

The Proclamation Of And Conversion To The Message Of Jesus Christ

Vincentian Mission Team in Ireland

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Preface:

The editor of a national newspaper, "The Irish Times" once wrote, "*...To appreciate Ireland, you must understand the priorities of the Irish people. Religion is not the most important characteristic. No! The priorities are land, religion and culture....*"

To apply the kerygmatic message of Jesus Christ to Irish religious faith, one has to begin with history. Therefore, the aim of this paper is

Part 1: To trace the shifts in Irish society and the evangelical responses by Irish Vincentians. (Context)

Part 2: To outline an emerging Ireland, the separation of church and state, and the struggles facing a changing nation. (Confrontation)

Part 3: An analysis of theological insights and our attempts to respond to those insights in a practical way. (Challenge)

Part 4: To summarize recent developments and a new approach through "The Ember Team." (Collaboration)

Part 5: To summarize a theology of mission for 2000, offer some reflections on signs of hope and a conclusion. (Charter)

Part 1: The historical context

1.1. Ireland - The Colonial Factor

Ireland was colonized for 800 years. After the Reformation, the Catholic religion was central to the Irish identity. English and Scottish farmers and landlords controlled Irish land and Irish affairs for most of that time. As Ireland was a colony, Irish Catholicism reinforced Irish identity. Priests had to study in Paris, Rome and Salamanca.

In 1829, an Act of Parliament provided for Catholic Emancipation. This enabled the Hierarchy to establish an era of development and organization. Marked growth began in the Irish church as parishes became established. *What is central to Irish Catholicism is that, historically, the Irish Catholic always had a cause to fight for.*

1.2. The Vincentian Community - Mission Expansion and Decline in the 19th Century

In 1833, a group of Irishmen organized themselves for the purpose of evangelization. Some years later, they wrote to Paris and sought to be a part of the worldwide Vincentian community. In this way, the Irish Vincentian community was founded independently from the Congregation on the continent.

The Irish Vincentians gave their first mission in 1842. From the 1840's-1880 Vincentians and Jesuits (later joined by Redemptorists and others) were engaged in very successful Parish Missions. Their aims were:

- a. to establish the parish structures throughout the country,
- b. to counter the proselytizing campaigns of protestant denominations,
- c. to regularize marriages,
- d. to established a sacramental life for the people.

The Irish Vincentians diversified their apostolate to offer formal education and the spiritual formation of clergy - but they continued to conduct parish missions. By 1859, the Irish Vincentians had established 4 central mission houses, Ireland (2), England (1), Scotland(1).

By the 1880's Church structures were established. The decline of the Mission Teams is traced to this time. Parish Missions became more devotional, less directly evangelical and less catechetical. As a result, the leading role of the Vincentians in parish missions was taken over by the Jesuits, Redemptorists, Passionists and others.

1.3. The Centrality of Catholic Church in 20th Century Ireland (1920-1960's)

By 1921, the Church had taken a central place in the life of the country. The Constitution of 1937 enshrined the "special" place of the Catholic Church "as the religion of the vast majority of the Irish population". Education and Health care were administered by large communities of Religious. In both cases they had become involved long before the Government had any such concerns.

Large numbers of vocations, sodalities and confraternities were also evident. An era of establishment of Vincent de Paul Society and the Legion of Mary had been reached. The Irish church was therefore central to any debate surrounding issues of social justice, health, education... the Irish Catholic church was of enormous relevance to Irish society - and the Irish Vincentians had established themselves in the training of teachers for primary schools, some secondary schools and Irish seminaries - in addition to parish missions.

Part 2: Emerging Ireland: Church and State: Confrontation

2.1. Ireland: 1960-1970's

Several factors shaped the cultural and moral landscape of Ireland in the last 30 years. The most significant were:

- a. The "Free Education Act" of the 1960's. Now, for the first time, formal education was freely available to all young people up to the age of 18.
- b. The arrival of television (1961) - we were less and less an island people.
- c. Economic policy, the stemming of emigration and Ireland's entry to the EEC (1973).

