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Vincentian Mission Team in Ireland

Michael McCullagh, C.M.

The Church in which we work

In order to understand better our apostolate of parish mission it is important that we situate it in the context of the Church in which we work.

The Catholic Church in Ireland holds a place in the culture and history of the people that is unique in Europe. For almost eight hundred years the island of Ireland was colonised. After the Reformation the Catholic religion became an integral part of Irish identity. Large numbers of Protestants (notably Scottish Presbyterians) were ""planted" in Ireland, given the best lands in return for their loyalty (notably true in Northern Ireland where the ""plantation" began in 1609). The effect of these policies was probably the opposite of what was intended and it served only to enforce the link between being Irish and being Catholic. Gradually the pressure was lessened, and in 1829 an Act of Parliament provided for Catholic Emancipation. This enabled the hierarchy to become established, and a tremendous era of development, organization and growth began in the Irish Church.

The Vincentian community

The Vincentian community, founded independently from the Congregation on the continent in 1833, gave its first parish mission in 1842. From the 1840s to about 1880 the Vincentians and Jesuits (later joined by the Redemptorists and others) were engaged in a very successful campaign of parish missions. These really established the parish structures throughout the country, countered the proselytizing campaigns of Protestant denominations, regularized marriages and established a sacramental life for the people. Later the community concentrated on education, formation of clergy, yet without abandoning missions. By 1859 there were central missions houses, two in Ireland and one each in England and Scotland, the latter two catering for Irish emigrants.

The decline of the mission teams

As Church structures were established parish missions tended to become more devotional and less directly evangelical and catechetical, and the leading place of the Vincentians was taken over by the Jesuits, Redemptorists, Passionists and others.

The centrality of the Catholic Church

By the time of Irish independence from the United Kingdom in 1921 the Church had taken a very central place in the life of the country. The new constitution of 1937 enshrined the

""special" place of the Catholic Church ""as the religion of the vast majority of the Irish population." Virtually every town had schools (primary and secondary, for boys and girls) run by large communities of religious. Most of the health care was also in their hands. In both cases they had become involved long before the government had any such concern. (It was an era of large numbers of priestly and religious vocations, sodalities and confraternities, and the era of the establishment of the St Vincent de Paul Society and the Legion of Mary).

The emerging secular state

It could be that the Church remained in positions of power and influence for too long. Gradually there was pressure from government and trade unions for control, and more recently, with a dramatic reduction in vocations, religious in particular have had little option but to hand over control of both educational and medical institutions. (In some instances religious, prompted by their own charism and thrust, took the initiative in handing over control, and engaged in a servant role once more).

Present-day political and social reality

In the 1990s there is considerable opposition to the institutional Church coming from a variety of directions, government, media, the European Union, and the impact of materialist-secular thinking. In a country with a well-educated population, but also a high level of unemployment, there is considerable disillusionment. In recent years much of this anger has been directed at the Church, which many regard as part of their problem rather than a sign of hope. The Church, in the main, is fighting a rearguard action to protect its place in society. A series of scandals among the clergy has greatly damaged the credibility of the Church, and despite relatively large church attendances, there is a rapid deserting of the Church. The schools _ so long the central means of "control" _ are no longer effective in this role. There is a sad lack of any means of getting "Vatican Two" thinking to the people, so many of whom, though well-educated and professionally trained, remain very poorly informed about their religion. Some will say that parishes provide little more than masses and sacraments _ very little in terms of reading, education, formation, or prayer.

It is in this environment that our missions are taking place.

New images of Church

It is only in the past fifteen years or so that a special need for evangelization has arisen in this country. Our Mission Team sees itself as playing a part in this work. We strive not to *revive the Church*, nor even to reform it, but somehow to play our part in bringing to birth, if not a *New Church*, then at least a very new model of Church, with a different style than before.

Increased alienation

The Church of the 1950s is becoming increasingly alien to Irish culture and society. The Church which is more and more middle-class seems to have lost much of its confidence and

has tended to turn in on itself, and is withering. Changes seem to be made only because they have to be, and as a last resort, rather than with a sense of excitement and being led by a creative Spirit. There is widespread alienation in Irish society, and by and large those people are also alienated from the Church.

New emerging voices

Reflective women are not attracted to a Church which brooks no criticism. Groups of people who cannot fit their lives into the officially sanctioned patterns of sexual behaviour feel excluded from the Church. There is a yawning gulf between the youth pop-culture and the experience of boredom in Christian worship.

Church as community rather than institution

The new Church will be more community based, and less dependent on institutions or education as vehicles of control and order. There will be a greater sense of people choosing to belong. There will be far more participation, and less clerical domination. It will be a Church more concerned with the needs and problems of society, rather than being preoccupied with its own preservation as something separate _ a sort of "perfect society". It will be more prayerful and less dogmatic, more scripturally nourished and less centred on the sacraments, more trusting of women and the young, and much more given to listening than dictating.

