift and shove us out of the mud.

The Catechist, Justus, found us there, all splattered with mud and wet with perspiration, a good earthy mixture. He had no difficulty in recognising me as a priest. He had seen many priests in shirt and shorts before, coming up out of the mud after pushing their cars. For the next six days this Justus, a big, friendly man, led us from village to village as we went further and further from tarred roads, electricity, piped water and all the normal props that sustain the white man or woman from day to day. We travelled mainly by canoe but sometimes we had to get out and walk through the high, dark forest to find another creek that would bring us in the direction we wanted to go. When that happened, all my boxes had to be unloaded from the canoe and carried on the heads of our various helpers – what a lot of stuff I had! Justus went swinging along the path ahead of me with his small travelling-bag probably containing only a change of shirt, a towel, a bar of soap and a Bible.

I wondered whether at that moment I could have explained to Justus that I had taken a vow of poverty? But I had a car, didn’t I? No poor person ever possessed his own car. To myself, I seemed very poor walking those remote pathways, but why was I carrying a bed around?

Or, more accurately, why were other people carrying it around for me? Justus would be quite happy to sleep on a bed, but he would also be happy to sleep on a mat. As things turned out I used my bed only one night. The other nights I was given a bed in peoples' houses. But my eyes were opened to see how our culture trains us to depend on being surrounded by possessions, gadgets, entertainment, money – we are the acquisitive society. On our trip we saw river people in large canoes with a thatched shelter in the middle, often pulled into the bank and cooking or washing. They can live for weeks like that, catching fish and trading in the towns and villages they come to. How easily we judge a man to be more important because he has a bigger house, a bigger car, more land, more money, more titles or degrees than others. Jesus challenged all that by his way of life and by saying effectively, “the most important person is not the person who possesses most but the person who loves most.” And the only way to cope with love and possessions is to share what we have, to invite the poor to our table and to get rid of anything that stands in the way of loving all our brothers and sisters, especially the most outcast.

A jumble of reflections like this passed through my mind as we travelled on, stopping at the appointed villages to celebrate Mass and tell the people about the prayer called ‘Our Father’. Some of the people who attended knew the prayer but most didn’t. This was fairly basic stuff. Without Justus, of course, I would have been completely lost. He interpreted the Mass and the sermon into the local language until we went too far south-eastwards and out of the area where his dialect of Ijaw was spoken. Even with these difficulties, however, I got great encouragement the very first night after celebrating Mass when an old woman came up to me and said she wanted to get rid of what are called ‘juju’ from her house. She didn’t want to offer sacrifices to spirits any more. She wanted to entrust her life to the Lord. I still pray and hope that she will receive further guidance along the gospel path.

On our third day at the village of Akiplai we couldn’t get a volunteer to paddle the canoe so Justus had to plead with them at some length. Meanwhile I sat by the side of the creek watching the water flow out in the direction we intended to take and watching men cook some fish by just throwing them on the burning logs and taking them off when they thought the job was done. Finally a powerful low-sized woman – I think her name was Mary – agreed to come with us and we loaded our things into the canoe and set off just as the water began to fill up in the creek again, the current having turned strongly against us now. The woman sat in the bow and paddled steadily with a tireless rhythm, sometimes humming a little tune to herself. Justus wasn’t so happy about having to paddle but his deep strokes moved us powerfully forward and the two

seminarians and I also took turns at the paddle. Our spirits rose as we all joined in the task and saw ourselves making progress down the river. We started about 11.30 a.m. and were still on the water when darkness fell at 7.00 p.m. We had passed from narrow creeks to broad rivers and into narrow creeks again and we gave a cheer when we made a left (port!) turn into a different creek and found the current flowing with us. The creeks are tidal but it would take a rare genius with a lot of time on his hands to work out the ebb and flow of currents through the thousands of creeks and rivers of the delta. The fishermen themselves don't seem to bother much about that. If the current is running very strongly against them, they simply tie up to a tree on the bank until it changes direction. Of course they live in larger spaces of time than we do.

None of us felt very comfortable about being still on the water in the dark, though Justus assured us we didn't have far to go. Sure enough about half an hour later the lights of Nembe, some of them electric, appeared first through the trees and then softly dancing on the tiny wavelets of the creek. I felt very relieved to come in out of the dark and leave the forests and swamps to the millions of insects, birds and reptiles who took for their natural environment what to me seemed transformed by the darkness into a hostile, noisy, frightening place. If we had just tied up at night as the fishing people do, I would surely have been bitten alive by insects and I would hardly have gotten a wink of sleep thinking of snakes coming on board the canoe. After such a long time in the cramped space of the little canoe I appreciated the firmness of the land and slept soundly in a friendly house on a good bed covered by a mosquito-net. The next day we celebrated Mass as a little group and were joined by only three or four people from the town. Although I felt quite disappointed at the poor attendance after our long journey to reach the place, I knew at the same time that there were very few Catholics living here. The Anglican Church had been established solidly since the last century in the time of the Nigerian Anglican bishop, Samuel Crowther. Of the few Catholics we had, some were reported as having travelled away on business and others that they didn't know we were coming (even though word had been sent ahead of us.) If this had been my own parish I'm sure I would have felt the disappointment more keenly, but I was still at the stage of looking around like a tourist and trying to appreciate the life of this place, so different from what I was used to myself. Still I wondered how the priests who worked in this area felt about the uphill struggle they were involved in. Quite a few people in the villages seemed interested in the Church, but they really needed good catechists to instruct them.

From this town of Nembe, one of the old centres of the palm-oil trade, we made the long canoe-journey back again, more confidently

this time – we were old hands. Justus told stories about the locality and we found ourselves laughing a lot at fairly silly things. He told us how a man from his village got caught in a rain-storm on his way back from Nembe. To his delight he saw shelter ahead – a *juju* shrine. Having no fear of that particular spirit he just hopped in. In doing this he showed that a man from Western Ijaw did not have to fear any spirits from this region. Justus found this very amusing. “He took permission,” said Joseph, the seminarian (as if a white person were to say, “Excuse me, please, Mr. Spirit, I’m just sheltering from this dreadful rain!”)

The mood of relaxation spread to all of us as we felt happy to have reached the farthest point of our journey, to have visited the places we were supposed to visit and to be getting nearer to our parked car with every pull of the paddles. We dropped our woman-paddler at her own village and made it to another village before dark. Two mornings later we reached our last village and after Mass we said goodbye to Justus and he set off to walk for six hours through the winding forest paths to his own home. We got into a canoe for the last leg of our journey back to the car.

### *A People’s Church*

A Church leader in every village, a catechist in every area, suitable courses of formation and education for them – these ideals most of us subscribed to, but how to achieve them? With our limited opportunities we did a certain amount in Port Harcourt. Then, in September 1975, I found myself suddenly removed from that scene altogether and plunged into this very work of forming and educating catechists and leaders in the diocese of Makurdi about three hundred miles to the north. The bishop of Makurdi, Donal Murray CSSp, had set up two catechetical centres and the one I went to was situated in the rural village of Ogobia where three other Vincentian priests were already living.

We held courses of formation in the Centre and from the start I tried to base all my teachings on the Scripture. The Bible itself became our basic textbook. We often discussed how the Word of God applied to the daily life and culture of the people. In the matter of daily life and culture I took a back seat and let the catechists teach me. We became a praying and worshipping community and I saw the power of their word and witness among their own people, particularly when I went out from the Centre to visit them in their parishes and do some special work their parish priests had asked for.

On one occasion, in March 1976, a priest asked me to give a course to a group of Church leaders who would gather for five days at a central village called Odum. Early March in that region is the time of year when

the hot season builds up to its stunning climax as man, beast and insect await the first electric storm and the first fall of life-giving rain after five months of scorching drought. As soon as the first decent rain falls all the farmers (including the Church leaders in the rural areas who are all farmers) will get out to their farms and start working like beavers to plant the first crops, man and wife usually working as partners in this operation. So our course at Odum was planned to take place before the first rain would fall.

Following the instructions of the priest, I drove to the railway-line and was met there by a group of boys and young men on bicycles who guided me to the place where I was to park the car under the deep shade of a large mango tree. My luggage, or loads, as they are called, was distributed among the groups of Church members who had met me, but instead of taking to a canoe I took to the bicycle provided for me. A guide cycled ahead of me along narrow winding paths through intensely cultivated farms which resemble market-gardens to the European eye., no machinery at all being employed. After about three miles we reached the Church at Odum which wasn't much more than a thatched roof held up by wooden supports. For walls it had palm-fronds and other sticks stuck into the ground and intertwined With one another. We entered this simple Church and my luggage was deposited at the back. Then one man took out a knife and began to cut holes in the mud floor of the Church. Into these he placed palm-fronds in a line parallel to the back 'wall' and about two yards from it. As I watched him do this I slowly realised that he was making a cubicle for me where I would place my camp-bed and the rest of my worldly goods. But what about snakes? This was my first thought. I could easily imagine them coming at me through the flimsy palm-fronds, but I kept these imaginings to myself since there was obviously no other place set aside for me to stay. Anyway if I was to die of snake-bite, what better time to go than 'on the mission'?

While my lingering fears remained, I soon had plenty of other things to think about as the Church leaders began to arrive on bicycles. Other people came with them too. I was glad to see one man I knew well, Michael, the chief catechist of the area. He had completed his course of formation at our Centre and was to be my right-hand man during this course at Odum as well as interpreting from English into the local language. Because the parish was so big, Michael had a lot of responsibility in his area and he was well able to give from his own knowledge and faith. With Michael's help then, I set about giving a series of sessions on basic topics: God, creator and saviour of Israel; Jesus, Son of God in human flesh; the Church as a community of followers of Jesus; the meaning of each of the sacraments as moments when we celebrate in visible signs God's saving action with us now. In each session we



sang, prayed, read from the Bible and put up a picture to illustrate the topic spoken about. Every day we held a practical session for which the leaders had to prepare and perform a Sunday Service. The reason for this is that most villages have no priest on Sundays so the leader must either take the Service himself or supervise someone else taking it (if the leader himself happens to be illiterate, for example.)

All of this may strike the European or North American person as very strange. He or she is used to being urged by priests and laws of the Church to go to Mass every Sunday. In a big city people ask themselves, "Will I go to the Jesuits or the Carmelites today – or maybe I should go to the local parish Church?" In the scattered villages of Northern Nigeria no such choice is available so we were trying to see that a Sunday Service of prayers, readings and hymns would be given with as much understanding and faith as possible.

Unfortunately this same lack of a Eucharistic celebration exists in very many parts of what is called the Third World, leaving the desire of the Vatican II bishops quite unfulfilled.

Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people, 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people' (1 Peter 2:9, 4-5) have a right and obligation by reason of their baptism. (2)

Baptised people have a right to celebrate the Eucharist but many of our poorest brothers and sisters are deprived of this right and will continue to be deprived of it indefinitely because they could never afford to pay for the type of celibate, highly-educated priest produced by our seminaries even if such a priest were willing and physically and spiritually strong enough to live alone in a remote area among mainly illiterate people. Our present seminary-priests are very suitable for living in towns and cities or in rural places where they have community with other priests. The effects, both good and bad, of twenty years of European education can be seen in this. But why should an African have to learn English, French or Portuguese in order to become a Catholic priest? Ethiopia has had a priesthood for 1,600 years without learning any European language. Reading and writing in their own languages proved quite sufficient for them and so they had a married, village priesthood down through the centuries in spite of persecution and many other obstacles. The same is true of the Oriental Church generally, both Catholic and Orthodox. (3) They follow what was done in the early Church: "Now a bishop must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate,

sensible, dignified... (1 Tim. 3:2) and again, "This is why I left you in Crete, that you might amend what was defective and appoint elders in every town as I directed you, if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife... for a bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless... (Titus 1: 5-7) The Catholic Church in Egypt, for example, possesses such a married priesthood and so the Eucharist can be celebrated every Sunday in the scattered villages of the Nile valley. On the other hand, Latin America, after five hundred years of evangelisation, still experiences a grave shortage of priests in spite of the thousands of foreign missionaries working there. It grieves me deeply to admit that we as a Church still fail to celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday for the poorer and more remote people who have just as much right to it as the rich city-dwellers of the Northern Hemisphere.

