

Spring 2008

Poverty Reduction—A Vincentian Initiative in Higher Education: The All Hallows Experience

Dorrie Balfe O.P., MA

John Joe Spring MA, Dip.Th.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj>

Recommended Citation

Balfe, Dorrie O.P., MA and Spring, John Joe MA, Dip.Th. (2008) "Poverty Reduction—A Vincentian Initiative in Higher Education: The All Hallows Experience," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 2 , Article 10. Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol28/iss2/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentian Heritage Journal by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

Poverty Reduction — A Vincentian Initiative in Higher Education: The All Hallows Experience

BY

DORRIE BALFE, O.P., MA

Director, Social Justice and Public Policy Program

AND

JOHN JOE SPRING, MA, DIP.TH.

Vice President, All Hallows College

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to reflect on the experience of addressing poverty reduction in a higher educational environment under a Vincentian administration. All Hallows College, situated in North City Dublin, is such a college. Founded in 1842, the College has been under Vincentian administration since 1892. Though not Vincentians, both authors of this article have been members of the staff at All Hallows for the past eighteen years. It is in that context that we have experienced the Vincentian charism in action.

Our approach here is to set the historical context out of which the present commitment to poverty reduction has grown, to track key moments of change in the past and to describe how a new postgraduate program in *Social Justice and Public Policy* is addressing such a key moment at present. We believe that this program is rooted in the College's Vincentian heritage, that it reflects priorities from the current All Hallows strategic plan and that it addresses educationally important issues at a time when the prevailing 'Celtic Tiger' economy is leaving many people so badly behind. For example a recent Conference of Religious of Ireland (CORI) socio-economic review entitled *Addressing Inequality*, with findings based on relative poverty, claims the following:

Despite the advances in employment and economic growth achieved over the last few years, the phenomenon of poverty remains large. While there has been some progress in recent years, its continued existence remains as one of the country's major failures... most weekly social assistance rates paid to single people are €24.07 below the poverty line.... From CSO (Central Statistics Office) we can calculate the numbers of people in Ireland who have been in poverty for the years

1994, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2004, and 2005. These calculations are presented in table 3.3 below. The result gives a better insight into how large the phenomenon of poverty is.¹

Table 3.3: The numbers of people below relative income poverty lines in Ireland, 1994-2005

	% of persons in poverty	Population of Ireland	Numbers in poverty
1994	15.6	3,585,900	559,400
1998	19.8	3,703,000	733,194
2001	21.9	3,847,200	824,537
2003	19.7	3,978,900	783,843
2004	19.4	4,043,800	784,497
2005	18.5	4,130,700	764,179

The Celtic Tiger economy has not raised all boats, and this is a unique opportunity for educationalists to review their educational outreach. It is not the first time that the College was faced with such a challenge.

The All Hallows story is a fascinating one. At key moments in the history of the College “two roads diverged in a yellow wood...”² Each time that has happened, the road taken, while steeped in Vincentian tradition, has opened up new vistas and at times called for a redefinition of the College mission. At these key stages courageous leadership dared untraveled roads. As will be seen, the influence of the Vincentian charism, with emphasis on pastoral care, pastoral formation, hospitality, and service to the poor is clearly discernible at every turn.

Founding Years

All Hallows College was founded in 1842 by a Maynooth-trained diocesan priest from County Meath, Father John Hand. He was one of a number

¹ CORI Justice, *Socio-Economic Review 2007 – Addressing Inequality, Policies to Ensure Economic Development, Social Equity and Sustainability* (Dublin: 2007), 20-25.

² From Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken” in Neil Macmonagle, ed., *Lifelines* (Dublin: 1992), 78.

of young seminarians and priests who were deeply influenced at this time by the rapidly expanding European missionary movement which had arisen in response to the needs of the “foreign missions.”



All Hallows College, North City Dublin, Ireland.
 Period postcard.
Public Domain

Although the founding and administration of the College for the first fifty years of its existence was a diocesan initiative, the Vincentian influence was strongly present right from the outset. During their student years, Father Hand and a number of his fellow students had become deeply impressed by the Vincentian charism and had in 1838 attached themselves to the recently established Vincentian community at Saint Peter’s, Phibsboro. It was while living and working with this community that Father Hand gave shape and, eventually, substance to his cherished dream of establishing an Irish movement for the ‘Propagation of the Faith.’