With new found confidence, trade unions and government gradually began to exert administrative control over those bodies that were formerly the domain of religious bodies. A dramatic reduction in vocations meant that religious had little option but to hand over control of both educational and medical institutions. The role of the priest as the conscience of the nation was evaporating.

2.2. Ireland: 1980-1990's

Since the mid 1980's the teaching of the church in Ireland has been consistently challenged by government and EU policy and has met with considerable opposition from the media. But other factors too have rocked the credibility of the church in Ireland. Some of these are

- a. the impact of materialist-secular thinking,
- b. a well-educated population,
- c. a high level of unemployment and considerable disillusionment,
- d. a loss of control in management of schools,
- e. "Vatican Two" thinking has, in many parishes never been seriously implemented,
- f. a referendum in 1995 on constitutional divorce in which 70% of the electorate voted - and was approved by 51% of those who voted. For the first time, church policy was defeated at the polling booths. The concept of separation of church and state was now crystallized in our legislation.

Consequently, parishes now provide Masses and sacraments - and very little more. Our obsession with "sacramental maintenance" meant that we neglected the cultivation of Evangelization. Sadly, scandals among clergy have compounded our problems in ministry. The public perception of the church is a sign of confusion rather than a sign of hope. Many good people have found in the institutional church no place to lay their heads... and have slipped away without ever saying "goodbye".

So what are the new images of Church in modern Ireland? They may well be summarized as follows:

- a. Evangelization in Ireland is only a felt need in the last 15 years.
- b. A sense of increased alienation - the church is perceived to be more and more middle-class - and even there it is withering.
- c. Changes seem to be made only because they have to be.
- d. No sense of excitement and being led by a creative Spirit - we have become a "valley of dry bones".

2.3. The Residue - New Emerging Voices

Many of the issues that people will discuss are centered on the collapse of vocations to the priesthood. But there are other areas of debate that we fail to address. These are the "emerging voices" who may be summed up as follows:

- a. Reflective women who are not attracted to a church which has proved itself slow to accept failure for indiscretions of the past and criticisms of the present,
- b. Groups of people whose way of living does not adhere to the officially sanctioned patterns of sexual behavior and who effectively feel excluded from the church,
- c. A yawning gulf between youth pop-culture and perceived stagnant adulthood,
- d. Liturgy is detached from life - as culture and Catholicism drift further apart, many will utter in weary fashion - why bother?

2.4. A New Church - a Community rather than an Institution

Already a new church is emerging in Ireland. It reflects many of the following characteristics:

- a. It is more community based, less dependent on institutions or education as vehicles of control and order.
- b. There is a greater sense of people choosing to belong.
- c. Far more participation, less clerical domination.
- d. More concerned with needs and problems of society.
- e. Less occupied with "self-preservation" and a "perfect society".
- f. More prayerful, less dogmatic.
- g. More scripturally nourished, less centered on the sacraments.
- h. More trusting of women and the young.
- i. More given to listening than dictating.

It is to such a church that we, as a mission team need to direct our energy and expertise - and such a model of church has been the foundation on which we have reshaped our mission team in Ireland.

2.5. Why A New Model of Mission?

This new model of mission is being developed to address the signs of the times. In Ireland these are:

- a. The spread of a "New Enlightenment" in Western Europe. How do we respond?
- b. The growth in technology and the Internet. How can it be harnessed?
- c. A new culture, economic policy and legislation which need a fresh theology.
- d. A recognition that traditional devotion which has waned or disappeared needs to be expressed - we need to ritualize this reality.

- e. Growth in concept of informed conscience - can we create space for "Nicodemus's" - those who seeks to deepen their faith by stepping out of inherited conventions and pursue a new form of faith expression in their relationship with God?
- f. Evaporation of the God of retribution - so where do we find our God now?
- g. A people who believe they are well on the way to "having it all" and do not wish to listen?