Experiences like the Church leaders' course at Odum and the long journeys through the Niger Delta had already set me thinking along these lines, but the subject is given a much more scholarly treatment by an Irish Augustinian priest, Raymond Hickey, who had worked for years in Northern Nigeria and then studied all the important writing on the topic. His book, *Africa; The Case for an Auxiliary Priesthood*, proposes that suitable married catechists be called forward by stages to the priesthood in places where they are needed.(4) At the same time the charism of celibacy will always remain in the Church as it does in the Eastern Churches both Orthodox and Catholic, so there will always be celibate priests and bishops, particularly those attached to religious communities.(5) Jesus, the celibate travelling-missionary, lives on as the central inspiration of my own life as he does of thousands of others. Celibacy has freed us to love and commit ourselves to people far away from home for indefinite periods of time and to move at the call of the Church rather than at the call of wife and family. This is the kind of background vision that enabled me to put myself fully into the work of forming the leaders at Odum. I believed very strongly in the development of all the ministries of the Church from the grass-roots upwards and nothing pleased me more then to be working side by side with catechists and people, deepening our knowledge and faith.

In this locality some Christians had suffered persecution because the older people did not want everybody to become Christian. Who would offer the proper sacrifices at their funerals if everybody was Christian? How could they keep a true relationship with their ancestors? Christians were seen to refuse to take part in traditional sacrifices. All right for young children, but what about a son whose father died? Would he not honour his father's spirit in the proper way? This kind of tension existed in most of the people I was talking to and so I spoke quite a lot about sacrifice. Their ancestors had to offer the sacrifices that they believed

in. Likewise the Jewish people offered sacrifices of bulls, goats and other animals and fruits. I showed some examples of these from the Old Testament. But God was now calling us to a new kind of sacrifice through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This sacrifice forgave sins and reconciled humanity and God and people with their neighbour. In explaining this, I read Hebrews 9 to show that the blood of bulls and goats was no longer necessary because we now had the sacrifice of Christ. We were now able to celebrate this sacrifice under the signs of bread and wine. While I was with them at Odum, we did celebrate the Mass, but after I left, how long would they wait again? A few months probably. Yet these people needed the Mass. Their culture cried out for it. Their funeral customs demanded the requiem Mass and Masses for the dead ancestors too. Their sense of celebration could receive such a boost from the regular Sunday Mass. But alas, for many people such as these, we take away the traditional sacrifices and do not adequately replace them. Part of the reason is because these people live in relatively 'undeveloped' places where the African priests who have been trained to live in many respects like Europeans are not happy to reside – nor should they either as celibates on their own.

We had good days in that flimsy little Church at Odum. We became a real community as we prayed, spoke, discussed, celebrated and sang. As I came to each topic I hung up a brightly-coloured picture showing a Bible-scene connected to that particular topic. We call these visual-aids nowadays, but at Chartres Cathedral they tried stained-glass and in Renaissance Florence they tried paintings and mosaics. St Vincent de Paul got some pictures ready for his first missionaries going to Madagascar in 1648. So I was in good company!

The weather was pretty hot during the day, but at night I sat outside on a kind of deck-chair the people provided for me and it was very soothing to watch the stars hanging like soft lights in the indefinable velvet texture of the sky. No electric light intruded on this natural view and no machine-sound challenged the cicadas, frogs and the human voices from the village raised in conversation or laughter. Sometimes I saw the lights of an aeroplane cross the sky above, but so high up that no sound reached me. That was good too. Let them go! I was happy enough where I was. I didn't feel any great desire to fly off anywhere.

But all things end and when Friday came we had to say goodbye for now and "Ka Chukwu gozie unu!" (May God bless you!) I climbed onto the bicycle and followed Michael, the catechist, along the winding paths through little farms and at one point we pushed our bikes over a tree-trunk bridge with wooden hand-rails to help the pedestrian. When we reached the car we found that a large branch of a mango tree had fallen down next to it, just missing it by feet. The Lord didn't want me to suffer

the wrecking of my car just yet, perhaps because it was St. Patrick's Day, March 17th, and I was heading back to the hospital where the American Medical Mission Sisters had invited me with some others to celebrate the feast. Thank God for St. Patrick! What would we do without him?

*In Sickness and in Health.*

Only a few days after I arrived in Nigeria, I saw an Irish priest in hospital suffering from cholera. The disease had left him weak and feverish and looking at least ten years older than his real age. His baldness and grey hairs added to the effect of a man who ought to go home and rest for a long time. At any rate, I, in my ignorance, didn't give him very long more in Nigeria. He had already, at that point, spent twenty-four years there. Fifteen years further on, as I wrote this, he was still there!

Illness affected some more than others. Some went home within a few months of coming out; some died in their thirties and forties, victims to the power of those tropical diseases that have never been conquered, malaria being the chief of these. The mosquito still sings in your ear and bites into your blood. Even when you are taking your regular tablets for it, you can still be attacked just the same, although the force of the attack will be lessened. A friend of mine used to get it almost every fortnight at one period of his stay. I was lucky to escape myself until near the end of my time. Then I began to suffer from tension, insomnia and recurrent fevers so that the doctor finally ordered me off the field of play: yellow card, sideline, any way you like to describe it but I felt it as a personal failure myself. I knew the doctor was right but I still suffered a severe disappointment while cherishing the hope of returning to Nigeria within six months or so. We were expanding our mission in many directions at the time; in catechists' formation, in medical work, in building our central Church for the parish, in publishing religious books in the local language etc. Since I was no longer well enough to work, I had to cancel the course I had just started. I found it painful to have to explain to the catechists and later to the bishop that I was unable to continue and didn't know when I would return to Nigeria. There was no other priest or missionary to take my place so the catechists just had to pack their bags and go back to their towns and villages. Meanwhile, I settled my own affairs as best I could and made my way back to Ireland where I put myself in the care of a doctor. Following his advice and quite mild medication, I made very good progress and within three months he had taken me off all medication and given me some sound, common-sense advice about the need to take relaxation in order to get my mind off the work. I then asked him when I should go back to Nigeria and he told me to put off the thought of going back to Nigeria "indefinitely". I felt as if stunned

by a heavy blow on the head. I had expected him to say, six months or a year, but I never expected him to forbid me for the rest of my life. I wandered out of his room in a daze. Suddenly my life seemed deprived of its purpose: I was going nowhere and had no job. For the previous ten years my goal was mission: I read about it, thought about it, worked at it, mixed with fellow-missionaries and felt a deep sense of belonging with everyone who shared the missionary experience and vision. I drifted down the corridor from the doctor's office and met a Sister of Charity who happened to be organising a pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady at Knock, Co. Mayo, on the following Sunday. "But we have no priest, Father," she said, "I suppose you wouldn't be free to come?" At that moment, I was free to do anything "indefinitely". I had no great desire to go on a pilgrimage to Knock, but maybe it was better than just hanging around, brooding on my own disappointment. I said, "yes", but I still felt dazed and disorientated. I immediately sought out another priest with whom I had been friendly for a good number of years and I poured out my disappointment into his sympathetic ear. Still that didn't prevent my mind from going back over it again and again so that I had to read in bed till about 2.00 a.m. before I could settle down to sleep.

Sunday dawned clear and sunny and I began to feel hopeful that this pilgrimage would do me good. I was glad to be of use as a priest, even if only for one day. Now that my *real* mission was taken from me, I would have to survive on the few scraps I could get at home. The bus was full of women who talked and laughed all the time. We set off at a good pace and began to recite decades of the rosary. I prayed especially to be able to accept the will of God in my life and as we neared the little village of Knock, I took the microphone and asked the ladies to pray for me too that I might gain the courage to accept the will of God and to see that his will was best for me.

These prayers were answered in a way that I did not expect. We had joined with about 12,000 other pilgrims in the main Mass of the afternoon. After the homily was given, the concelebrating priests turned around to anoint the invalided people who lay on stretchers or sat in wheelchairs up in the front of the congregation. As a concelebrating priest, I followed a steward to a particular row of sick-people and began to anoint them on the forehead and on the hands. As I did this it suddenly struck me with great force that these people all had to accept God's will in their life. What work could they do? Perhaps they might have liked to be missionaries in Africa? Perhaps they had spent their whole lives in wheelchairs or in bed? And now for the foreseeable future most of them would continue in that state. So, why was I complaining about my future? Why was I arguing with God, saying '*why* me'? Why not men older than me? Why am I not as physically or psychologically strong as

them? Men and women of sixty-five and seventy still working in Nigeria – and I'm only 39! Some of them have spent 25 or 30 years and I've only spent 9. What is my future going to be now? How will I settle into any work here at home? All this kind of questioning had been revolving in my mind ever since the day of my interview with the doctor. I couldn't suppress it. And suddenly now a whole new light had been thrown on it: the silent argument of the sick people at Knock, praying, accepting, joining with their brothers and sisters in celebrating our communion in the body of the Lord, healthy and sick, old and young, strong and weak, missionaries and home-birds, married and single. Yes, I could thank these sick and paralysed people for their silent sermon of prayer, acceptance and union with God. On the way home in the bus I told the ladies what had happened to me and asked them to join me in thanking God.

Acceptance that God was calling me now to a different way of life, this proved the beginning of a new healing process within me. Instead of letting anger and frustration take control I was ready to fight them and to pray that I would be fully healed of the sense of failure that I felt so strongly at the time. I wanted God to heal me fully in body and spirit so that I could commit myself again to whatever he wished me to do in the future. Again and again I have found the need to kneel at the feet of Jesus and ask him to heal me of disappointments, angers, frustrations, feelings of inadequacy and judgements about my failures in life. As a result of that day in Knock, I was able to face myself back into the home mission again.

As soon as I got back to Dublin I wrote to Mgr. Horan at Knock offering to work for ten days there in August. The answer came by return of post, 'Come'. And so the first work I did at home after nine and a half years was to hear confessions, celebrate Mass, anoint the sick and be generally available to pilgrims at Knock. I wanted the sick people to re-enforce their lesson to me and I wanted also to give them back something of what they had given me. But I also received an unexpected sign during these ten days.

It happened like this. A few weeks before I went to Knock and before I had any intention of going there I met a young nurse who began to tell me about her difficulties with the Catholic Church. We had quite a long discussion which included reading some passages from the Bible. She had given up going to Mass and had frequented some Bible meetings instead but she still felt drawn back to the Catholic Church and I think what she wanted from me was mainly encouragement. After our discussion I thought I would never see her again because she lived in a part of the country that I had no occasion to visit again. One Sunday during my ten days' ministry in Knock, after the homily of the Mass I turned around to anoint the sick and followed the steward straight down to the people

nearest to us. Just as I was about to begin anointing another steward came along and said I was to follow him and led me around to the far side of the Church and half-way up the aisle to a row of sick people who had a nurse with them – the very nurse who had discussed her religious problems with me a month previously. We were both amazed at meeting one another again but I was even more amazed at how it had happened, as if that steward had been specially inspired to lead me to the opposite side of that huge basilica straight to the row where this nurse was sitting. So God used me again to encourage her in her faith as we got the opportunity to have another chat after Mass.

So much for illness, or how God can draw good out of what is evil in itself. Without that illness I would never have been in Ireland that summer. And without the interview with the doctor and the subsequent meeting with the Sister of Charity in the same building, I would never have gone to Knock. I have to thank God that he brought me through the valley of darkness to fresh pastures beyond. My experiences at Knock showed me the pathway to a new mission nearer to home.

No doubt many of us will suffer a final illness, a gradual closing down of the faculties, retirement from active work, slowing down of the brain's activities, very little to see by way of results at the end of each day. But God is surely saying to us, "I accept you at all times, in sickness and in health, in poverty or in riches, in good times or in bad until I call you finally to myself. All I ask is that you love me through it all. This is your mission every day." Later, called away from Nigeria by illness, I next found myself in Damascus House, London, where I had to learn a lot about presenting the heart of the message to young people of this generation. But that is another chapter.

