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Hyacinth Anayor Nwakuna

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Why Are You Here?

Hyacinth Anayor Nwakuna, CSSp



When a request from the editor of this magazine came to me to articulate my experiences as a member of the Spiritan team in Ireland, one of the significant things that struck me immediately was the astounding common questions that Irish people with whom I come in contact, continually ask and still ask me: 'Hello' [Dia dhuit], they say, 'How are you?' [Conas tá tú]. 'What is your name?', [Cad is ainm duit] 'How long are you in Ireland?' 'What are you doing in Ireland?' 'Are you studying?' 'Do you like it?' I found these questions very integral and fundamental to my missionary work in Ireland.

The changing Irish society

Whenever I reflect upon these questions they bring to mind the nature of mission today in the changing Irish Society. There is a movement away from the idea of ministry as the monopoly of those ordained, to the understanding that ministry is the responsibility of the whole people of God. There is also what President Mary McAleese would see as 'the apparent or alleged fear of recent inflows of immigrants' into the Irish society.

Its unprecedented economic development has propelled Ireland from being a country of emigration to one of immigration. And this newly found economic prosperity, with an associated perception of Ireland as an attractive place for work and study, poses a problem of how to cope with immigrants of all categories arriving in Ireland. Irish people have never experienced such an influx of immigrants before and are very concerned to know who is in their midst, what each person is doing, and, if possible, when each person is going. There is a perception that foreigners who are in Ireland are either working for economic purposes, studying, or are asylum seekers. Missionary work is hardly envisaged.

Called by name

The question 'what is your name' is a question anybody could ask another person. It is natural and vital for ordinary human relationships. Because name is very important for Irish people, and they appreciate names, they would like to identify and know people by name and relate to them not just by the title they hold, but as a person 'first' and then subsequently as a 'Fr' 'Dr' or whatever title the person holds. For

them this makes relationship more personalized. This is because there is a huge captivating sense of respect and dignity for the human person. In Ireland everybody is somebody, even children. Such that when I addressed some priests as 'Fr' in my first few weeks in Ireland, they instantly cautioned me and reminded me that I should call them by their 'names'. Whenever I mention my name is 'Hyacinth' what comes to the minds of some is 'flower' or a BBC T.V. programme featuring the incomparable 'Hyacinth Bucket'. Fortunately this becomes a base for my name to remain indelible in the minds of many.

A "return match"

'What are you doing in Ireland?' 'Are you studying?' These are questions I have responded to, often times to the same people. To come as a missionary is 'grand', 'absolutely fantastic,' 'lovely,' for many, but for others it is difficult for them to imagine that Ireland is turning out to be a mission territory, in the sense of receiving missionaries. Some will explain at length that long, long ago, Irish missionaries were in Nigeria, today ... here you are ... isn't it amazing? It is a 'return match' ... Tá fáilte romhat ...

Photos: Hyacinth Anayor Nwakuna, CSSp with students at Blackrock College and the Emmanuel community in Manooth.

'you're welcome'. And because missionary work is greeted with positive regard by many of them, they eventually inquire whether I like living and working as a missionary in Ireland. And that is why they pose the question 'Do you like Ireland?' that is to say 'Am I happy being with them?' Do I accept them as they are, with their values and world view? And I do. I find them very good, I am happy in their friendship, and enjoy their easy and caring way of life.

Arrival in winter

My journey to priesthood started in 1987 when I joined the Holy Ghost Juniorate Ihiala, Nigeria. Having been

tremendous and superb. They are outstanding in hospitality and spirituality. I am comfortable and at home in their midst. What makes me marvel is that they are 'aging with grace' and many of our elderly Spiritan members still make a valuable contribution to the missionary outreach of the Congregation. The hallmark of it all is the marvelous provision made for me to gradually integrate into the work, both through educational and cultural empowerment.

Since I arrived I have joined the Blackrock College Pastoral team to which I am officially assigned. Part of our work is the organization of liturgies for the students

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ordained in July, 2004, I set out three months later for missionary work in Ireland. Full of anxieties and uncertainties of where I was going, I was relieved at Dublin airport to see Fr. Pat Palmer, the Provincial, who was there to welcome me. Immediately I felt at home. His presence at the airport was really a source of inspiration for me. Inside the airport building it was warm, but it was winter time. So outside I experienced real Irish winter weather for the first time. It was rainy, windy and extremely cold. The weather was really not friendly. I was dispirited, weighed down and almost reluctant to proceed out of the airport terminal. At the beginning it was a struggle to cope with the weather but I thank God I speedily acclimatized. It wouldn't be an exaggeration if I say I am enjoying it now.

Blackrock College

The few years I have lived and worked in Ireland have been a wonderful experience. I am happy working with the Irish people who are friendly, caring and welcoming. The warm reception given to me by the Irish Spiritans is indeed excellent. They really love to see me and they desire to see more Nigerian missionaries. My community, Blackrock College, is quite

including the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist. It also includes taking the students on retreats and visiting them at their pastoral placements and reflection centers. I am also taking Religion classes with the 4th year students in a module called 'Justice in the Developing World'. I found the students very attentive. Their openness to discussion in the classes, their curiosity to know about current events in the Church and society, and more especially their concern about situations in the developing world, overwhelm me. In fact their genuine contributions add to my own insights and experience.

Young people leaving the church

My work in Balckrock College is more of a youth apostolate. The mass movement of the youth from the Church is like an earthquake that is about to shake the institution of the Church to its deepest foundations in Ireland. Young people are leaving the Church and they are indifferent to its message. This indifference is a symptom of deeper malaise that needs to be addressed urgently today in the Irish Church. One of the ways to address this is to ascertain where the Church has gone wrong, and then how to restore the confidence of the people in her teachings.

I am not perturbed about the criticism of the Church because it will turn out to be beneficial. The Church is flexible enough to adopt a listening ear to the values and aspirations of the people, especially the young. And again it is when we are criticized that we learn to adjust our own image of ourselves. But I am concerned about fellow-Spiritans George Boran's view: 'When the first generation decided not to practice or educate its children in the faith, the second generation has no faith reference' If this is true it will have enormous influence on the future of Catholicism in Ireland. This is a major challenge to us missionaries here today.

The Church in Ireland will regain its credibility only when the values it preaches are lived within the institution itself. I believe our mission today in Ireland does not merely require talking and preaching but depends particularly on our witnessing to a Christian type of life. In that way the confidence of the people can be renewed and the faith will be a sign of hope and inspiration.

I so much enjoy my apostolate in the school here because I see it as an integral part of work of evangelization. The way the Christian faith is declining in Ireland has made it so difficult to get the youth involved. I believe that through the school apostolate we can talk to the youth and preach the word of God to them. If we are to be "fishers of men" it is best to catch them young.

The challenge of secularism

My missionary work in Ireland is not limited, however to the school environment; I reach out to others in the cities and country areas. I minister in the parishes when necessary, in the hospitals when there are demands, in convents and among some devotional groups. I believe that missionary work in this part of Europe is challenging, and will continue to be challenging as we are working with people who have lost confidence in the teaching of the Church. And again secularism is becoming the dominant culture. By secularism I mean a culture or mindset based on the proposition that 'God's existence need make no difference to the individual, and ought make no difference to how society is run. Therefore the public forum should be religion-free'. It may be more acute in future, but I am not scared. I remain optimistic because with God everything is possible. ■