From its beginnings All Hallows College, has been outward looking. Its founding purpose was to train priests for mission abroad. Within three years of the founding of the College poverty directed its course in a spectacular way as Ireland experienced the Great Famine — or, as it is often called the “Great Hunger” — which lasted between 1845 and 1849. The potato blight, which hit the country over five successive growing seasons, struck at the staple diet of an impoverished eight million Irish. Although much is unrecorded, it is estimated that one million people, about twelve percent of the population, died in the famine and another million, at least, emigrated to Great Britain, the United States, Canada, and Australia. It was in this dark hour of Ireland’s history that the thrust of the All Hallows missionary identity focused on ministering to those driven from the country by poverty. This

shift was largely a response to constant appeals by bishops in various parts of the English-speaking world whose Catholic populations were increased by post-famine emigration.

The early 1890s was a fascinating period in the history of All Hallows. It was marked by turmoil at a time when throughout Europe conflict brewed about suitable models of seminary training. The All Hallows enterprise was affected by this controversy. Divisions among the staff spilled over into the student body and eventually would involve the then archbishop of Dublin — Dr. William Joseph Walsh, the Congregation of Propaganda in Rome, and even Pope Leo XIII himself.³

With no resolution in sight, the Irish bishops finally turned to the Vincentian congregation to take over the administration of All Hallows College. From 1892 until the present the direction and management of the College has been under Vincentian leadership.

The Seminary under Vincentian Administration from 1892

In 1892 the Vincentians, under the leadership of Father James Moore, were brought in to heal the divisions of the previous five years — a task they accomplished with amazing success. The Vincentian focus on pastoral formation, hospitality, and compassion was ideally suited to healing the rift of the previous five years and continuing the outward-looking vision of John Hand. For about eighty years that charism influenced the training of pastors who would minister abroad — many in areas of great poverty and deprivation. The College archives contain numerous stories of extraordinary courage and zeal. Vivid accounts of pastoral commitment abound. For the next sixty years, under the able leadership of such men as Father Moore, Father Tom O'Donnell, Father William Purcell, and Father Tom Fagan, there was in the College a steady development of a distinctly pastoral approach to priestly formation.

During the 1960s and 1970s the College was blessed with the leadership of Father Tom Lane, C.M., whose familiarity with and commitment to the theology of the Second Vatican Council gave direction and thrust to the College in these years of change and development. From the 1960s to the 1980s, pastoral and theological training of seminarians remained the main focus of the College's mission. Every year young men went out from All Hallows to the English-speaking world, and regularly men of all ages returned to celebrate milestones in their ministry and to keep the College in touch with pastoral work worldwide. Yet things were changing in the country.

³ In this regard see Kevin Condon, C.M., *The Missionary College of All Hallows, 1842-1991* (Dublin: 1986), 167-190.

From the 1980s: Extending the Mission

By the 1980s it was becoming apparent that this annual supply of candidates for ordained ministry in All Hallows was in terminal decline. The choice facing the College leadership was whether to close down or to open up to new demands. Writing from a 2007 Irish church perspective, it might seem that opting to include “lay ministry” training would have been an obvious move. In 1982, however, the idea of opening seminary theology courses to lay people was innovative. The challenge was to reinterpret the College motto, “Go teach all nations,” in a new context. Again Vincentian leadership, in the person of Father Kevin Rafferty, rose to the challenge and had the courage to open up the seminary just when other colleges were responding to the drop in priestly vocations by closing down.

In an increasingly secularized Ireland, the home mission was also demanding attention. All Hallows’ response was to develop courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level consistent with its pastoral and missionary tradition but also recognizing the call to mission of all the baptized. This was a significant shift as it necessitated a broadening of the popular understanding of the word ‘mission.’ Although the notion of ‘the home mission’ was not a new one theologically, its radical implications for pastoral formation were only beginning to be appreciated.

Initially the deacons’ program, which had been given a more pastoral focus in the early 1980s, was expanded to include women religious and lay people. In 1985 a highly successful part-time Lay Ministry program was launched. In 1988 an undergraduate Theology Program was opened up to lay people. A new All Hallows was being born.

Throughout the 1990s several postgraduate courses were developed. The emphasis on pastoral leadership, pastoral care, and human development continued and most of the early students envisaged a future in pastoral ministry. Research programs and taught programs in Leadership and Pastoral Care, in Holistic Development for Pastoral Ministry, and in Management for Community and Voluntary Services were developed.

