

Marquette University
e-Publications@Marquette

Theology Faculty Research and Publications

Theology, Department of

11-1-2013

The Milk of Missionary Offspring

Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator

Marquette University, agbonkhianmeghe.orobator@marquette.edu

Published version. *Religious Life Review*, Vol. 52, No. 283 (November/December 2013): 337-343.

[Publisher Link](#). © 2013 Dominican Publications. Used with permission.

The Milk of Missionary Offspring

AGBONKHIANMEGHE E. OROBATOR, SJ

It is a vast agenda I am invited to address¹ – and so is the heritage, reaching back to St Columba's sixth-century missionary expedition to Iona in Scotland. I will offer thoughts on the role that Ireland has already played in mission and missionary development. I will speak on the transformation that is taking place with fewer Irish-born missionaries serving in developing countries – and my vision of the future for missionaries and what role Ireland might play in that future.

A PERSONAL TESTIMONY

I stand here a proud testament to Irish missionary enterprise in Africa. When I converted to Catholicism as a teenager in the early 1980s, living eyewitnesses in my local parish reminisced about Patrick Kelly, the saintly and selfless founding bishop of Benin City, my home diocese. Sisters Scholastica and Henrietta and their intrepid band of sisters of Our Lady of Apostles educated several of my siblings at Maria Goretti Grammar School there. A short distance from my home, Sr Eugenius ran the finest mission hospital in town, where my younger siblings and several relatives were born. During novitiate training in the Society of Jesus, I had my inaugural apostolic experience at St Camillus Hospital of the Religious Sisters of Charity, in Uromi, and at Mile Four Hospital of the Medical Missionaries of Mary in Abakaliki. The desire to join the Jesuits was kindled by weekly visits to *Ossiamo Leprosarium* where I witnessed Sr Elizabeth Fallon and her fellow Daughters of Charity serve with passion and compassion women and men wasted by that

1. The occasion of this address is noted on p 324 above [Editor].

terrible disease and banished to the periphery of humanity. Several years later, Father Cecil McGarry would influence my career option by his example of solid theological scholarship at Hekima College in Nairobi, just as Father John Guiney would do by his example of grassroots pastoral ministry in the slums of Kangemi. Father Sean O'Connor travelled the length and breadth of East Africa, shepherding many to the Society of Jesus. Sean was justly nicknamed the 'Great Fisherman'. During fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation, it was in Kitovu Hospital of the Irish Medical Missionaries of Mary and St Francis Hospital of the Irish Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Africa in Uganda that I found the most innovative programmes of home-based care and education for life in a country where the rural population faced near extinction by HIV/AIDS. And were it not for the pioneering, courageous and compassionate work of Father Michael Kelly in Africa and globally, HIV/AIDS would not have become a mainstream concern in Catholic theological ethics as it is now. I could multiply examples, but the point is clear: wherever you look, in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, South America and the West Indies, Irish missionaries – sisters, priests, brothers, lay volunteers and lay missionaries – have trodden the globe like the Shakespearean colossus, vanguards of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Was the Irish missionary enterprise different from others? It was. Let me give you examples.

For a start, the advent of Christianity in some parts of Africa is almost always associated with the establishment of Western colonial political hegemony and with economic exploitation. However, unlike the French, English, Portuguese, Spaniards, Dutch, Belgians, and Italians, Irish missionaries had the unique distinction of not fronting that colonising agenda. Although former President Mary McAleese famously eulogised them as 'unpaid ambassadors' of Ireland, the fact is they avoided overt political and economic interests that so often cast missionary endeavours in the shadow of an ambiguous adventure.