These are the images which support our efforts as a Mission Team.

A call to a new model of mission

There is a call to a new evangelization in a society such as ours, Western and European in terms of culture, economic policy and future legislation. People are now enlightened; traditional devotions have waned or disappeared; people are informing their own consciences; the God of retribution has fallen into disfavour. Since Vatican Two we have been trying to adapt.

A time of re-founding

Since 1980 a new team has been formed with people specifically qualified for popular parish missions, and that team, with changes in personnel, has been fully operational to the present day.

A call by the whole Congregation to a new model of mission

1. Provincials' meeting, Bogotá, 1983: The Superior General calls for a renewal of the traditional mission and a Congregation which would reflect a pilgrim theology in our willingness to go from place to place in the work of evangelization.
2. Constitution 1:3 calls us to collaboration with clergy and laity.
3. We have been called to serve the "more abandoned" (Cons. par. 1). (Designated in the Provincial Plan as the "urban poor").
4. The call to the work of justice. The General Assembly of 1992 called us to study the root causes of poverty and to carry out a social analysis of the lives of the people among whom we work.

Pre-mission, mission-event, and post-mission

The majority of Mission Teams in Provinces around the world are now working on a three-fold approach to missions which recognizes the on-going mission of the parish.

Proclamation Sunday and first public meeting

A member of the Mission Team preaches at all the masses, announces the mission and calls the people to a public meeting at which there is a random survey of the needs of the parish. This first public meeting is chaired by *a lay person* from the parish. At this meeting also there is a call from various committees who will undertake the task of the mission. (Further reflections on this later).

Mission and ministry weekends

We run two separate weekends in January each year here in All Hallows for the adults and young adults of the parishes to which we have been invited. (We expect at least six representatives from each parish). The purpose of these weekends is to help the parishioners to clarify their vision for their parish mission, acquire the skills to do a social analysis of their community and to draw up a tentative plan for the task ahead.

The Pastoral Ministry Team in All Hallows is the primary contributor at these weekends, together with other students from the All Hallows Institute.

On-going formation of mission teams in the parish

Each member of the Vincentian Mission Team takes responsibility for the formation of the parish teams in the time leading up to the mission event. Other parishes who have experienced a parish mission help the parishes in their preparations also.

Mission event: The community and the institution

In many instances there would be 50% or less attendance at church services. (We have observed that many of the upper classes and almost all of the lower classes no longer attend church). To address this we run two weeks of a mission event, the first week being in the community reaching those who, for a variety of reasons, no longer worship in their local churches. This is the week of *outreach*. The events of this week are concentrated, not in the church, but in halls, homes, even pubs _ wherever people meet. A range of activities will be held throughout this week, trying to reach the young, the elderly, the unemployed, all sorts of people, without expecting them to come to church. There would be prayer gatherings, scripture-sharing sessions, educational sessions on aspects of faith, music sessions _ all depending on the work the groups set up in advance. We simply give them ideas, tell them of what others did, and encourage them. It is their community, their Church, and their mission

Mission event: Commissioning Sunday

The parishioners are missioned to bring the good news of the mission to each home in the parish one week before the mission-event begins.

Mission-event: The gathering week

This week is celebrated in church, concentrating on good preaching and a quality of liturgical expression for the sacramental lives of the people. Drama, mime, a variety of speakers and voices from various sectors of the community feature this week, in addition to the missionaries.

The role of the parish community in mission (Presented by Maureen, a parishioner and member of the mission team).

From passivity to activity

In recent times there is a growing awareness of the need within communities to come together and help shape their future. A more active participation will be demanded from many if their parish is to grow and develop. It is a call from passivity to activity. A mission can be a great opportunity in a parish to get people involved and to help them to discover their gifts and opportunities for ministry.

For most people in Ireland it is within their parish that they experience what it means to be part of the Church. For them there is little difference between the local and the universal Church. It is the local Church which touches their reality in a very real and tangible way, particularly in the "Key Life Moments" and celebrations, such as births, marriages and deaths.

A call to live our baptismal vocation

The Second Vatican Council gave us a new vision of the Church as the People of God where each and every person has a part to play. Yet many people in the Church have still not fully assimilated its message and meaning into their lives. Pope John XXIII spoke of the parish as the "village fountain" to which all would have recourse in their thirst. In the document *Christifideles laici* the role of the laity is clearly defined:

It is necessary that in the life of the faith *all rediscover the true meaning of the parish*, that is, the place where the very "mystery" of the Church is present and at work.... The parish is not principally a structure, a territory, or a building, but rather "the family of God, a fellowship afire with the unifying spirit", a familial and welcoming home, the community of the faithful.

As a lay person I can explain my own experience of parish, of my own experiences as a wife and mother bringing up a family and trying to live a life of faith in today's world. For many people it is a new experience to see a lay person and a woman speaking to them about Faith and Parish and the Church.