Part 3: Responding to the call: challenge

3.1. New Initiatives for Mission

a. Vatican II and The "Village Fountain":

The Church is the People of God - everyone has a part to play. Many people in the church have still not fully assimilated its meaning into their lives. There is an ever increasing need for Adult Faith Formation/Development and this must take place at local level....

Pope John XXIII gave us a vision of Parish as the "Village Fountain" where all would have recourse to their thirst. It is in and through the Parish that people experience what it is to be church, a part of the Body of Christ.

b. 1980: Popular Parish Missions:

A radical step at Evangelization in the Irish province - *specialization* became a key characteristic in the members of our teams as a new team was established.

c. 1983: Bogota:

- i. Calls for a Congregation which would reflect a pilgrim theology in our willingness to go from place to place in the work of evangelization.
- ii. Collaboration with clergy and laity.
- iii. Call to serve the "more abandoned" and to promote justice.

d. 1989: Christifideles Laici:

"It is necessary that in the life of 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."

e. 1990-95: A Collaborative Approach to Urban Parish Mission

The aim of this new approach was to aim at a model of mission that would foster the development in parishes of small groups centered around a common purpose - liturgy, spirituality, education, social, etc. - which would express a new way of being parish.

3.2. A New Approach: Pre-Mission, Mission-Event, Post Mission

a. *Pre-Mission: Proclamation*

- i. Mission Team preach at all the Masses in advance of the "Mission Event"
- ii. Public meeting, (optional) survey of needs of parish, chaired by lay person
- iii. Structuring of various committees to undertake the task of mission
- iv. Preparation Week-ends (each member of Vincentian team takes responsibility for the formation of parish teams prior to mission event. Other parishes who have experienced a parish mission help the parishes in their preparations also.

b. *Mission Event (One or two weeks of a mission event)*

Week 1: "Outreach Week"

- i. Geared partly to those who, no longer worship in local churches.
- ii. Located in halls, homes, even pubs - wherever people meet.
- iii. Activities vary - may have prayer sharing/scriptural/educational or purely recreational dimension - dependent on work done by groups in advance.
- iv. We offer ideas, tell them of what others did and encourage them.

Week 2: "Gathering Week"

- i. Celebrated in church
- ii. Emphasis on preaching, liturgical expression/sacramental lives of people
- iii. Drama, mime, a variety of speakers and voices from various sectors of the community feature this week in addition to the missionaries.

Conclusion: These two weeks were eventually conflated into one week in response to our experience of parish mission where it was felt that two weeks were "confusing" and could not be sustained.

c. *Post-Mission*

Some parishes undertook a process of follow-up to the mission-event.

- i. Parish Evaluation with a skilled facilitator from outside of parish.
- ii. The formation of a Pastoral Council.
- iii. Lay ministry educational programs in the parish.
- iv. Further study of lay ministry or a degree in theology at All Hallows.

In Ireland, there is little difference between the local and universal Church. It is the local Church which touches them in a real and tangible way, particularly in the "Key Life Moments" and celebrations such as Births, Marriages and Deaths. One of the goals of

parish mission is to bring to awareness the reality of a universal church - this is the philosophy in which much of this model is grounded.

Part 4: Maintenance, task and "the ember team": collaboration

In September 1994, Maureen Treanor joined our team of three priests. After many missions involving different non-ordained people, Maureen, a married woman and mother of five children worked with us for that year on a part-time basis. In September 1995, Maureen commenced a three year term as a full-time member of our team. This move was prophetic. With a provincial plan that would seek to expand the presence of more non-ordained members on our team, and the addition, in 1996, of a Daughter of Charity, we felt the need to change our approach - and our image - from that of a team of ordained Vincentian priests to a collaborative team of men and women, some of whom are ordained. It was time to look to create a new image.