### Notes

- (1) Edel Quinn's life was later written by Mgr. (later Cardinal) Leon-Joseph Suenens, and published by C.J. Fallen, Dublin 1954.
- (2) Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Chapter I, Paragraph 14.
- (3) The Vincentian missionary, St. Justin de Jacobis, ordained both married and single men to the priesthood in Ethiopia in the last century and thereby laid down the foundations of the Catholic Church in that country. Cf O'Mahony, *The Ebullient Phoenix*, Asmara 1982, especially Book 1, Appendix II.
- (4) Hickey, Raymond, *Africa; the Case for an Auxiliary Priesthood*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1980.

- (5) See also Donovan. Vincent J. *Christianity Rediscovered*, London, SCM Press, 1982.
- (6) Thus Cardinal Basil Hume of Westminster (*Sunday Independent*, Dublin, June 9th, 1985) “If there are no priests available then I think consideration should be given to the possibility of calling married men from the ranks of the laity... to be ordained in order to have priests in those parts of the world where there is a considerable shortage of priests...” He said that he remained “a strong believer in the value of celibacy” and also a strong believer in the importance of the Eucharist as being at the heart of the Christian community”.
- (7) Mention must also be made of Edward Schillebeeckx’s, *Ministry: A Case for Change*, London, SCM Press, 1981. This casts light on the history of the priesthood and on the law of celibacy in particular. Arguments for or against laws and customs have never convinced me very much personally. I would rather state my own case like this: I am a celibate missionary because Jesus was and he has called me to follow him in this way.



# Heretical Edges

Paschal Scallan CM

Professor Patrick Corish, writing at the end of his book, *The Irish Catholic Experience*, cites Patrick Kavanagh's poem, *Lough Derg*. He claims that this poem, perhaps more so than Kavanagh's epic, *The Great Hunger*, exposes most forcefully the spiritual hunger that had overtaken Irish Catholicism by the early and middle years of the twentieth century. The hunger was borne of a rigid and defensive stance adopted by the Church at a time, paradoxically, when it enjoyed its highest moment of prestige. Professor Corish quotes Kavanagh,

... something that is Ireland's secret leads  
These petty mean people...  
The middle of the island looked like the memory  
Of some village evicted by the famine...  
So much alike is our historical  
And spiritual pattern, a heap  
Of stones anywhere is consecrated  
By love's terrible need...  
For this is the penance of the poor  
(Who knows what beauty hides in misery...)  
Lough Derg, St Patrick's Purgatory in Donegal,  
Christendom's purge. Heretical  
Around the edges: the centre's hard...  
The twentieth century blows across it now,  
But deeply it has kept an ancient vow.  
It knows the secret of pain...' (1)

The last ten years have been, it is reasonable to say, years of very great pain for the Irish Church. Those who have committed themselves to Christ in the Catholic Church in Ireland, men and women, priests and religious, have watched as much of what they placed so much faith in, in days gone by, has turned to ashes. The contribution many men and women of deep Christian conviction made in the past has been tainted by the excesses and crimes of some, whose actions are coming to light and are being subjected to the rigour of the law. Whatever embarrassment or humiliation Irish Catholics have experienced, however, as the full glare

of publicity fixes on the Church and its leadership in their attempt to address a truly appalling state of affairs, they are bliss compared to the degradation visited upon those members of the Church so shamefully used when they were at their weakest and most vulnerable. The pain of victims, abused by those in power and authority is the real pain of the crucifixion of Irish Catholicism, a crucifixion begun and endured long before any case ever came to light.

Apart from this, however, there has been an enduring experience of dismay as the once sure cohesion of the Catholic community has come undone. Nor is this dismay expressed simply because numbers coming to Mass are declining. Numbers are anonymous. The fact is we know who these people are who are choosing priorities and values that are increasingly different to our own. They are our sons and daughters, our sisters and brothers, relatives and friends. Our dismay at their apparent abandonment of the faith is the fear that something strange has come between us and that we are no longer a family as we once were. Tears shed in confessionals over children going too much their own way are real and grief stricken.

Kavanagh suggests that Ireland's secret is the 'secret of pain', and that this is what lies at the 'hard centre' – 'beauty hiding in misery'. Professor Corish explains that what he calls the Irish national inheritance – 'those shared values for which people are prepared to make the necessary sacrifices' – is an understanding and feel for the human condition. He goes on to say that Ireland has only slender traditions of philosophical or secular humanism but that what humanism there is in the Irish tradition is rooted in religion and that it is possibly the strongest element in the Irish national inheritance.

The essentially religious nature of Irish people, to which Professor Corish alludes, is worth examining if only to clarify that any shift from the standard set by what Tom Inglis, calls 'the long nineteenth century of Irish Catholicism' (2) is not necessarily deviation. It may simply be an adjustment, a return to the *status quo ante* from an otherwise abnormally high standard. Various polls taken over the last several years continue to show that religion and faith remain important in the lives of a great many Irish people, much more so than in other developed countries. We tend, however, to take fright at reductions from that uniquely high standard.

Authors have referred to the 'protestantisation of Irish Catholicism', which Tom Inglis defines as, 'devising one's own spiritual and moral path to salvation'. In other circles this phenomenon has been disparagingly referred to as *a la carte* Catholicism, implying that Irish Catholics have become selective in their Catholic belief and practice. It is probably closer to the truth to say that Irish Catholicism was always eclectic. It

probably had to be for much of the post-Reformation period, making do in terms of what it could sustain and preserve, 'travelling light' as it were, unencumbered by the weight of teaching and discipline that Ireland's nineteenth century religious *risorgimento* imposed upon it.

It is necessary, as we are discovering, to differentiate the Irish people from their faith, their Church and their religious practices. Prior to the Famine evidence shows that Irish Catholics did select where personal religious practice was concerned and were equally selective about those things in which they placed their faith. The same traits are emerging again. It was the overwhelming degree of success attained by the nineteenth century revival of the Irish Catholic Church that obscured this aspect of religion in Ireland. It is arguable as well, however, that we ought not to have lost sight of the grip superstition has always had on Irish people given the manner in which certain religious devotions were, and still are, used. The Catholic Church in Ireland has been frequently upbraided by various elements for its perceived lack of a pluralist ethic. That some of these voices need to take their own advice in some measure we may leave aside for the moment but, in fact, there is a pluralism existing among the ranks of the faithful at present.

Irish Catholicism is not homogenous. There are at least three types of Irish Catholic according to Tom Inglis:

- the magical, devotional Catholic who places a good deal of emphasis on prayer, penance and pilgrimage
- the legal-orthodox Catholic who knows exactly how everything should be according to the laws of the Church
- the individually principled, ethical Catholic who tends to be well read and well informed and prepared to make up his own mind.

Each of these loves the Church even though they are unlikely to get on well together.

It would be easy in any analysis of the Catholic Church in Ireland at present to list the areas of decline experienced by the Church, both as an institution and as a people, and Inglis lists very graphically what the decline has been and where it has been taking place. For all his exactitude in outlining the decline of the Catholic Church in Ireland, however, Inglis is very clear about one thing. He states categorically that the Church is far from dead or even dying. He holds out the possibility of revival. Whatever happens, he envisages a reformation of sorts.

More than one author speaks about the absolute requirement of hope. Even though we are told that we live in a '*disenchanted world*', or perhaps, more accurately, we live, as Christians, among a disenchanted people, keeping hope alive remains central to our vocation. Words like:

'religion', 'faith', 'church' arouse a variety of responses in people today. Some respond defensively, anticipating the insulting remark or put-down that may or may not be coming. Some react angrily, remembering grievances. Others respond with cynicism, which probably has its roots in anger. Others still, and these are probably the most recent arrivals, respond with indifference simply because these words have never been part of their experience in any meaningful way. Relatively few will respond to these words with any sense of hope rising within them or any sense that these words might point the way to meaning in life.

Writing in 1996, Anne Looney, a catechist at secondary level, recounted the moment when she became aware of the extent to which a cumulative cultural atheism had overtaken the awareness of her students (3) An attempt in class to talk about Lent was met with complete silence, in which it eventually became clear that none of the students was saying anything because they genuinely had nothing to say. One student did volunteer that Lent was about, 'giving up things when you were a kid', an interesting observation in that Ms Looney later suggests that, 'Irish Catholicism is now seen as something that you grow out of.' The notion that one grows out of Catholicism may confirm the already bitter suspicion that the faith of our fathers was only ever child's play, something taught at length to unquestioning and unanswering children but hardly developed with adolescents and adults who might have had something to say.

It seems certain, however, that one of the reasons we are meeting young people in school to whom faith and religion mean hardly anything at all is that a generation ago we allowed their parents to leave school and encounter the realities of adult life with the religious sensibilities of ten year olds. Little wonder they cast off their inadequate catechesis for more credible, though hardly Christian perspectives. When one asks why earlier generations didn't do the same as Ireland's Baby Boomers, it may be because the 1930s, 40s, 50s and even the celebrated 60s in Ireland did not see what the 1970s, 80s and 90s have seen. By 1970 the times had begun to change and people had begun to change with them. The culture began to change and with it came the collapse of the tri-par-tite relationship between school, home and Church. In the past, the same themes had always seemed to 'echo' between home, school and Church but as the country changed both home and church seemed to experience a collapse, leaving the schools to continue presenting themes that simply did not find an echo in the home, or indeed in Church with any great conviction. New voices have emerged in the country but they are being met with silence. Cultural atheism has seen a culture that was founded on the authoritative Word and the word of authority melt away before it.

Anne Looney's observations on where young people are matched by her observations on the Church. For her and many others, the Church has been and continues to be extremely defensive. Perceiving itself under constant 'attack', the Church, as represented by its clerical leadership, has appeared to fight a rearguard action, sniping back at the so-called 'liberal agenda'. This defensiveness has shut out many of the faithful – people who desperately want to see strong and confident leadership in the Church, even if they don't necessarily want the old Church back. In a particularly damning statement, Ms Looney says, '...it's a long time since I have heard the church preach authentically about anything'. The still overwhelmingly clerical leadership of the Church seems to lack inspiration and has thus ceased to be inspirational in turn. Priorities now seem to be about dioceses balancing the books, unquestionably an important consideration for the way any community conducts its business but set against the closure of centres of adult faith formation, these priorities seem counter-productive. Anne Looney's bottom line is this – the Irish Church must stop trying to save itself. It is a stinging rebuke which implies that some, at least, in positions of leadership in the Irish Church, may have lost their faith. That would be truly catastrophic because without faith it becomes impossible to keep hope alive.

Hope seems to be a pivotal construct on which the whole struggle for hearts and minds can turn. Moreover, it appears to rest not far from the surface of human sensibility because it can be tapped into relatively easily which also makes it vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation. The advertising industry long ago learned a simple but profound truth: people want to believe. Our capacity for hope must seem boundless also to the advertising executive, as time and again we buy the 'line' and the product that he or she has worked on, in the hope that this product will outshine the previous item we might have bought and vested hope in.

A century or more of 'the hard sell', however, may have inured us to the wiles of suggestion. That is to say, we have become conversant with the language of Madison Avenue and know when we are being taken in. But perhaps that's as much as can be said about us in relation to contemporary commerce. We know that we are being manipulated but we go along with the process, which can make our perception arch at best and cynical at worst. It is as though we may have no illusions left but continue to take part in an illusion in spite of our apparent sophistication.

In a book entitled *Christian Resources of Hope*, Maureen Junker-Kenny, who is both editor and one of the contributing authors, quotes the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko on the subject of hope

the inevitability of disappointments  
makes us see too clearly ...

The world appears before us, unhazed, unmisted,  
no longer radiant with something priceless,  
but with all this truthfulness unmasked  
as deceit. But what is gone –  
was no deception.

You see, it is not the knowledge of the serpent,  
it is not the doubtful honour of experience,  
but the ability to be enchanted by the world  
that reveals to us the world as it really is. (4)

If we have become too 'knowing', if we feel that we have grown out of our need of faith and religion and are in danger of having, 'tasted and tested too much', then it is arguable that far from having asserted ourselves or having established any real sense of autonomy, we have merely accentuated our neediness and exposed our vulnerability. We are no freer now than when we were supposedly in thrall to the Church. We have not seen any more enlightening a vision than Coca Cola's glib optimism that, 'things go better with Coke'. It seems true, as Chesterton once said, that when people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing, they believe in anything.