Whereas the two pastoral programs spring directly from the College’s traditional focus on ministry, albeit of a more inclusive nature, the Management for Community and Voluntary Services degree broke new ground in attempting to bring the influence of Gospel values to bear directly on the workplace. By the beginning of the new millennium, All Hallows had established itself as a respected institute of pastoral ministry training.

During the 1990s a very positive experience was the link to Dublin City University (DCU).⁴ There are some significant points of congruence between

⁴ During the 1990s All Hallows College began to forge formal links with Dublin City

the strategic plan of the University and that of the College. Part of DCU's mission as stated in its strategic plan for 2001-2005, is "to foster creativity and to spearhead change for the benefit of society." This mission direction of the University is apparent in DCU's emphasis on the theme of ethics across the curriculum, and particularly in its outreach to the more disadvantaged areas in North City Dublin. The aspirations underlying DCU's structure for development in certain thematic areas, notably that of social development and world order, fit well with the aspirations of All Hallows, as does the University's plan to "provide a framework for engaging more directly with decision-makers in government, industry and the community, and so influence change in society."⁵

All Hallows' strategic plan for 2005-2010 identifies the College's mission as that of providing "a learning community committed to the mission of Jesus Christ and to the development of people for ministry." The vision is expanded in terms of the following directions and priorities:

- To be a community of education in theology and related disciplines.
- To offer formation and support for pastoral leadership and promote the development of collaborative ministry.
- To be a community committed to prayer and worship.
- To work for justice with particular attention to the poor and powerless.
- To foster an environment of hospitality and welcome.
- To promote imaginative responses to the searching of young people in their faith journey.
- To cultivate a climate of creative and artistic expression.

One can readily see many aspects of the Vincentian charism reflected in these commitments, but for the purposes of this article we will focus on our commitment "to work for justice with particular attention to the poor and powerless."

Discerning Vincentian Influence on Core Content

As we look back through the All Hallows story it is noticeable that at each new stage of development signs of the charism of Saint Vincent de

University. By the late 1990s the College had become linked to the University. In practice this meant that the University validated, accredited, and awarded its degrees. At present (January 2008) All Hallows is in the final stage of deepening this linkage to become a college of the University. The linkage agreement, while protecting the College trust, will ensure greater opportunities for All Hallows students and also open the way for better funding for the College.

⁵ DCU Strategic Plan, 6.

Paul are clearly in evidence. All the programs of the College have a discernible justice component. At undergraduate level, Moral Theology includes courses on justice, peace and ecology. Pastoral Theology requires students to undertake a pastoral placement in some area of social engagement. This involves weekly visits to prisons, homeless centers, Saint Vincent de Paul units, AIDS centers, etc. Weekly reflection groups process these experiences and all undergraduate students learn the basics of social analysis to enable them to begin to critique society in a structural way. The emphasis is on helping students to develop congruence between their espoused and their operational theology.

Postgraduate Program in Social Justice and Public Policy, 2005

At the beginning of the new millennium a young Vincentian, Dan O'Connell, became a member of the College staff. Prior to joining the staff he had worked as parish priest of Dublin's "Travelling people."⁶ He had also undertaken a significant internship program organized by the Justice Commission of the Conference of Religious of Ireland (CORI). Coming from that particular background and training in social analysis his tendency was to apply the analytical questions, "Who benefits? Who pays?" not only to the broader social context but also to the College's educational task. Soon he had initiated among the staff and students focused conversations which had us talking to each other about education in a more socially critical way. The context of Irish society was changing and educational institutes could not avoid focused social critique.

Our students, both religious and lay, had proven that they had the educational expertise and skills to minister pastorally. However, new needs were emerging in Celtic Tiger Ireland; it had the fastest growing economy in Europe, but not all boats were rising. In fact the gap between rich and poor was widening, not lessening.⁷

The fact that Dublin-based Vincentians were very involved with the Traveling community resulted in some members of the community becoming students of the College. Two such students, Nell McDonagh and Kathleen McDonagh (not relatives), made a significant impact by focusing attention on Travelers issues for staff and students alike.

These various influences had us asking, "Is pastoral care enough as a

⁶ This is the term used to designate Ireland's nomadic community, who are often victims of social and cultural discrimination.

