MISSION TODAY & TOMORROW

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Conference Opening Address:

"When a rabbit reaches old age it survives on the milk of its offspring: a reflection on the life cycle of the Irish missionary miracle"

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Introduction: a personal testimony

I would like to thank Misean Cara Chairman Matt Moran, All Hallows College President Patrick McDevitt, Kimmage DSC Executive Director Paddy Reilly and Irish Missionary Union President John Guiney for the invitation to offer some thoughts on "the historical role that Ireland has played in mission and missionary development, the transformation that is taking place with fewer Irish-born missionaries serving in developing countries" and my "vision of the new future for missionaries and what role Ireland might play in that future." It is a vast agenda for a 25-minute presentation on a missionary trajectory that stretches back to Saint Columba's 6th-century missionary expedition to Iona in Scotland.

I stand here a proud vintage of Irish missionary enterprise on the continent of Africa. When I converted to Catholicism as a teenager in the early 1980s, living eyewitnesses in my local parish still reminisced about the saintly and selfless founding bishop of my home diocese of Benin City, Bishop Patrick Kelly. Sister Scholastica, Sister Henrietta and their intrepid band of sisters of Our Lady of Apostles educated several of my siblings at Maria Goretti Grammar

School in Benin City. A short distance from my family home, Sr. Eugenius ran the finest mission hospital in town where my younger siblings and several relatives were born. During my 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 Ossiomo Leprosarium where I witnessed Sr. Elizabeth Fallon and her fellow Daughters of Charity serve with passion and compassion women and men wasted by the terrible disease of leprosy 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. In my province of Eastern Africa, Father Sean O'Connor travelled the length and breadth of East Africa, shepherding many young men 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 today. 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 bestrode the globe like the Shakespearean colossus as vanguards of the good news of Jesus Christ.

I would like to suggest two important considerations for setting the Irish missionary enterprise in the wider historical context of Africa and the world.

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

My second point concerns the cost of missionary enterprise. In 1847, William Whitaker Shreeve, a British colonial official, made a terrifying assessment of the missionary adventure in Africa. He wrote:

> [F]or, until some great revolution in nature or some great and gradual human exertion takes place, it [Africa] must ever prove the "white man's grave"…. [A]nd truly may it – be said that "Africa's shores are paved with the white man's bones, and its grave-yards filled with monuments of lost exertions;" but as Christians we should and *must* persevere (Shreeve 1847: 2 – 3).

Shreeve wrote at a time coterminous with the devastating Irish Famine (1845-1847). 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 Shreve'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 attempt to imagine its future, it is important to take stock of some of its features. I highlight the following five defining historical characteristics that may permit a coherent understanding, without claiming that they are the only valid ones.

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

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

Third, it *focused on real needs.* Missionary activity covered a vast spectrum of development initiatives. I would characterize the Irish approach as developmental evangelization. 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, strongly influenced the integration of practical aspects of development, notably education, healthcare, and agricultural and rural development, into missionary activity.

Fourth, *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 *in solidarity with the local Irish church*. In this sense and literally, the laity was its backbone. Some members of the audience would still recall accounts of missionary exploits carefully and faithfully recorded and disseminated via missionary magazines and those collection boxes strategically located in parishes and 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 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 making sense of the state of contemporary mission in Ireland? Generally speaking, there is a consensus of views that paints a gloomy picture of the matter. In many people's mind the Irish missionary juggernaut has run its course and out of steam. After all, 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. At home in Ireland, the irresistible Tsunami of secularization erodes the capacity of traditional catholic culture hitherto

considered as the primary transmitter of faith. The dwindling missionary capital of the church in Ireland lies beyond doubt. The question 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? Let me suggest four areas where I am convinced that mission made in Ireland retains an ongoing relevance.

First of all, although the landscape has changed drastically, at present and in the future, 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 two items delineate critical areas of partnership and solidarity in mission.

Second, an emerging area of missionary involvement is advocacy and networking. Although it falls on local religious personnel to take the lead in promoting reconciliation, justice, peace, gender empowerment, ecological integrity, fair trade, etc., religious communities in Europe seem well placed to initiate networks of global advocacy that target the remote causes and political interests at the root of the socioeconomic and political malaise in some parts of the developing world. New technologies of 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 church in the global south.

Third, the future of mission in the world church depends on a radical openness to lay participation and leadership. The Irish missionary enterprise has a unique distinction of promoting lay participation in mission. 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 secularization of missionary activity parallels in

some respects the secularization 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," "post-Christian," and "post-modern" reality; at worst, it is trapped in an irreversible trajectory of decline and decay. Earlier I spoke of a pessimistic approach that ceaselessly laments the diminishment, decline and demise of mission in Ireland. To my mind, as a way of explaining the present situation of mission in Ireland, this "framework of decline and fragmentation" (Jenkins 1999: 27) is grossly inadequate and unsatisfactory. 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 secularizing 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 assumption of responsibility for the mission of the church by local personnel. Significant demographic shifts in Christianity places the church in the global south on an axis of growth. For such former mission territories, Ireland, as well as the rest of Europe, now represents a new mission frontier 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." To return to my metaphor of lactation, I suggest that it is now time for the church of Ireland and Europe to consider surviving 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 in former foreign missions. This partnership, however, raises two complementary and critical challenges.

First, it is imperative to rethink the efficacy of aid as a developmental tool. After decades of transfer of vast monetary aid, human and socioeconomic development remains but a fraction of what it should be in the global south. The question arises: besides aid, are there other means of assisting other churches that prioritize solidarity, partnership and mutuality in mission? For this partnership to succeed, the agenda of development ought not to be decided unilaterally and foisted on the local population. Rather, it should be the outcome of dialogue, discernment and mutual exchange in view of meeting the greatest needs here or abroad.

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

In conclusion

At the 2009 African Synod, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI spoke of Africa's spiritual potential in glowing terms: "Africa," he declared, "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 the shores of Ireland 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.

Finally, in Africa, the veneration of ancestors constitutes an integral part of indigenous religious traditions. Several Irish missionaries would have been widely exposed and vehemently opposed to this belief and practice. Today, scores of Irish women and men lie buried on African soil in solidarity with the people they loved and served as Jesus commanded in the Gospel of John – "greater love hath no man or woman than to lay down his or her life for friends" (John 15:13). To conclude my reflections, it is my privilege to invoke the names of some of these departed daughters and sons of Ireland as Christian ancestors of the church in Africa. May I invite you to stand and please acknowledge their presence by responding "Oyé!"

- Edel Quinn
- Fathers John and Martin Reidy
- Mother Raphael Gordon
- Bishop John Mahon
- Sister Theresa Joseph O'Sullivan
- Father Morgan O'Brien
- Sister Joseph Veronica O'Nolan
- Bishop Joseph Shanahan
- Mother Borgia O'Shaughnessy

- Brother Larry Timmons
- Sister Lucy Flatley
- Father Gerry Roche
- Sister Philip Neri Heeren
- Father Sean O’Connor
- Sister Hyacinth Barden
- Father Cecil McGarry
- Bishop Patrick Kelly

Amen!