In the lead up to mission we are helping people to become aware of the gift of their baptism and what they have to offer to the building up of the community. We stress that this is their mission and that they will have a big part to play in the final shape of it. For many people this may be the first time they have ever been invited to get involved in Parish. So, following the Proclamation Sunday as mentioned above, all are invited to a public meeting.

The function of this initial public meeting is to try to bring people to explore their vision of Parish and mission. This first meeting is important in that it helps people to focus on the needs of the parish and it gives them a place to voice those needs. Mission is not just about a team of people coming to a parish for a short time. Rather it is about a life-long journey of faith, and the mission-event is just a small step on that journey. It can be a very important step, one which can affect the future of individuals and communities.

The mission of "'Like-to-like'

In many communities there is a growing number of support-type groups where people minister to one another, and in such an atmosphere of care and compassion, healing takes place. The mission-event can help to develop this *like-to-like* ministry in a parish setting. In the preparation for mission many will have a chance to discover that they do have something to share with others in their community. The mission-event can be a celebration of all that is taking place in a parish community.

Post-mission

Many of the following are taking place or are in process as follow-up to the mission-event.

1. An evaluation by an outside facilitator of the work of the mission, in the presence of the Vincentian Mission Team and the parish-based team.

2. The formation of a Pastoral Council.
3. Lay ministry educational programmes in the parish.
4. Further study of lay ministry, or a degree in theology at All Hallows.

(Much of the above is facilitated by the All Hallows Institute for Mission and Ministry).

Future developments

1. Concentrating on the urban poor as requested by our Provincial Plan.
2. Continue to collaborate with other agencies of parish renewal.
3. Invite diocesan clergy, and others in lay ministry, to join us on missions.
4. Have a Social Justice element in our missions resulting in some concrete action for the materially poor.

Conclusions

The problems which we are facing in the Church in Ireland today were faced in many European countries during the 1960s and 1970s. This is a significant advantage to us. We have possibilities which were not readily available to others then, both in terms of theology and an increasing number of lay people interested in, and trained in, theology and related skills. Many people have a strong basic faith, and while we might complain about the inactivity of the institutional Church there are many competent people to fill the roles of leadership in all of this. It is an exciting time in the Irish Church, and Vincentians as missionaries have a part to play with a lot of others, in the age-old task begun by Him who came to bring the Good News to the poor.

APPENDIX ONE

Major points from the Provincials' meeting in Rio de Janeiro in 1989

These were their main conclusions regarding the evangelizing of the poor.

1. All of our apostolic activity must be realized in union with Christ, in contact with the poor, and in fidelity to the Church.
2. We need to be inserted in the local Church and participate in the life of the local community.

3. Every missionary (sic) should feel the need to be a professional in the work of evangelization.
4. There must be a greater commitment to the poor, in order to re-evangelize the Church and missionaries through the poor.
5. Encourage on-going formation for clergy and laity.
6. There must be a commitment to social justice. Investigate seriously the "root causes of poverty" (NB the words of Pope John Paul II, cited above).
7. For the evangelization of the poor, use should be made of the best means of social communication.

APPENDIX TWO

Provincial Plan of the Irish Province, 1992

Target One: Mission Teams.

To develop strategies for evangelization, especially in urban parishes in Ireland and Britain.

Why?

- a) It is a practical expression of the kind of missions for which we were founded.
- b) Today the lapsed and unchurched and the poor are found in great number mainly in urban areas.

How?

- a) Form a working party composed of members of the current mission team, parish priests of designated parishes, designated staff from All Hallows, Damascus House, and Strawberry Hill, and members of the Provincial Council to research and draw up clear models of parish mission.
- b) Focus the work of teams on the urban poor, and highlight priority areas for missions (e.g. North Dublin, South London, Cork, Glasgow).
- c) Collaborate, where possible, with Daughters of Charity, Society of St Vincent de Paul, clergy and laity.
- d) Dialogue with priest in the highlighted areas, with the hope that we are invited to work with him.
- e) Investigate financial implications of (c).

Who?

- a) Directors of Mission Teams.
- b) Designated confreres.

Where?

Damascus House, London; All Hallows, Dublin.

When?

- a) Initiated by Directors of Teams by December 1991.
- b) Teams to develop so that the new direction is more clearly visible by Autumn 1993.

APPENDIX THREE

The major points which emerged from the presentations of confreres engaged in parish missions, at CIF, Paris, Autumn 1994:

1. Today our work in parish missions is almost a case of going after the 99!
2. Young people must be encountered - they have a new image of Church.
3. There was a strong emphasis on ministry to priests.
4. New ways are being sought for mission - the old are obsolete.
5. The mission is on-going, hence pre-mission, mission-event, post-mission.
6. A wide chasm is evolving between priests and people.
7. Missions must be collaborative in character.
8. The mission must operate within the pastoral plan of the parish.