The 'knowledge of the serpent' that Yevtushenko speaks of, the caniness of the worldly wise has not made us more prudent, which would be a virtue, it has made us cynical and cynicism cannot recognise hope as anything other than fantasy. The reclamation of hope, which must include its rehabilitation must, as Yevtushenko implies, reach beyond even 'the honour of experience' and revive the ability to be enchanted by the world. It is in enchantment that Yevtushenko believes truth, in the world is revealed. Thus can the world appear, 'radiant with something priceless'. If Yevtushenko is correct and the world no longer appears, 'radiant with something priceless', can it be, as he suggests, that disappointment has convinced us that much of what we built our hopes and values on in the past was deception? And is it the case that in order not to be misled, we have learned to withhold trust? In withholding trust one's expectations diminish; one learns to lower one's sights, as it were. The horizon is too distant to be concerned with, so it becomes safer to ensure that one's course immediately ahead is clear. The present becomes preeminent in the sense that one knows what one can be certain of; the implications of this for our consideration of ultimate questions are enormous. The instinct for the transcendent that allows for prayer, altruism and ultimately any development of an eschatological awareness may become redundant. Hope itself is reduced to concern for the banal.

Maureen Junker-Kenny, in her paper on the search for hope today goes on to quote the German sociologist, Gerhard Schulze. His 1992 study entitled, *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft* ('People of Experience') (5), suggests that in the light of a general disillusionment and disenchantment in western society, there has been a renunciation of 'Utopian' thinking leading to its replacement by a concentration on the experience of the present moment. The extent of this process has even led people of faith to speak about, 'the sacramentality of the present moment.' If there is a problem with this line of thinking, it is not that it is untrue, it is only partly true. The present moment and one's awareness of the levels of meaning that radiate within it and from it is, of course, most important but it is not the whole story.

Utopian thinking, on the other hand, in which hope is raised on a grand scale, has problems of its own in that, when applied rigorously, it becomes totalitarianism. Caught, therefore, between an inflated notion of the present moment and a fear of Utopian totalitarianism, it seems nevertheless that people have settled for what is conceived of as 'praxis'. Praxis is closer to the school of the present moment than it is to Utopianism. It asks us to concentrate on what can be realised and to dispense with promises. Set against the fatalistic ennui of those for whom faith is something for the gullible and the credulous, praxis at least has the allure of action about it, '*better to light a candle...*' Perhaps, but is praxis enough?

There is something worthy and commendable in concentrating on what *can be* achieved and actually achieving it. After all, just because something is possible doesn't necessarily mean it's going to happen. Having said that, however, one can't help feeling a vaguely utilitarian chill here. There is a chronic lack of vision or imagination that leaves no room for inspiration. If this is all there is, praxis itself, manifested as no more than managerial competence, becomes grey and alienating.

What Tom Inglis calls the 'long nineteenth century of Irish Catholicism' can be seen, in part, as a spectacular achievement and, in part, especially perhaps in its latter stages, as fairly competent management. The Irish Catholic Church, which came into being during the nineteenth century was, by all accounts, outstandingly successful by the criteria of the time. It revived and reshaped the faith of a country and inspired a model of Roman Catholicism still traceable throughout the English speaking world. During those years, in the absence of broadly based and adequate leadership within the Catholic community, the task of the clerical leadership of the Church was not only to foster the establishment and growth of the faith of a people but also to facilitate the rise of the Catholic community to take its rightful place in society, and thereby invest society with a Catholic ethos.

The bishops of the time may have harboured nationalist aspirations to a greater or lesser extent but on the whole they were not politically radical. There was enough to be done. This raises an interesting question about the Irish Church. Given what appear to us unthinkably bleak circumstances, it is difficult to grasp what was the imaginative genius of those who, looking around them in the 1830s after Emancipation and in the 1850s after the Famine, sought to build up the Irish Catholic community. Did the advent of Catholic Emancipation in 1829 burst upon them as a kind of release or was it, under the conditions of the time, no more than a means to an end already underway? If one allows for the possibility that Emancipation was experienced as a moment of imaginative opportunity, then the Famine must have dealt it a body blow from which the continuing poverty of the people made it difficult to recover. The subsequent achievement by the community was, nevertheless, formidable but one wonders if it didn't, in fact, leave a deep impression on the Irish Catholic psyche which, even today, makes it difficult to dream of what might be and be sustained by that into action. Perhaps it is no wonder that our greatest writers and artists, of whatever discipline, are people who have had to maintain a certain distance from the Church, stepping away from the claustrophobic centre in order to allow the imagination its widest possible horizon. During its years of consolidation, the Irish Catholic Church stressed the absolute need for conformity or at least a discipline that would permit it to realise the various projects with which it became synonymous: the schools and hospitals and other foundations which only now are beginning to pass out of 'ecclesiastical' control. Involvement in these vast projects which put in place the landmarks of the Irish Catholic landscape appears like praxis on a grand scale. One is left with the disturbing question; what inspired it? Was it truly for the glory of God or really for the honour of an Ireland too self-consciously emerging from centuries of enforced anonymity? The Catholic Church in the nineteenth century sought to change the environment in which so many of the faithful were compelled to live and, indeed, this would seem entirely for the glory of God but the Church could do little about the economic circumstances of the people. Therefore, when writers like Frank McCourt, in his autobiographical *Angela's Ashes*, portray, not for the first time, a Church and a clergy disdainfully aloof and indifferent to the poor, one begins to think about the goals and the 'achievement' of Irish Catholicism. For all the good undoubtedly done, the anger and perhaps exaggerated perspective of many people begs the question; was the ambition of Irish Catholicism primarily self-serving and self-aggrandising?

As the Irish Catholic Church moves from one era into another, a process which began possibly thirty years ago, and which may continue



for some while yet, it is possible that as an institution it has less going for it than it had at Emancipation. The attributes of its power and prestige, that is its property and its access to the centres of influence are being relinquished. Its 'personnel', both clerical and religious, are vanishing and its hold on the attention of the 'faithful', to say nothing of its imagination, is no longer sure. For many this is a hopeless scenario and one which arouses much sadness and frustration. Maureen Junker-Kenny insists, however, on an incarnational path to the restoration of hope in the Church as a whole. The men and women who people this age are themselves the foundation of all our reasons to be hopeful. It is those around us who serve to remind the Christian community that God's ultimate act of solidarity with us was to become one of us and to share our limited though wonderful existence. In this Junker-Kenny quotes the French poet, Charles Peguy who observed that our surest ground for hope is that God set God's own hope in us. As we look at and examine ourselves we realise, in the light of the Incarnation, that something greater than we have been able to imagine is here.

In the passage from Kavanagh's poem *Lough Derg*, which Professor Corish quotes in his book, *The Irish Catholic Experience*, the lines; 'So much alike is our historical/ And spiritual pattern, a heap/ Of stones anywhere is consecrated/ By love's terrible need...' speak of another hunger than that of which Kavanagh was perhaps aware. Yet it is difficult to avoid the impression that the spiritual hunger Kavanagh discerned in the people of his time is much the same spiritual hunger ravishing us now. If the means by which Irish Catholics sought to assuage their thirst in the past was indeed, 'heretical around the edges', at least their devotional practices ignited their imaginations and addressed their pain and if there were no immediate or ready answers, they had at least sought them and they knew they had been seeking them. For all its heresy at the edges, therefore, the centre could not be other than hard. Here was faith seeking understanding. The transparency of these devotions allowed for little doubt. The pilgrimages, patterns and stations, with Lough Derg more illuminating than most, were unambiguously windows on another world.

It seems curious, perhaps, that as Lough Derg itself experiences the general decline in attendance, seen as more evidently anachronistic than many other practices of the faith, it reports increasing numbers of young people who are prepared to go along for the truncated day pilgrimage. In this it might be said the young pilgrims are consistent; so many other things in which they seek meaning are equally dismissed and even condemned. Those whom *Gaudium et Spes* identifies as the 'people of our time' are familiar with the badge of 'heretic'. And yet heresy, for all the fear it engenders and for all its power to mislead, is at its heart a

half-truth. Heresy too is imbued with faith and seeks understanding of the God it pursues. This is its hard centre and if, at the edges, it seems that meaning and understanding are obscured and lost it may be because we have become lost in the chase – after so many things, failing to remember that God loved us first and that while we are even still a long way off, the Father rushes out to embrace us and to clothe the nakedness of our inadequacy and folly with garments of grace and truth.

Patrick Kavanagh suggests that Lough Derg has deeply kept an ancient vow in knowing the secret of pain. In the Christian vision pain is inevitably linked to the crucifixion of Jesus. Suffering, particularly the suffering of a good or ‘innocent’ person, seems mirrored in the image of the crucifix and the suggestion that if Jesus could achieve all that he did (the salvation of the world and resurrection from the dead) by keeping faith even unto death, then identifying with Christ in one’s own sufferings may also yield deliverance in some form or other, not only for oneself but for others as well. If this is the secret of pain, then Lough Derg has indeed kept an ancient vow as the rigours of the stations there have, over the centuries, mirrored the pain in the lives of the pilgrims and the whole island seems to say, ‘I know your pain, your terrible need’.

If it is true that at the hard centre of our faith we do know the secret of pain then we are well placed to witness to the Gospel in contemporary Ireland but only if we are prepared to keep the vow Lough Derg has kept, that is to speak to the pain of the people out of our own longing –the longing that mirrors theirs.

In the epilogue to his book, *Clashing Symbols*, Michael Paul Gallagher speaks of his encountering young people in Rome. He says, ‘I imagine them lonely in surprising ways... I sense them drifting on the surface of themselves... I picture them, spiritually, as uncalled, unawakened, unreached by the Truth...(6) He goes on to say that if his musings on Roman youth are too pessimistic then, like St Paul before the Areopagus, he must wait until his eyes are opened and he can see, ‘the signs of searching beyond the appearances.’ In a sense the Irish Church is approaching an Areopagus of its own. We are called before the bar of true faith and right religion and we will have to give an account of the hope that is in us. Moreover, unless we exercise the imagination of St Paul and recognise the Spirit moving in the lives of the ‘gentiles’, our hearing will be short.

**Notes**

- (1) From 'Lough Derg' by Patrick Kavanagh cited by Rev. Professor Patrick Corish in *The Irish Catholic Experience, A Historical Survey* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1985) pp 255-256. The line in parentheses is in sequence but is not cited by Professor Corish.
- (2) Inglis, Tom. *Moral Monopoly, the Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland* (Dublin University College Dublin Press 1998) p. 9.
- (3) Looney, Anne. "Disappearing Echoes, New Voices and the Sound of Silence", in Sean MacReamoinn, *The Church in a New Ireland*, (Dublin, Columba Press, 1996) p.25ff.
- (4) Junker-Kenny, Maureen. "The Search for Hope Today: Religious and Cultural Expressions", in Maureen Junker-Kenny *Christian Resources of Hope* (Dublin & Collegeville, Columba Press & The Liturgical Press, 1995) Chap. 2 pp 26-38.
- (5) Junker-Kenny, p.29
- (6) Gallagher, Michael Paul SJ, *Clashing Symbols, An Introduction to Faith and Culture*, (London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997) p. 148.

# Vincentian Refugee Centre; Annual Report 1999

*This annual report, from the centre in Phibsboro' in Dublin,  
is given in the format in which it was presented.*

## *A note from the Chair*

This decade has seen an enormous change in the number of Asylum Seekers coming to Ireland. Only thirty-nine came in 1992, but by 1999 the annual figure had risen to over seven and a half thousand. That surge in numbers represents for the first time in Ireland's history a significant influx of non-nationals from diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds, and it has led to challenges, as well as opportunities, for both migrants and local communities alike.