In relation to the cost of missionary enterprise, William Whitaker Shreeve, a British colonial official made this terrifying assessment in 1847 of the missionary adventure in Africa. He wrote: '[U]ntil some great revolution in nature or some great and gradual human exertion takes place, it [Africa] must ever prove the "white man's grave".... It may truly may be said that "Africa's shores are paved with the white man's bones, and its graveyards filled with monuments of lost exertions"; but as Christians we should and *must* persevere' (Shreeve 1847: 2 – 3). Shreeve wrote while Ireland was being devastated by famine in the 1840s. As a brief visit to the cemeteries of St Austin in Nairobi or St Joseph in Mombasa, Kenya, reveals, Irish missionaries and the other harbingers of Christianity in Africa fulfilled Shreeve's macabre prognosis to the letter. But the tombs of these missionaries are anything but 'monuments of lost exertions'. Or else I would not be standing before you today!

HISTORICAL FEATURES OF IRISH MISSIONARY SERVICE

To understand the transitions in the Irish missionary enterprise and seek to imagine its future, we need carefully to note some of its features. Among its historical characteristics, I highlight five – though there are more, for sure.

Firstly, by all accounts, Ireland's brand of missionary Christianity was an example, in its composition, of *inclusive ecclesial mission*. The missionary caravan of priests, sisters and brothers came from diverse religious congregations, but it also included diocesan priests, members of societies of apostolic life, and a significant number of lay people.

Secondly, it emerged from and was motivated by a *global vision of church*. Long before Karl Rahner proposed the notion of 'world church' as the paradigm of post-Vatican II ecclesiology, the Irish missionary enterprise already prefigured the notion of globalisation.

Thirdly, *it focused on real needs*. Missionary activity covered a vast spectrum of developmental initiatives. I characterise the Irish approach as 'developmental evangelisation'. It is debatable to what extent aspects of Irish history, particularly the denial

of education to the people until the mid-19th century, the unjust system of land tenure and the Great Famine, influenced the integration into missionary activity of practical aspects of development, notably education, healthcare, and agricultural and rural development.

Fourthly, *women played a vital role in the missionary economy*. From Atakpame to Abakaliki, Makurdi to Masaka, ubiquitous and heroic communities of women religious and members of societies of apostolic life defied unimaginable odds to establish and manage educational and healthcare institutions in several parts of sub-Saharan Africa, while providing pastoral support in parishes and remote outstations.

Lastly, it was done *in solidarity with the local church in Ireland*. In this sense and literally, the laity was its backbone. Some of you can still recall accounts of missionary exploits faithfully recorded and disseminated via missionary magazines and those collection boxes strategically located in parishes and in village shops. These activities generated pride and sustained a strong support in the local Irish church for the work of missionaries. To quote a former professor of church history at Milltown Park, those were the days when 'the pride of every Irish farmer was to have a bull (or a well) in the yard and a son at Maynooth!' Understandably, Irish missionaries replicated a familiar model of Church with a predilection for church attendance, devotional practices and pietistic worship.

PRESENT CHALLENGES AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Is there a way of integrating the past with the present, or of making sense of the state of contemporary mission in Ireland? There is a general consensus that paints a gloomy picture of the matter. In the minds of many, the Irish missionary juggernaut has run its course and is now out of steam. Statistics don't lie! In erstwhile mission territories, Irish missionary presence has contracted to a handful of older Irish-born missionaries with only minimal replenishment from the Irish-based missionary congregations. In Ireland, the irresistible 'tsunami' of secularisation erodes the capacity of traditional Catholic culture

hitherto considered as the primary transmitter of faith. The dwindling missionary capital of the church here is beyond doubt. The question now is: is Ireland ready to harvest the fruits of its missionary labours *on its own soil*, or will the church simply opt to bear the burden of diminishment with resentment and nostalgia? May I suggest four areas where I believe mission 'made in Ireland' retains an ongoing relevance?

Firstly, although the landscape has changed and still does, drastically, there is need to revive and sustain the twin missionary strategies of education and health as catalysts of integral human development and social transformation. These mark critical areas of partnership and solidarity in mission.

Secondly, an emerging area of missionary involvement is through advocacy and networking. Although it falls on local religious personnel to take the lead in promoting reconciliation, justice, peace, gender empowerment, ecological integrity and fair trade, religious communities in Europe seem well placed to initiate networks of global advocacy, targetting the remote causes and political interests at the root of socioeconomic and political malaise in parts of the developing world. Virtual communication and social media offer effective platforms for advocacy and networking on issues of shared interest between the church in the global north and the global south.