In years past, the open fire was a familiar sight in every Irish home. One of the family would get up in the morning, rake over the embers of the fire from the night before, draw them together and a new fire would be generated as a new day would begin. For us, this image was the most appropriate symbol of our task. The bonfires of Irish faith have diminished, but in our work we frequently encounter pockets of faith that are waiting to be nurtured. Our task, in a time of mission is to draw these embers together and set a fire which will draw together those who feel the cold of isolation and discouragement.

We now approach our ministry at two distinct levels - Team (Maintenance) and Task. This has helped us achieve much greater unity and clarity of vision, in the present climate of confusion. Our decisions are made as a team and we have acquired the assistance of an outside facilitator for the purposes of achieving a "team identity" and clarifying our task (what are we trying to do?).

The goals of the Ember Team are a theological and pastoral development of the models of evangelization we have inherited. Those aims are:

1. A personal experience of a liberating, loving and merciful God.
2. A deeper awareness of the Holy Spirit in our lives.
3. A greater involvement in caring for those within and beyond our community, especially those who feel isolated from the community because of their situation.

A significant thrust in our development has been the shifting of emphasis from a *sacramental basis* to an *evangelical basis* as the "raison d'être" of our apostolate. The "Open Sessions", informal gatherings within a week of mission have proved to be an area that continues to generate tremendous enthusiasm. From these sessions, the seeds of follow-up are sown.

Our future as a province has to be questioned. We have no students and have not had an ordination since 1991. Nigeria will become an independent province soon. Excluding Nigerian confreres, we have 100 confreres - 14 are under 50 years of age - two are under 35. The future may seem dark - yet we are called to be children of light. And the light of truth is that we are called to be faithful to our charism - to communicate the compassionate love of Jesus Christ to those in need. Vincent de Paul saw that need and began setting up structures

that would foster the spiritual growth of each individual. And the work of the Ember Team is yet another channel of his charism and the grace of God's Holy Spirit.

Part 5: a theology of mission for 2000: charter

5.1. New Definitions of Mission

A Mission is a time of opportunity for everyone involved in Parish

- i. to grow in awareness of the gift of Baptism,
- ii. to identify our gifts and talents which can be used in building community,
- iii. to explore different visions of Parish and a life-long journey of faith.

Within a time of Mission,

- i. the compassionate healing of Jesus Christ is ritualized in word and action,
- ii. from which stems the development and growth of special groups,
- iii. where we may share with one other the peace, joy and hope given us by the Holy Spirit.

A Mission can foster

- i. a growing number of support-type groups,
- ii. a ministry of "like to like" - we have something to share with others,
- iii. events that need to be cultivated in a parish setting and so engender a deeper sense of belonging.

5.2. Signs Of The Times - Signs Of Hope

- a. The problems facing the church in Ireland today, surfaced in many European countries during the 1960's and '70's. This is a significant advantage to us.
- b. We have an increasing number of lay people interested in, and trained in Theology and related skills.
- c. While we complain about the inactivity of the institutional church, many people have a faith, strong enough to sustain roles of community leadership.

Conclusion:

Ireland has never been a stranger to poverty. But the poverty of contemporary Irish Catholicism is the loss of sight - the ability to see the center ground. Those of the extreme left call for total freedom in an age of economic prosperity, those to the extreme right seek a Christian fascism that smacks of intolerance while many of those in the center utter in a bewildered fashion the words of Mary Magdalene "...they have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have put him." What we strive to bring to parish life is an awareness of the ground of true encounter between Jesus and each of us.

The metaphor of the "Ember Team" is a providential one. The ground of encounter that once was a blazing fire of Irish Catholicism has died. Yet in our experience, there still are many embers of hope. (We have forgotten what our primitive ancestors knew so well).

Our goal is to draw together the embers and once more encourage a fire of confidence and assurance, a fire that will give light to our eyes, joy to our hearts and hope to our souls. We have taken for our motto the words of St. Paul to Timothy "Fan Into A Flame The Gift of God". Such is our understanding of our Vincentian charism as we strive to communicate the kerygmatic message of conversion to Jesus Christ on the threshold of a new millennium.