Given the Continental experience, it is remarkable that we were so unprepared. We seem to have had some difficulty in grasping the idea that Irish society in the new Millennium will very likely be a multiethnic one, and that a sea-change in attitudes is needed. "Ireland of the welcomes" is a notion seen by many as one urgently in need of review.

It is against this background that the Vincentian Fathers, the Daughters of Charity, and the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul came together in partnership about a year ago to respond to the needs of asylum seekers and refugees. They contributed as best they could to the creation of a Welcoming Community in which the difficulties of those concerned might be resolved. How they set about this and what was achieved is detailed elsewhere in this report. It suffices at this point to say that the value of the work is reflected in the thanks and appreciation of the clients, and in the co-operation and support given by many other agencies.

The significance of this type of work cannot be over-emphasised. Doing it well will make the changeover to a pluriform society an enriching rather than a painful experience. Doing it badly will allow racism and extremist feelings to hold sway and, as has been seen elsewhere in Europe, such feelings lead sometimes to the bitterest of strife, even murder. The next generation will not thank us if we do not insist on putting humane and well thought-out immigration and integration policies into place without further delay. Often, when refugee and migrant matters are being discussed, the question of giving priority to "our own" marginalised is raised. This is a seemingly reasonable point, but its very reasonableness belies the illiberal and unchristian attitude that underpins it. It is the Vincentian view that the rights and dignity of all members of our society, regardless of origin, are worthy of our concern, and that to

be selective in that concern would be to leave us morally blighted and spiritually impoverished.

1999 has given us a wealth of experience and a better understanding of the difficulties facing our clients at the Centre and their host communities. Our staff and volunteers are now all the better equipped to meet the demands of the coming year, and they look forward to bringing support, hope, and comfort to the people they serve.

Nuair a bhí an t-ionad á cur ar bun ba cúis áthais agus misnigh dúinn an cuideamh a bhí ar fáil ó clann Naomh Uinsionn de Pól, ón gnáthphobal, agus ós na h-eachtranaithe iad féin. Cinnte, seólfar ‘n-ár dtreo amach anseo go leor daoine eile i gcrua-cas, agus, le cúnamh Dé, beidh ar ár gcumas breis áiseanna a cur ar fáil dóibh, agus beigh deis againn cómh maith a scéal a leiriú don saol mór.

*(When the place was being made ready we were delighted and encouraged by the help we got from the Vincentian family, from ordinary people and from the refugees themselves. Certainly, in our present situation, there are many others in difficulty and, with God's help, we'll soon be able to reach out to them and to make the wider public aware of their plight.)*

Beir Beannacht,  
Donal Hayes, (S.V.P.)  
Chairperson.

### *Mission Statement*

The partnership consists of the Vincentian Fathers, the Daughters of Charity and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Its aim is to involve the local community with refugees in developing a model of a “Welcoming Community” which recognises and values cultural diversity in a multi-ethnic society

### *Objectives*

- To provide information on accommodation, welfare, health and social opportunities.
- Language training and accommodation finding service.
- To develop awareness programmes for schools, community groups and other local interests so that cultural diversity is recognised and valued.
- To ensure that the needs of asylum seekers and refugees and the issues affecting them are addressed at policy level, either directly or through the co-operation with other agencies.

*The key to the future is having and building caring and local communities. (Matt. 25:35)*

### *Hospitality*

The Vincentian Refugee Centre is primarily a centre of hospitality. The Centre offers a safe haven to the asylum seeker/refugee, a place, where they can feel welcome and at home. The staff of the VRC do 'not ask why the asylum seeker is in Ireland but rather how can they help them to feel at home in a strange land. It does not matter what the asylum seekers' religion is, or the colour of their skin, we all need one another and to that end the Vincentian Refugee Centre makes a special effort to make their time in Ireland a happy one.

*There is no State in the world that has not its bitterness and crosses,  
and which therefore does not make us desire  
to embrace some other conditions.* (Vincent de Paul)

At the official opening of the Vincentian Refugee Centre, the Taoiseach, Mr. Bertie Ahern, stated "a stranger is always a stranger until we get to know them." In the VRC we get to know the asylum seeker/refugee and offer them a warm welcome, tea/coffee and biscuits are served and the asylum seeker is made to feel s/he is important and welcome in the Centre and in Ireland.

### *Language Classes*

An asylum seeker is not permitted to attend full time education and for those wishing to learn English it is extremely difficult for them to access free English classes. During the year classes were held each day for those with no English and also for those who had some knowledge of the language. These students were taught by voluntary teachers who were formally qualified or by those who had studied TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language).

From September 1998 until July 1999 ninety students had attended at least one class of English. All the classes were of two hours duration. On occasion the students were taken to places of interest, for example, Museums, Galleries, Gardens. 36 students were presented with certificates on the completion of 24 hours or more of English. They represented several countries. Many students left the courses once they had enough basic English to go shopping, collect their social welfare or when they could read the messages their children brought home from school. There was quite a high turnover of students as they moved into private rented accommodation or left for no apparent reason.

In the period 1998-1999 four teachers taught students in the students own accommodation, some helped with English while others helped their children with their homework. Those involved in teaching met every six weeks to discuss issues of concern and to share ideas. They also attended meetings and courses relevant to teaching English to asylum seekers.

*Junior Certificate*

A group of eleven students studied for the Junior Certificate in English one afternoon a week for two hours from October to June. They were successful in the examination and were presented with their Department of Education and Science certificate by their teacher, Sr. Madeleine Griffin, S.M.G. The students came from Romania (3), Nigeria (2), Togo, Rwanda, Belarus (2), Angola (2) and all of them completed the Ordinary Level Paper. Asylum seekers have also been referred to other agencies providing free English classes. Those entitled to go to Primary School and Secondary School have been helped to locate a school near their accommodation.

*Women's Group*

At the request of some women asylum seekers, a group was formed in March and continued until the end of June 1999. The group met each Thursday morning from 10.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. Afterwards the women continued their discussion for an hour or more over a cup of tea in the Centre. Twelve women participated in the group with an average of five at each session. The group was composed of women from Sierra Leone (3), Ivory Coast (1), Cameroon (1), Romania (1), and Nigeria (7) from three different tribal groupings. The woman from Romania did not continue in the group as she was learning English and found it too difficult to communicate. The group was essentially a support group, as some women felt isolated, lonely or suffered from post-natal depression. Issues discussed related to dietary, medical and personal health problems. They also discussed the asylum procedure, residency etc. One session was devoted to racism as all of the women had many experiences of racism ranging from rudeness to downright abusiveness and physical intimidation.

Two members of the local Community Gardai came and spoke about personal safety for women. As a result the group visited Mountjoy Garda Station as many fear the police because of the negative profile of the police in their own countries. Two of the women refused to enter into the cells in the Station because of previous experiences.

The group was successful in that it was a safe place where the women could talk and share their experiences. They made new friends and now socialise together. The women are still very supportive of each other. One of the women has had major surgery and continues to receive support from members of the group.

*Everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person.  
(Article 3, Universal Declaration of human Rights)*

### *Ecumenical Group*

A Bible study group was formed in November, in conjunction with Abbey Presbyterian Church and the staff of the Vincentian Refugee Centre. The group meet each Wednesday evening and it is open to all asylum seekers/refugees regardless of their religious affiliation. The evening generally consists of the singing of hymns, teaching and a time for intercession and praise followed by refreshments.

### *Networking*

The Vincentian Refugee Centre was able to carry out its work with the help of many voluntary and statutory organisations. These include Non-Governmental Organisations and Church groups working with and on behalf of asylum seekers/refugees. We have good contact with the Cabra Finglas Partnership, General Practitioners, Home School Liaison Officers, Social Workers, Public Health Nurses and the Gardai. We also have a good working relationship with the staff of the Asylum Division, Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, The Refugee Legal Service and the Medical Unit all based at the Refugee Application Centre at Lower Mount Street. Links have also been established with the United Nations High Commission Office for Refugees, the Eastern Health Board and in particular with the Community Welfare Officers.

### *Social Welfare*

*Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for their well-being including food, clothing, housing and social services.*

*(Article 25, Universal Declaration of Human Rights)*

Understanding the complexities of the social welfare system is difficult for an Irish person and much more difficult for the asylum seeker. We have helped many apply for Child Benefit. Some do not do so until they have secured private rented accommodation and others do not know they are entitled to Child Benefit. The application form asks for the birth certificate for the child/children. Fleeing from persecution one does not think to bring the birth certificate and for that reason many did not apply. During 1999 each asylum seeker was entitled to Supplementary Welfare Allowance and Rent Allowance if in private rented accommodation, as well as a Medical Card and Child Benefit. If applicable, an asylum seeker was also entitled to apply for Lone Parents Allowance or Widow/Widowers Pension. Much of our work was informing the asylum seeker of his/her entitlements, helping them complete forms, liaising with Community Welfare Officers on their behalf and ensuring that they appealed a decision where Supplementary Welfare Allowance was stopped or when they were refused Rent Allowance.



Many asylum seekers requested General Practitioners who spoke their language. This caused distress especially to those who had traumatic experiences in their country of origin when they were unable to register with a General Practitioner. Many waited several weeks before registering in the hope that they would find a doctor who could speak their language.

#### *Home/Hospital Visitation*

*Make love accomplish what justice and law could never do.  
(Blessed Frederic Ozanam)*

When an asylum seeker is a regular visitor to the Centre and if we have not seen them for sometime we generally contact them. This means a lot to those who are isolated and far from their families, friends and country. Many women who gave birth in Irish Maternity Hospitals were visited as their experience of giving birth in an African context is so much different than to give birth in a clinical setting.

#### *Awareness Programmes*

*The tragedy of refugees is a wound which typifies  
and reveals the imbalance and conflicts of the modern world.  
(Pope John Paul II)*

We believe that from the moment an asylum seeker enters the State s/he should be helped to integrate into our society. Asylum seekers are part of the community while they are waiting for their application for refugee status to be determined which can take up to at least three years. With this in mind we have given presentations to schools and colleges, for example to the Leaving Certificate Students at: Plunkett College; Ballymun Comprehensive School; the Holy Family School, Newbridge; the students of University of Ulster, Jordanstown; and to the students at Trinity College. Other awareness programmes included the giving of a one day Seminar at All Hallows College, presentations to parishes, to various religious communities, to local conferences of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and to local community groups.

We have meetings every six weeks with Sergeant Taylor and the local Community Gardai at Mountjoy Garda Station. These meetings were attended by members of the asylum /refugee communities, the Gardai and the staff of the Vincentian Refugee Centre. Issues such as policing, the role of the Community Gardai, road safety, personal safety, cultural differences and expectations were shared and discussed. These meetings help to eradicate fear and to build trust between the asylum seeker/refugee and the local Community Gardai.

On Refugee Day, 16th June, the meeting included representatives of the local community groups. At the meeting the staff of the VRC

gave a presentation on the asylum procedure and the problems faced by asylum seekers. One asylum seeker spoke of his experience of living in a B&B (Bed and Breakfast accommodation). Afterwards there was an opportunity for the different groups to mingle and all enjoyed a buffet of Nigerian food prepared by the women's group.

Two cultural evenings took place both presented by asylum seekers. The aim of these evenings was to inform people of the countries the asylum seeker was forced to leave. One evening there was a presentation by a group from Belarus which included some beautiful music. The second was by a group from the Democratic Republic of the Congo after which everyone sampled some Congolese food.

The Vincentian Refugee Centre has featured on all the national television stations, RTÉ radio and on several of the national newspapers. There have been good links forged with many of the reporters and staff. Two groups of asylum seekers were brought on a visit to the Law Library and the Courts. These were organised in conjunction with the solicitors of the Law Library. Students from various colleges and universities have visited the centre to seek help with projects and essays. Many others have called whilst doing research specifically on asylum seeker/refugee issues.