Thirdly, the future of mission in the world church depends on a radical openness to lay participation and leadership. The Irish missionary enterprise has had the unique distinction of promoting lay participation. At present the role of lay volunteers and partners who desire to serve abroad is emblematic of a residual and resilient missionary spirit in Ireland. My Jesuit province of Eastern Africa has benefitted immensely from such new models of gospel-inspired and lay-led mission and service. This secularisation of missionary activity parallels in some respects the secularisation of society in Ireland, but it neither diminishes nor extenuates the passion to take the gospel abroad.

I would like to introduce my fourth and final point, which I have entitled a 'new partnership for mission in the world

church', by quoting an African proverb: *When a rabbit reaches old age it survives on the milk of its offspring*. Theorists of religion tell us that contemporary Europe at best represents a 'post-missionary', and 'post-Christian', reality; at worst, it is trapped in an irreversible trajectory of decline. I mentioned a pessimistic approach that ceaselessly laments the decline and demise of mission in Ireland. To my mind, as a way of explaining the present situation in Ireland, this 'framework of decline and fragmentation' (Jenkins 1999: 27) is grossly inadequate. Another explanation is possible, namely that the present situation constitutes a stage in the missionary life cycle that flourishes and ebbs through a series of transitions (cf. *ibid*, 38). Properly conceived, mission does not terminate with the departure of the missionary to a vaguely remembered homeland recently fallen prey to marauding secularising forces and a church besmirched by sex abuse scandals. On the contrary, mission progresses to a new stage with the coming of age of mission territories and the assumption by local personnel of responsibility for the mission of the church. Significant demographic shifts in Christianity places the church in the global south on an axis of growth. Such territories as Ireland (and the rest of Europe) now represent new mission frontiers in the world church. As one veteran Irish Jesuit missionary in Southern Africa once confessed, 'if I were to start my life of ministry all over again in these days, I would have no doubt – the need is greater in Ireland'. Returning to my metaphor of lactation, I suggest that it is now time for the church of Ireland and Europe to consider surviving by feeding on the milk of its missionary offspring.

In practical terms, this new partnership for mission in the world church places on the church in the global south the duty of offering suitably qualified personnel and human resources to the church in Ireland as well as the responsibility of learning to live in and adapt to an unfamiliar culture, just as Irish missionaries did formerly. Mind you, this partnership raises two complementary and critical challenges.

Firstly, it is imperative to rethink the efficacy of aid as a developmental tool. After decades of transfer of vast monetary aid, human and socio-economic development in the global south remains but a fraction of what it should be. So we ask: besides aid, what are the means of assisting other churches that prioritise solidarity, partnership and mutuality in mission? For this partnership to succeed, the agenda of development must not be decided unilaterally and foisted on the local population. Rather, it should be the outcome of dialogue, discernment and mutual exchange, with a view to meeting the greatest needs either here or abroad.

Secondly, although I have said that in the past, the Irish missionary enterprise did not fly the banner of Ireland's overseas political agenda, mission today has become increasingly dependent on the financial support of government channeled through organisations such as *Misean Cara*. In this arrangement, it is worth confronting issues in sexual ethics that test the compatibility of purpose between Irish government aid and faith-based development and mission.

IN CONCLUSION

At the 2009 African Synod, the then Pope Benedict XVI spoke in glowing terms of Africa's spiritual potential: 'Africa constitutes an immense spiritual "lung" for a humanity that appears to be in a crisis of faith and hope.' This flattering description expresses an implicit belief in the potential of the religious fortunes of Africa to rejuvenate a church in crisis. Benedict's pulmonary metaphor offers a vital lesson for Ireland. For several centuries successive generations of courageous women and men sailed from these shores to various parts of the world as ambassadors of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As we speak, the church in Ireland urgently needs the resuscitating breath of the church in the south in order to survive and grow.