⁷ For further reference see Peadar Kirby, *The Celtic Tiger In Distress: Growth with Inequality in Ireland* (Dublin); also Sara Cantillon, *Rich and Poor: Perspectives on Tackling Inequality in Ireland* (Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency's Research Series); see also, CORI JUSTICE *Socio Economic Review 2007 Addressing Inequality* (Dublin: 2007).

response to the inequality that is growing in our society?" It was becoming clear that within the theological institutes there were no accredited programs preparing students to engage specifically with issues of public policy. The justice desk of CORI had for some years pioneered a non-accredited internship course in Social Analysis and Public Policy. Was it time for All Hallows to design a Master's Program specifically for people working in other areas where policy was an issue? Over the years, students had come to see a pattern of systemic failure in relation to vulnerable people and groups. In pastoral reflection sessions the need for a more constructive response to injustice than merely railing against systems was becoming apparent. New initiatives were being called for. If, as an educational establishment, we were to contribute to preventing the widening economic gap in society, we would need to develop courses with a greater focus on policy formation and systems analysis. This led to the development of a new venture at All Hallows: a two year Master's program in Social Justice and Public Policy. This began in 2005, and the first cohort of students graduated in October 2007.

Again the Vincentian charism and the wise leadership of the current president, Father Mark Noonan, is steering the College through a new phase in its development by forging closer links with DCU and by overseeing the development of new outreaches, notably the Social Justice and Public Policy program, a key strength of which is its formal link to the CORI Justice Commission.⁸ The decision was taken by the College administration and by CORI that we would jointly design, deliver, and administer this program. All Hallows brought to the relationship more than 150 years' experience of theological, pastoral, and academic training as well as its expertise in designing, administering, and delivering successful academic programs in conjunction with DCU. The CORI Justice Commission specializes in areas of public policy, enabling and empowerment, spirituality, advocacy, and communication. In recent years it has played a key role in the Irish government's social partnership strategy, and has had a widely acknowledged influence on government social policy.

The natural alliance between All Hallows and the CORI mission is clearly expressed in the stated aim of the joint program:

⁸ CORI's Justice Commission is an extremely influential body. It has campaigned tirelessly for over twenty-five years on behalf of those who are economically disadvantaged. One of its key strengths has been the continuity of service of Father Seán Healy and Sister Brigid Reynolds. The Commission has played an active role in securing social partnership status for the Community and Voluntary Sector in Ireland. They negotiate with government on behalf of the disadvantaged sectors in advance of the annual national budget, and they are tireless in their critique of unjust policies. We are very fortunate to have them both on the Program Board directing the Social Justice and Public Policy program.

to provide an understanding of and a capacity to engage with the overarching and theoretical frameworks that underpin public policy development today. It will provide skills in areas such as advocacy, community organizing and networking, media engagement, communication in the public forum, as well as in the capacity to critique public policy from a values perspective. It will help students to understand the interplay of values and public policy so that they have the capacity to judge what is ethical or unethical and can appreciate and promote a human rights and civil society agenda in a dedicated and practical manner.⁹

Having completed the first two-year cycle of the program it is clear that students have been given the education and practical expertise to analyze the needs of society, especially those of people and communities experiencing social disadvantage. It is heartening to see them grow in their capacity to critique, plan, act, and evaluate on the basis of their analysis to the advantage of a growing multicultural Irish society.

One of the strengths of this program is the fact that it is offered to people actively working in the area of social justice and public policy. Current students work in organizations dealing with such issues as drug addiction, disability rights, Saint Vincent de Paul initiatives, child protection, family support, travellers' welfare, social housing, and community development. Their workplace is their placement and each student is expected to initiate a goal specific to public policy and to bring it to actualization over the two years. There is a constant emphasis on integrating theory and practice. One of the modules, entitled "The Prophetic Tradition," introduces students to significant prophetic voices in the Hebrew and Christian traditions, as well as in Islam, in literature, and in Christian feminism. Students keep a journal after these sessions. This provides material for reflection on the personal value systems out of which they are operating in their advocacy work and in their critique of structures. This is, we believe, a very important focus in any training for work in the area of social justice. In postmodern society where individualism reigns supreme there is always the danger that the very advocates of liberation will, when successful, end up perpetuating systems of injustice.