### *Accommodation*

*If a stranger lives with you in our land, do not molest him.*

*You must count him as one of your countrymen*

*(Leviticus, 19.33)*

Each asylum seeker is given emergency accommodation. During 1999 this emergency accommodation consisted of Bed and Breakfast with no facilities to cook or B&B with cooking facilities. As asylum seekers, they share their rooms with others from different countries, cultures, tribes and languages and hence searched to find alternative accommodation. They were also advised by the Community Welfare Officers to find alternative accommodation. Daily the VRC issued a list of flats, bedsits and houses taken from the Evening Herald of possible accommodations. The number of flats in the Evening Herald newspaper for 1999 was 18,616 (this excludes Saturdays, Bank Holidays, days the Centre was closed etc.) Some of the accommodation advertised was not suitable because flats (or houses) were advertised for students only, professional people or for working people. When we telephoned we found that:

- The rent was too expensive
- The landlord did not accept Rent Allowance
- The flat was given to someone else
- The landlord did not want refugees

It is extremely difficult to obtain accommodation in the private rented sector especially if you are black and have difficulty speaking English. When we telephoned the landlords on behalf of the asylum seek we often received comments such as

- “No blacks”
- “They are too noisy”
- “If you guarantee they won’t entertain their friends”
- “We had bad experiences with them before”
- “We could not have them living that near the city”
- “I have taken them on other occasions but not this time”
- “The other tenants will object”

Hence the list we gave to the asylum seekers are those

- Flats to view only, an address given and time to view but no telephone number so that the asylum seeker must go there and see if the landlord will accept them.
- Flats where the landlord has agreed on the telephone to accept Rent Allowance and asylum seekers
- Flats where telephone numbers are given to contact after working hours, which is of no help to those who do not speak English.

Asylum seekers are rejected time and time again when they go to view a flat and are told it is gone even though they may have been the first people in the queue. In some cases there was no telephone number so how could the flat have already been taken? Many landlords allow them to view the property and tell them they will telephone the next day but many do not. Therefore, the asylum seekers feel let down, that they are ‘nothing’ that the landlord did not have the decency to telephone and say “I have given the flat/house to someone else”. Many of the asylum seekers get tired of trying day in day out to find alternative accommodation. Their confidence is shattered, they become self conscious of looking non-Irish in appearance and they still have to return to their overcrowded room in the emergency accommodation.

#### *Vision for the year 2000*

The Vincentian Refugee Centre will continue to provide :

- A place of welcome for Asylum Seekers/Refugees.
- Advice and support with asylum procedure, social welfare entitlements, and health matters.
- A comprehensive accommodation finding service for Asylum seekers living in emergency accommodation.
- Classes in English language.
- Awareness programmes, presented in part by Asylum Seekers/

Refugees themselves, for schools, colleges, community groups, and parish meetings.

- Facilities aimed at developing relations between visitors to the V.R.C. and Statutory/N.G.O (Non-Government Organisation) groups.
- Integration initiatives which will bring together V.R.C. people with social and sporting groups as well as the local community.
- Work orientation and advice on C.V. preparation.
- Support for minors, both in terms of integration and education (primary & secondary level)
- A Women's Group which allows mothers with children to meet and support one another
- Liaison and advocacy work on behalf of Asylum Seekers/Refugees
- Responses to media invitations to comment on Asylum/Refugee issues
- A platform for Asylum Seekers/ Refugees to express their views to the community.

*Some statistics*

Clients at the centre by country of origin;

<i>Africa</i> Algeria	55	<i>Eastern Europe/Asia</i> Afghanistan	2
Angola	23	Armenia	2
Burkina Faso	11	Azerbaijan	1
Burundi	2	Belarus	8
Cameroon	4	Bosnia	3
Congo	72	Bulgaria	21
Congo Brazz	2	Czechoslovakia	4
Eritrea	9	Chechnya	1
Ethiopia	5	Estonia	2
Gambia	1	Georgia	10
Ghana	9	Hungary	1
Guinea	1	Kosovo	34
Ivory Coast	9	Kurdistan	2
Kenya	3	Latvia	2
Libya	4	Lithuania	3
Liberia	3	Moldavia	20
Nigeria	375	Poland	51
Rwanda	5	Romania	208
Sierra Leone	35	Russia	29
Somalia	43	Slovakia	1
South Africa	7	Tajikistan	5
Sudan	8	Turkey	1
Togo	7	Ukraine	16
Uganda	1	Uzbekistan	2
Zimbabwe	3	Yugoslavia	1

*Flat finding service No. Advertised*      *Number listed by VRC*

January	1324	317
February	1483	432
March	1533	450
April	1472	377
May	1857	469
June	2515	549
July	1866	257
August	1612	250
September	1513	248
December	640	100

*Numbers of visitors to the centre (not including children)*

MONTH	Total	Men	Women
January	156	92	64
February	281	190	91
March	323	220	103
April	286	153	133
May	540	303	237
June	589	368	221
July	680	447	233
August	743	487	256
September	775	525	250
October	889	632	257
November	880	621	259
December	852	614	238
TOTAL	6994	4652	2342

# Christ within and among us

Pat Collins CM

Paradoxically, the more we relate to others, the more we discover and relate to our deepest selves. Carl Jung, one of the most introspective of psychologists stated: “One is always in the dark about one’s personality. One needs others to get to know oneself.” (1) If any of us reflect on our experience we will recognize the truth of this principle. For example, when we think about our friendships we become aware of the fact that we grow in self-awareness through our struggle to grow in intimacy. It confronts us with the limits of such things as our trust, generosity and our ability to receive. In heterosexual relationships, in-depth knowledge of a person of the opposite sex helps one to acknowledge and appropriate either one’s male or female potential. Relationships with others also school us in virtues such as patience, forbearance, self-forgetfulness, generosity, compassion, empathy etc.

## *The Divine Indwelling*

In spirituality it is much the same, inwardness and relatedness, divine immanence and divine transcendence are interconnected. St Paul, writes about these interrelationships. On the one hand he describes God as the one who is beyond and incomprehensible. In Rm 11:34 he asks “For who has known the mind of the Lord?” but on the other hand in 1 Cor 2:16 he refers to the Lord within when he says: “For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ” 1 Cor 2:16. This is made possible because “we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God” 1 Cor 2:12. St Paul used the phrase “in Christ” and the correlative notion of “Christ within” over a hundred times in his writings.

Although this is true, too few people have experienced the divine presence as the innermost presence in their souls. All too often Christ only meets them from without e.g. by means of doctrines, rituals, religious education, art etc. but rarely from within the soul. One only grows to have a sense of the immanence of Christ as a result of a gradual or sudden spiritual awakening, an in-filling of the Holy Spirit that enables one to have a new and vibrant relationship with the God who is at once the God beyond and the God within (cf. Eph 3:17). The American bishops described this experience when they said in a 1997 document entitled *Grace for a New Springtime*, “the in-filling of the Spirit makes Jesus Christ known and loved as Lord and Savior, establishes or reestab-

lishes an immediacy of relationship with all those persons of the Trinity, and through inner transformation affects the whole of the Christian life. There is new life and a new conscious awareness of God's power and presence."

As I contemplate God the Father, in and through his Son, I get to know my own divine potential, my Christ-self. Pope John Paul II has adverted to this principle in par. 8 of his encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*: "the man who wishes to understand himself should draw near to Christ. He must, so to speak, enter him with all his own self... If this profound process takes place within him, he then bears fruit not only of adoration of God but also of deeper wonder at himself." In another place the Holy Father says: "God is present in the intimacy of man's being, in his mind, conscience and heart; an ontological and psychological reality, in considering which St Augustine said of God that he was closer to us than our inmost beings."

Many of the mystics have spoken about the fact that in getting to know Christ one gets to know him as the intimate guest of one's deepest spiritual self. For example in the writings of Dame Julian of Norwich we read: "For our soul is so deeply grounded in God and so endlessly treasured that we cannot come to knowledge of it until we first have knowledge of God, who is the Creator to whom it is united... It is a great understanding to see and know inwardly, that God who is our Creator, dwells in our soul." (2) In her *Way of Perfection*, St Teresa of Avila wrote: "Remember how St Augustine tells us about his seeking God in many places and eventually finding him within himself. Do you suppose it is of little importance that a soul which is often distracted should come to understand this truth and to find that, in order to speak to its Eternal father and to take its delight in him, it has no need to go to heaven... we need no wings to go in search of Him but have only to find a place where we can be alone and look upon him present within us." In the modern era, Thomas Merton once asked during a talk, "Who am I?" and answered, "My deepest realization of who I am is -I am one loved by Christ... The depths of my identity is in the center of my being where I am loved by God."

In his treatise on *Loving God*, St Bernard stresses the importance of being consciously aware of what he refers to as one's "inner glory." He says that objectively speaking we have such glory in virtue of our creation in God's image (cf. Gen 1:26) and also in virtue of our salvation by the grace of God which abides within us because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (cf. Rm 5:5). He says that these interrelated forms of glory don't do us much good unless we have a conscious knowledge of them. He says: "what glory is there in possessing something you do not know you possess?"(3) When we



become consciously aware of our inner glory, i.e. the divine indwelling, we should not attribute that glory to ourselves but rather to the One who has freely bestowed it upon us. As St Paul said let him who boasts boast in the Lord.” 1 Cor 1:31.

*Some Effects of Divine indwelling*

As I become progressively aware of the divine indwelling I become consciously aware of the fact that Jesus loves me in the way that the Father loved him. As Jesus said: “As the Father has loved me, so I love you.” Jn 15:9. The Spirit gives me the ability “to comprehend with all God’s holy people the length and breadth, the height and depth of the love of Christ which surpasses understanding” Eph 3:16. There have been many moments, some simple, others more profound and memorable when I have been so vividly aware of that love, that it brought tears of joy to my eyes. As St Peter said: “Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy” 1 Pet 1:8.

Remarkable as it may seem, the Father, loves me as if I were Jesus himself endowed with every perfection of divinity. As the 7th Sunday preface of the eucharistic liturgy says the Father sent his son Jesus that he “might see and love in us what he sees and loves in Christ.” The Father says unceasingly to those who have been justified by grace, “You are my beloved son or daughter in whom I am well pleased.” Mt 17:5. When a person enjoys this Christ-like awareness of God’s love, we are able to say with his divine Son who lives within us, “Abba Father” (cf. Rm 8:15). As St Paul says in Gal 4:6: “Because you are sons and daughters, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.”

In par 521 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, we are told on another profound effect of the divine indwelling, namely that Christ lives out his divine-human life in and through us. “Christ enables us to live in him all that he himself lived, and he lives it in us. ‘By his incarnation, he, the Son of God, has in a certain sense united himself with each person.’” St Irenaeus explained one of the implications of this form of indwelling by stating that Christ sanctified every stage of our lives: “For He came to save all through means of Himself – all, I say, who through Him are born again to God – infants, and children, and boys, and youths, and old men. He therefore passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, thus sanctifying infants; a child for children, thus sanctifying those who are of this age, being at the same time made to them an example of piety, righteousness, and submission; a youth for youths, becoming an example to youths, and thus sanctifying

them for the Lord. So likewise He was an old man for old men, that He might be a perfect Master for all, not merely as respects the setting forth of the truth, but also as regards age, sanctifying at the same time the aged also, and becoming an example to them likewise. Then, at last, He came on to death itself, that He might be “the first-born from the dead, that in all things He might have the pre-eminence,” the Prince of life, existing before all, and going before all.”(5)

As we move through the different developmental stages of life, which have been well described by psychologists such as Jung, Piaget, Erickson, Kohlberg, Fowler, Levinson and Gilligan, we can have the faith assurance that we do so in Christ, who went through the very same stages himself. There is nothing in our experience which is alien to him except sin. Even there Paul went so far as to say, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” 2 Cor 5:21.” In other words Christ allowed himself to suffer many of the effects of sin as though he had sinned himself e.g. a certain alienation from God. That was poignantly evident when he cried out on the cross, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” Mt 27:46. So he knows from personal experience what it is like to be human at each of the stages of human life. As we go through the same stages we can make an act of faith in the fact that he is at work within us by his Spirit to know God’s will of love and to carry it out (cf. Phil 2:13). As Ps 37:5 puts it: “Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act.” In other words, by his grace at work within us God will enable us to live Christ’s life in the world today, no matter what the inner and outer obstacles may be. As St Paul proclaimed: “I can do *all things* in him who strengthens me” Phil 4:13.

For example, if I have to relate to someone who irritates me I may find it particularly hard to carry out the golden rule by doing to that person what I would like him or her to do to me (cf. Mt 7:12). But, if I make a decision to do so, believing that it is what God wants me to do, while at the same time trusting in the Spirit’s help, it will become possible. Not only will I want what is best for the other person, I will have an empathic sense of what it might be. One is reminded in this regard of a difficult relationship in the life of St Therese of Lisieux. She felt her vocation was to love as Jesus loves. She wrote: “I am not just to love my neighbors as myself; *I am to love them as Jesus loves them.* (My italics).”(6) She went on to add: “Always, when I act as charity bids, I have this feeling that *it is Jesus who is acting in me;* (My italics) the closer my union with him the greater my love for all the sisters without distinction.”(7)

One of the sisters she lived with had the knack of rubbing her up the wrong way at every turn. Therese says that every time she met this sister “I reminded myself that charity is not a matter of fine sentiments;

it means doing things. So I determined to treat this sister as if she were the person I loved best in the world. Every time I met her I prayed for her, offering God all her virtues and merits...! didn't confine myself to saying a lot of prayers for her... I tried to do her every good turn I possibly could. When I felt tempted to take her down a peg or two with an unkind retort, I would put on my best smile instead, and try to change the subject... We used often to meet, outside recreation time, over our work; and when the struggle was too much for me, I used to turn tail and run.”(8) Therese tells us that the sister in question never suspected what she really felt about her. She tells us that once at recreation, the sister actually said, beaming all over, something like: “I wish you would tell me, Sister Therese, what it is about me that gets the right side of you? You always have a smile for me whenever I meet you.” Therese went on to comment wryly: “Well, of course, what really attracted me about her was Jesus hidden in the depths of her soul... I could only say that the sight of her always made me smile with pleasure – naturally I didn't explain that the pleasure was entirely spiritual.”(9)

Scripture tells us that Christ “himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted” Heb 2:18. When we are faced with powerful temptation, especially against love, we can be sure that if we have realistic self-awareness, and humble and trusting dependence: “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way to escape, that you may be able to endure it” 1 Cor 10:13. Given these realities, no wonder St John Eudes was able to say: “We must continue to accomplish in ourselves the stages of Jesus' life and his mysteries and often to beg him to perfect and realize them in us and in his whole Church... For it is the plan of the son of God to make us and the whole Church partake in his mysteries and to extend them to and continue them in us and in his whole Church. This is his plan for fulfilling his mysteries in us.”(10)

### *Nurturing the sense of indwelling*

It is clear from the scriptures that a number of actions tend to nurture the inward sense of the divine indwelling. I will briefly advert to three of them, praying to be filled with the Spirit, reading and praying the scriptures and receiving the Eucharist in holy communion.

It is the Spirit that leads us into the truth about God and about the divine indwelling. Not surprisingly, therefore, in Eph 5:18, St Paul says: “Be filled with the Spirit.” In the *Summa Theologica* St Thomas asks whether a person can experience more than one in-filling of the Spirit. He responds by saying yes. The first in-filling initiates the divine indwelling, subsequent in-fillings enable “a certain renewal by grace.”(11) Then

he goes on to explain that the Spirit *lives* in us in a new way in order that we may *do* new things, such as giving ourselves more fully to the Lord, e.g. by being willing to embrace some difficult task, such as donating one's money to the poor or volunteering to go on the foreign missions. So it is important to pray regularly for the in-filling of the Spirit. I try to say the following prayer every morning. "Father in heaven, your Spirit is a Spirit of truth and love. Pour that same Holy Spirit into my body, my mind and my soul. Preserve me today from all illusions and false inspirations. Reveal your presence, your word, and your will to me in a way that I can understand. And I thank you that you will do this while giving me the ability to respond through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

To read and pray the scriptures is another wonderful way of nurturing the divine presence within. If Christ abides in people, they, like him, have to be attentive to the revelatory word of God. In the Exech 3:3 the Lord said in a symbolical way to the prophet that he should eat and digest the word of God. St Paul had something similar in mind when he said: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" Col 3:16. One is reminded in this regard of something Francis Bacon wrote: "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested." The bible is preeminent among the latter. We can chew on and digest the word of God in different ways, such as paying attention to the liturgical readings and praying the scriptures on a regular basis by means of *lectio divina*. In Jn 14:25 Jesus says that he will continue to abide in those who keep his word: "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."

Regular reception of the Eucharist, *the* sacrament of God's love, also nourishes the life and expression of Christian life As Jesus says in Jn 6:56, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them." John makes it clear that Christ will only continue to abide in people if, having received him in the Eucharist, they love one another in the way Jesus loves them. He wrote: "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit" I Jn 4:12-13.

### *Christ in our Midst*

There is a well known, much quoted text in Luke 17:21. It can be correctly translated in two ways. In the *New International Version* the first rendition reads: "the kingdom of God is within you" which is literally correct because the Greek word *entos* usually means ".within." The second rendition which is found in many other translations reads: "the kingdom of God is among you." It is also correct because the Greek

word can also mean “among,” or “in the midst” of you. In Col 1:27 there is a similar verse that can be translated in the same two ways. It reads: “To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” The verse can be read as either: “Christ *in you* the hope of glory” or as: “Christ *among you* the hope of glory.” From a theological point of view these renditions are complementary rather than opposed. It is precisely because Christ is present in individual persons that he is also present in the community.

The gospels tell us that Jesus taught that he was present in the community of believers. There is the well known saying: “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” Matt 18:20. The post resurrection account of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus makes a similar point. As a gentile, Luke is asking how can those who have never met the earthly Jesus encounter him after his glorification? He answers, the Risen Jesus is encountered in the eucharistic community where believers share their lives in the context of three important realities, the word of God in scripture, inspired preaching and the breaking of bread. In the light of these realities “their eyes were opened and they recognized him” Lk 24:31. In other words the community discerned the presence of the risen Lord in their midst in a way that made their hearts burn within them (Lk 24:32).

St Paul first came to recognize the indwelling of the Jesus in the community of believers when he had his conversion experience on the road to Damascus. Acts 22:7-8 recounts the dramatic moment. The Lord asked him: ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’ “‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked. “‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied” Acts 22:7-8. From the beginning Paul was aware the Jesus lived in the Christian community. Afterwards, the apostle to the Gentiles used a number of metaphors to express this vivid awareness.

Firstly, Paul referred to the community as the temple of the Lord. This image had its roots in the Old Testament and the gospels. Having stated in 1 Cor 6:19 that each individual’s body is a temple of the Spirit, Paul goes on to say to the community “For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.” 2 Cor 6:16. Sometime later the author of Eph 2:21-22 observes, in Christ: “the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”

The second great image used by Paul is that of the community as the body of Christ. As he says, Christ: “is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in

everything he might have the supremacy” Col 1:18. Then addressing himself to the believers Paul says: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” 1 Cor 12:27-28. The charisms and ministries of the Spirit are the charisms and ministries of Christ who expresses Himself in and through the giftedness of the community (cf. Rm 12:4-9; Eph 4:9-13).

*Christ’s Presence in non-Christians and the Poor*

Once we can discern the presence of Christ in our own hearts we will be able to discern that same presence in the hearts of fellow believers. Just as the Lord lives in me, so the same Lord lives in them, we are all children of God, members of the same family of faith and brothers and sisters of Christ. While Christians should esteem non-Christians, they are neighbors rather than brothers and sisters. This distinction is implied in a number of texts such as: “let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” Gal 6:10 and “Honor all people. Love your brothers and sisters” 1 Pt 2:17. Therefore it is only Christians who are true brothers and sisters, the others are called *hoi exo*, those who stand outside the family of faith (1 Thess 4:10-12; 1 Cor 5:12, 13; Col 4:5).(12) Tertullian echoed this distinction when he distinguished between two kinds of relationship. One depends on common descent and embraces all people; the other depends on the common knowledge of God and a shared experience of the Holy Spirit.(13)

Ralph Martin has written, Christ has “made an extraordinary promise to those who are abiding in close union with him, so much so, *that for his disciples*, those who hear them hear Him: “And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward” Matt 10:42.”(14) Surprisingly, Martin overlooks the existence of anonymous Christians. Because of the notion of baptism of desire, there are many men and women who are secret but unrecognized members of the family of faith because they consciously or unconsciously seek God with a sincere heart. Writing about this the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, says in par. 1260: “Every person who is ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and of his Church, but seeks the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it, can be saved. It may be supposed that such persons would have desired baptism explicitly if they had known its necessity.” Martin goes on to say that those who extend the notion of brotherhood and sisterhood to all people, whether they are disciples or not, are seriously mistaken because they are confusing different modalities of divine presence. He says, that this propensity probably has its roots in the secularizing tendencies of the Enlightenment and the French

Revolution which advocated the notion that all people were equal as brothers and sisters because of the common paternity of their Creator.

While there is undoubted truth in what Martin says, it must be acknowledged that it is not of any great practical value, because one can never be quite sure who is, or who is not a Christian, albeit an anonymous one. In any case there is another notable exception which he overlooks. It blurs the distinction he adverts to, even further. In the parable of the general judgement in Mt 25:31-46, the judge of the world declares to those gathered before him that the works of mercy done or not done for those in need were done or not done for himself, and he calls these poor people in need “the least of my brothers and sisters” Mt 25:40. As Joseph Ratzinger observes: “nothing suggests that only the faithful, only believers in the gospel of Christ, are meant here, as is the case in a similar text (Mk 9:41), but rather all people in need, without differentiation.”(15) He goes on to say in a rather convoluted way: “Christ sees himself generally represented in the poor and lowly especially, people who – quite apart from their ethical quality, but simply through their being lowly, and the appeal to the love of others that lies in that – make present the master.”(16) Evidently, Jesus identified himself so much with the poor and needy, irrespective of their beliefs or behavior, that to love them was to love Him with them and in them. Of course, the two notions of divine presence can come together when those in need are also believing Christians, members of the household of faith. Some people mistakenly argue that if Jesus is present with and within anonymous Christians and the poor and needy, why should we try to evangelize them? We do so for two reasons. It is a divine commission given to us by Christ (Cf. Mk 16:15; Rm 10:14-17), and it is important to help those who do not know Christ to consciously acknowledge and believe in the saving power of the One who is already with them by the Spirit. As St Francis of Assisi once said: “we should preach always and sometimes in words.”

St Vincent de Paul was palpably aware of these truths. Speaking about him Bishop Abelly wrote: “He saw Jesus the worker in artisans, Jesus the poor one in the poor, Jesus the suffering in the sick and dying. He looked on all states in life, seeing in each the image of his sovereign Lord who dwelt in the person of his neighbor. He was moved, in this view, to honor, respect, love and serve each person as our Lord, and our Lord in each individual. He wanted his followers and all those with whom he spoke to enter into these same sentiments, to make their charity toward the neighbor more constant and more perfect.”(17)

Some time ago these truths came alive for me when a traveller, who is an alcoholic, called at the house where I live. I know him well and like him. He asked for some food and drink so I went away and got some. I

also knew that his son had been in hospital with meningitis. I asked how he was. This gave rise to a most eloquent response. He was so keen to tell me about him that he forgot about the food and drink for quite a while. He told me all the details of how he became aware of his son's illness, how he had rushed him to hospital and how the doctors had fought to save his life. He told me of his great love for his son. He showed me how he had cradled him in his arms. He explained that a few years ago his daughter had died of meningitis and that he would have been quite willing to offer his life in return for his son's life. As he spoke about his passionate love for his child, I couldn't help thinking that his love was a reflection of the love and benevolence of God the Father for each one of us. As Jesus said "If you, bad as you are know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him" Mt 7:11. Indeed, this traveller, often spoke about his prayer to God, his trust in God and his gratitude to God for saving his son through the devoted efforts of the doctors. When he was finished his story, he turned to me with a very intent look and said, "Father, you are a true gentleman." Again I felt as if the Lord was speaking to me through his messenger. As Heb 13:2 says: "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it." Although from a strictly human point of view I didn't deserve the travellers compliment, it was as if he were gratuitously saying on God's behalf, "you are my beloved son, in whom I'm well pleased, my favour rests upon you" Mk 1:11.