Albert Nolan, in his latest work: *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom*, puts it thus:

⁹ Program aims as outlined in the joint program's promotional literature.

In many of the struggles for justice... what more and more people are discovering is that without personal liberation or inner freedom, our hard-won social freedoms are undermined and perverted by selfish individualism. If the people who have been socially liberated are not also liberated from their own egos, their personal selfishness, they are in danger of repeating — in another form — the very oppression and cruelty against which they have fought.¹⁰



The grounds of All Hallows College.
Public Domain

Transformative Education in a Vincentian Context?

The invitation to address the experience of educational initiatives with a specific poverty reduction agenda in a Vincentian context is a challenging one, if for no other reason than that it brings so many strands together. In terms of *education* many writers would claim a reflecting rather than a transforming societal role, a view which can lead us to settle for the inevitability of structural inequality. An educational philosophy guided by economic and industrial needs is likely to perpetuate rather than challenge societal inequalities.

However, an educational program inspired by the Vincentian charism of concern for those at the margins will always find itself at variance with this analysis. It will find itself more comfortable with the assertion that education at its best is transformative.¹¹ For those who espouse this view the enormous challenge is to bring to the educational task the unambiguous Gospel focus on the Anawim, the best wisdom of a liberating educational method

¹⁰ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* (New York: 2006), 18.

¹¹ Cf. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, among others.

(c.f. Paulo Freire), the social teaching of the Church, and the prophetic wisdom of all the great religious traditions as well as contemporary insights into education. Though many current educational perspectives, particularly those heavily influenced by market and economic reality, will be suspicious of transformation as an educational aim, most will acknowledge the role of education in poverty reduction.

The Vincentian witness of outreach to the poor is powerfully evident worldwide in the work of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in terms of immediate relief and assistance. In Dublin the Daughters of Charity, in particular, have an impressive record of social and community engagement in tackling *structures* of injustice.¹² In Vincentian schools throughout the country pupils are exposed to initiatives such as Vincent de Paul groups, Drop the Debt Campaigns, street collections for the homeless, etc.

Until recently, however, there was not in Ireland an accredited postgraduate program designed to train people working in the area of social justice to understand and engage with public policy from a value-based perspective for the purposes of transformation. We believe that the All Hallows Master's program in Social Justice and Public Policy is such a program. In our experience it is a significant response to the particular challenges presented by Celtic Tiger Ireland. Our students are well equipped to focus on policy in their workplace, to develop liberative policies, to critique unjust ones, and to become leaders of society.

Conclusion

The authors of this article recognize the challenge of balancing the tensions which exist among educational, justice, and values imperatives. Unlike with our traditional theological and pastoral programs, participants of this program come with a range of perspectives. One cannot, for example, presume on a faith or Church background. This challenged us, particularly when delivering such modules as "The Prophetic Tradition," which we were always confident was an important focus of the program. During the accreditation process there was the issue of convincing university authorities of the value of a reflective component coming from our faith tradition. We needed to assure them that there were in fact no hidden agendas. Initially we also encountered a suspicion on the part of some students about the motivation behind the inclusion of this module. Whereas they related readily to theories of justice, human rights, social policy, advocacy, etc. — modules with immediate and obvious significance for their work — some struggled to appreciate

¹² The Saint Vincent's Trust offers a very relevant citizen's education program aimed at educating people on the margins of society to exercise their voice by voting.

the need for a more reflective component, and for many the social teaching of the Church was a revelation. However, it must also be acknowledged that many of the students welcomed the opportunity for reflection and were deeply appreciative of the social gospel.

The fact that alienation from the Church is a feature of modern Ireland challenges us to find ways to allow the prophetic voices within and beyond our faith tradition to be heard. This program has often forced its designers beyond familiar comfort zones. At the end of two years we can, however, appreciate the fact that for students and staff this has been a rich experience. Pope John Paul II claims that "The split between the Gospel and Culture is without doubt the drama of our time." In offering this program, All Hallows is once again facing a new cultural reality and attempting to transform that "split" into an opportunity for creative dialogue. We believe that this indeed is transformative and transforming education.

Though this new program may represent an educational 'branching out' of the College's Vincentian Mission, there is also a sense in which we arrive back at the place from which we began. Who knows whether we, in some future work on education and poverty reduction in a Vincentian context, in the words of Robert Frost:

shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and [we],
[we] took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.