### *A Prayer*

Lord, help me to see and love in others,  
especially the poor and needy,  
what you are seeing and loving in me.  
Amen.

## NOTES

- (1) *C.G. Jung Speaking*, eds. William Me Guire and R.F.C. Hull, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 165.
- (2) *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 56.
- (3) Quoted by John Higgins, *Thomas Merton on Prayer*, (New York: Image, 1971), 59.
- (4) *The Twelve Steps of Humility and Pride/On Loving God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), 86.
- (5) *Adversus Haereses* book 2, chapter 22, par. 4.
- (6) *Autobiography of a Saint: Therese of Lisieux*, Trans. Ronald Knox, (London: The Harvill Press, 1958), 266.



- (7) *ibid.*, 266.
- (8) *ibid.*, 268.
- (9) *ibid.*, 269.
- (10) *On the Kingdom of Jesus*, Liturgy of the Hours, Week 33, Friday office of readings.
- (11) *ST I, Q. 43, A. 6, rep. Obj. 2.*
- (12) Cf, Joseph Ratzinger, *Christian Brotherhood*, (London: Sheed & Ward, 1966), 66.
- (13) *Ap.*, 39, *CCSL*, I, 151.
- (14) *Unless the Lord Build the House: The Church and the New Pentecost*, (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1975), 30
- (15) *Christian Brotherhood*, op. cit. 27-28.
- (16) *ibid.*, 28.
- (17) *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul* Vol 1, (New York: New City Press, 1993), 107

# World Youth Day, Rome 2000

Niamh O'Flaherty  
(All Hallows College)

The Rome experience for me as a young person was, first and foremost, a warm one. Not only the warm weather but also the warmth of all people both young and old towards each other during that week of celebration. I didn't contemplate much about WYD (World Youth Day) until I actually got there and experienced the overwhelming sense of peace and unity in each one of us. For me it was a time of reflection, a time to sit down and think of where I am in my journey of faith and where this wonderful mysterious journey is leading me. Still I am uncertain, but not knowing makes it all the more zestful.

As a young Catholic the trip was the most enjoyable experience that I have had with my faith so far. That week in Rome, I encountered many friendships on my journey and the friendship with my companions from college grew stronger. Girls that I wasn't acquainted with in college before the trip are now some of my closest friends. During that week we shared a bundle of feelings and adventures with each other, something that I never want to forget and hope that I never will.

It was also a time of rejoicing and giving thanks for my faith, a faith that has brought me through so much in my life like the death of my mother, separation of loved ones and being able to make heart-rending decisions in my life. The City of Rome was such an apt place for giving thanks for my life and the achievements that I have made throughout it.

The sacrament of reconciliation in Circus Maximus was an emotional time for not only myself but for all those who attended there that week. It was a time for reflection on the faults in my life, and made me realise that no matter what wrongs we do, there is someone there to see me through it all. As I came out of confession the multitudes started to sing the chorus of the WYD Jubilee song entitled "Emmanuel",

Sotto la stessa luce  
Sotto la sua croce  
Cantando ad una voce  
El Emmanuel, Emmanuel, Emmanuel

This translated as:

Under the same light  
Under your cross  
We sing in one voice  
Emmanuel, Emmanuel, Emmanuel.

As I listened I welled up inside and thought how lucky I was to be given a chance in life to affirm my faith so freely with everyone around me and not be judged for doing so. It was also a time that I thought of friends in Ireland and their lack of faith and how they believe in things that don't give them anything in return. If I ask God for something and he gives it to me I rejoice and give thanks and when my prayers are not answered I know that He has a reason for not answering them, a reason that will benefit me in the future, and Rome was an extra-special chance for me to give thanks and praise for all that has happened to me in my life.

This song totally depicted to me what WYD in Rome was about. It taught me that no matter where we are in the world, what we are doing, we are all children of God (young or old) gathered together to praise and give thanks for our lives, our lives as Christians, our lives that were given to us to share with the rest of the world.

The night vigil, which we attended on the Saturday evening, was one of excitement and tranquility. As we watched the sun go down and gathered under the night stars, I felt a real sense of security in this world one that I have never experienced before. I felt safe with all of the nations gathered around me as we were all there to share and profess the same faith in one God.

The experience of Rome is one which was different for all of us but it was one journey in my life that I will never forget. Looking back at that hot eventful week in Rome, I will never let go of the feeling of unity amongst my companions on the journey and of all nations gathered together to celebrate and share their faith with one another, a faith that has seen us all through the good times and the bad.

# The Life, (and Death) of Reilly!

Judith Greville DC

*One of the areas of ministry about which little enough has been written in Colloque is that of the directorship of the Daughters of Charity. Sr Judith Greville DC, archivist of the British Province, gives an interesting sidelight in this account of a style of directorship now no longer in operation.*

## **Some thoughts on the life – and, especially, the afterlife – of Sr. Mary Frances Reilly 1871-1949**

The Daughters made their first foundation in Ireland at Drogheda. It opened on 8th November 1853 as an Industrial School. On 4th October 1871, Mary Frances Reilly was born in that town, daughter of Edward and Mary Reilly (variously spelt Reilly and O'Reilly) and baptised the following day in St. Mary's Church. It may well be that she attended the school for she subsequently entered the Community and postulated there, arriving at the Seminary on the 10th January 1894. Her Seminary Notes were not particularly notable:

Tall. Character good and simple. Not much energy but has a free and unconstrained spirit. Judgement and intelligence ordinary. Submissive, laborious and pious. Not much education. (*Let us hope this does not reflect on the school!*)

She received the habit in August of the same year and was placed in Central House, Mill Hill.

Like most sisters she served in several houses: 1897 Smyllum Park Orphanage, Lanark; 1904 Gainford, Co. Durham; 1910 Hull; 1934 Gravesend and 1936 at St. Vincent's Boys' Home in Hull where she was Sister Servant. She died on 20th November 1949 and was buried in the Holderness Road Cemetery, Hull.

Again, like most sisters, her brief notes say little about her life and achievements or that inner life known to God alone. She left no biography or diaries. She was really very ordinary and unremarkable. She did her work adequately. She does not appear as a "notable other" in

any classification. Except, that is, until November 1951 when the local authorities decided to relocate the cemetery. Permission was granted to exhume the graves and the Community received the following letter from H. Moses & Sons, Funeral Furnishers of Beverley Road, Hull.

21st December 1951

*To Whom it may concern.*

I was present at the Exhumation of the late Sister Mary Frances (Reilly) on the 16th November 1951 and am able to state that the body was intact and was easily recognisable, being in a remarkable state of preservation.

*Signed* A. Harold Moses  
Managing Director H. Moses & Sons Ltd.

Some sisters who were young in the Community around this time remember being told that a sister had been found incorrupt. It was no big deal, but came out as a yarn at recreation time – more by way of amusement at the reaction of the then Director than as a pious reflection on the sister concerned! It was said that a sister came flying into the chapel to tell Ff. Joe Sheedy the news and found him saying his office. “Father, they have just found a sister in the Hull cemetery whose body is incorrupt!” It is reported that he did not look up from his breviary but said, “We have plenty of saints in our Community, Sister. Bury her!”

Fortunately the sisters did begin to ask what Sister Mary Frances Reilly was really like. We have two accounts of her. One of these accounts is undated, but the other was written on 27th February 1952. We treasure them. Here they are in full.

*Re Sister Reilly who was found incorrupt  
when the coffin was opened.*

A Sister writes –When I came to Mill Hill in 1895 Sr. Reilly had charge of the kitchen, after receiving the Holy Habit. A tall slim sister, very laborious and a very capable manager, her office always in perfect order. She was gifted by God with the greatest favour of making Community Life happy for herself and others,

by a great sense of humour, and hence was always bright and smiling no matter what happened. She enjoyed telling us that in Phibsborough where she lived before entering, old Fr. Dan O'Sullivan had his confessional there. Once on an evening she went to him. In those days no such thing as electric light was in common use, and Fr. Dan kept a lighted candle in the box. Seeing him bringing it towards her face she blew it out, vigorously! This was typical of what she would do, and enjoy doing.

All her Community life was spent in kitchens, and her cooking was of the best. She took pleasure and interest in it. The kitchen was a hive of industry in those days. The Seminary Sisters helped her at work there, scrubbing and rubbing. There were no aids in use to lessen the labour anywhere about the house. After two years of such activity, in her zeal to be always first down in the morning after the rising bell at 4 o'clock she suffered an unfortunate mishap. She had placed her cornette overnight on top of her jug, not noticing that it was full to the brim with water that had soaked it. It was only later on in the morning that she realised the fact. It had serious results, causing her to become deaf with ear inflammation. She was moved from Mill Hill and never placed there again, but she was devoted to Central House and always came there for her retreats. Sister Langdale laughingly said that she was so delighted to be there again that she herself nearly lost her balance through the vigorous clutch she received on her arrival.

After working in various kitchens in the Province she came to Gravesend. When visiting her kitchen there it was indeed edifying to see how devoted she was to keeping Our Lord's words in her heart "I was hungry and you gave me to eat." –Such was the care she had for the poor. At this point of her life she became delicate, but was always up for the morning Mass. To attain this she so arranged her work that all food for the household's supper and breakfast was prepared perfectly before she retired to bed about 4 o'clock. This was her custom during the rest of her stay at Gravesend. Her kitchen labours ended when she was made Sister Servant in Hull. When I took her up there she laughingly said, "Glory be to God, to think of taking the old rooster from her perch to make her a Sister Servant!"

The people up there took to her bright and kindly ways and she was devoted to the Poor. The Rev. Fr. Mackin was the Parish Priest at that time, but not for very long as he went over to Ireland and died rather suddenly there. Sister was extremely good to priests and big-hearted to everyone. When the late War broke out the household moved for safety up to Scarborough.

Her Letters, which always ended with “God and Mary bless you!” were full of admiration of the beautiful scenery up there. She was always wishing to be moved from the office of Sister Servant, saying she should never have been make one. It was characteristic of her not to blame companions who had various ways ‘unlike what sisters ought to have’. Her way of describing them was simply to laugh and say, “Isn’t it funny that sisters should have got into such queer ways?” Sister Branigan, who was moved from the orphanage here, was alone with her at the moment of her death as the sisters were at Mass, and could give the best details of what it was like. Sister Reilly could not be left alone for any length of time, her heart being so affected.

*Signed Sister Josephine O’Driscoll*

*Sister Margaret Branigan wrote as follows*

My dear Sister Augustine,

The Grace of Our Lord be with us for ever! You surely did spring a surprise on me with your letter about Sister Mary R.I.P. As Sister was very ill when I arrived and remained so till her death, there isn’t very much I can say. As a matter of fact too, her mind was affected so we had quite a job coping with her, as you will remember she was a very big and masterful woman.

One thing I did notice she was a great prayer. She had great devotion to ejaculatory prayers, and would be heard repeating them many times during the days and nights. Sister retained her strong sense of humour and repartee right up to the last. From many who attended her funeral I gathered that Sister was famous in Hull for her all embracing charity and kindness, particularly to the boys of the Working Boys’ Home where she had laboured for many years.

The presence too, of the Bishop and over thirty priests at her funeral testified to the great esteem in which she was held by them. The Bishop was a personal and intimate friend of Sister’s for many years. He visited her regularly every week during her long illness. Many a story he told of his acquaintance with her since boyhood days. He sang the Solemn Requiem Mass and officiated at the graveside. From Heaven Sister will no doubt continue to help by her intercession her dear boys of St. Vincent’s. May she rest in peace.

Sister made no great stir during her life, and only briefly after her death. I don't know what science makes of incorruptibility these days or even if it has any significance at all. Maybe it was a sign of Divine approval of *the Life of Reilly* to her sisters in Community, or maybe it was just a sign of Divine approval of that first House of the Sisters in Ireland, just as the story of Sister Agnes Hunt in 1886 was taken as a sign of St. Louise's blessing on the new Provincial Seminary in Mill Hill. God knows!