

**World Mission Sunday
Celebrating and Supporting the
Legacy of Irish Missionary Work**

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Irish youth encouraged to follow oft risky footsteps of missionaries



An Irish missionary speaks to **Chai Brady** about police brutality and oppression, and tackling gender-based violence in South Africa

The profound culture shock and oppression witnessed after landing in South Africa as a young idealistic sister in 1984, ready to help the vulnerable and needy, was enough to “tear your heart apart”, according to the new leader of the Missionary Sisters of the Assumption.

Having taught children for decades through apartheid and civil unrest, Sr Mary McAteer, who is still based in South Africa, says her Faith helped her through harsher times. Hailing from Antrim, she went to a school in Ballynahinch, Co. Down. It was there she first met the Missionary Sisters of the Assumption and driven by a calling to help the less fortunate in an unequal world, she joined the congregation and found herself in a South Africa embroiled in conflict.

Sr McAteer began teaching in a high school started by the diocese in the township of Atteridgeville to the west of Pretoria. The school taught black children and mainly consisted of staff who were black, with Sr McAteer and two other sisters being the only white teachers.

“The only other white people you would see in the township were a couple of doctors who used to be in the hospital, and then – as it was a desperate place – in the army every now and again. They came in and out,” Sr McAteer recalls.

Supported

The sister said she was well supported by the local bishop who visited her in the school because the diocese was concerned, as it was “nearly in a warzone”. During a visit, Sr



Sr Mary McAteer (Left) of the Missionary Sisters of the Assumption has been a missionary in South Africa for more than 30 years. Among the projects she works with is the Cathca Inkanyezi project, that partners with teams of Community Advocates who tackle gender-based violence (GBV) in poor, informal settlements outside Johannesburg. Photo: Lizette Cressey

McAteer said: “After he spoke, the bishop called me over and said, ‘I was worried about you’ – He knew I was only out from Ireland – and then he said, ‘But then they told me you’re from Belfast and I said, sure she’ll feel at home’. I didn’t grow up in Belfast, but at least I did know the desperation of oppression – but not the way it was here.”

“You people know nothing that come from the outside, Mandela will never be released, he will die in jail, you people don’t understand”

Sr McAteer described the situation as “terrible”, recalling giving “naïve” advice to a young boy she taught. She said: “I remember at one time with one of the boys, his arm was all cut, and I said: ‘Did you fall?’ He said, ‘No we were talking and the army came along so we ran and I fell.’”

“I said in all innocence, ‘Maybe when you run they

think you’re doing something wrong and then they chase you, maybe if you just stood there they wouldn’t.”

She continued: “So the next night at 12 on the dot there’s a phone call, ‘Sister, you told me not to run, I didn’t run and now I’m in jail can you come and get me?’ It was a desperate, desperate time, you couldn’t imagine that it would end even.”

Mandela

She remembers speaking to members of the black community about Nelson Mandela, who was still in jail at the time (he was released in 1990), and how there was a feeling of hopelessness against the brutal South African apartheid regime. “I remember saying to some of them, ‘You know one day Mandela will be released’, I was told ‘You people know nothing that come from the outside, Mandela will never be released, he will die in jail, you people don’t understand’. It was desperate times altogether,” Sr McAteer reiterated.

After four years she moved to a rural area, far from electricity and running water. Sr McAteer recalls teaching people how to vote in the first all-race election in South Africa in 1994.

Many adults were illiterate and needed to be shown how to use a pen and to write an ‘X’.

“The risk of abuse for disabled young people is very high, they are more likely to be abused than anyone else”

She said: “On the day of the election, I will never, ever, ever forget it. It was a very isolated area so you never saw many people at the same time. They lived in traditional homes made of grass. But that morning there were queues to get in to vote. The older grannies were pushed in wheelbarrows. They were sitting there smiling, the young men pushing them, going to vote for the first time – it was unbelievable, even as I say it, the emotion and the wonder after all the violence that had happened, and all the oppression, that it could come to these people going to vote all around the country in peace.”

In 2016 Sr McAteer went to work at a small school for children with disabilities in Port Alfred, in the Eastern Cape.

The school provides a space where children can learn, play, socialise and learn simple skills training as they get older. It is one of very few such educational opportunities in the area for children with disabilities. This is one of the projects that received funding from Irish charity Mísean Cara, which supports missionaries working worldwide to empower those left furthest behind.

Encouragement

Another sister, Sr Elizabeth, established the school – the English name of which is ‘A Place of Encouragement’ – after seeing many children with disabilities being excluded from mainstream school and being forced to stay at home. When Sr McAteer arrived many of the children were turning 18 and “there was nothing else for them”.

“The risk of abuse for disabled young people is very high, they are more likely to be abused than anyone else,” the sister said. So she began, with the help of locals, to teach them gardening, knitting, sewing, cooking and more. Subsequently an Irish volunteer from Dublin, sent by Viatores Christi, trained workers to teach peo-

ple with disabilities and “really helped to raise the standards,” according to Sr McAteer, who admitted at that point she didn’t have specific training to teach those with disabilities. She added that the project is “going strong” and continues to provide more services.

“Cathca is running support services in several areas where there’s nothing, there’s just tin houses. They do a great job”

Among the projects the congregation is involved in – with the support of Mísean Cara and in partnership with the Catholic Healthcare Association of Southern Africa, known as Cathca – they help those suffering gender-based violence.

“There’s an awful lot of gender-based violence in South Africa across all economic strata,” said Sr McAteer. “I suppose among the very poor where there’s so much desperation, it’s even worse. Cathca is running support services in several areas where there’s



Community advocates with the Cathca Inkanyezi project connect survivors of domestic and gender-based violence with services such as counselling, legal aid, and self-empowerment to help them heal and safely resume their lives. Photo: Lizette Cressey

nothing, there's just tin houses. They do a great job.

"They identify an organisation who are already trying to do something, get them to identify five unemployed young people who have some umph in them, who would like to help, and then Cathca go and do a week's training with them about gender-based violence."

The training involves several factors, including how to raise awareness. Those involved also meet other key stakeholders, who may be representatives from the nearest clinic, the police, a women's shelter, someone from the Department of Social Development, a counsellor and others involved in the area.

The young people would then go to the local pub, schools, places where there are refugees or migrants and raise awareness. They also visit people's homes and hand out small cards which would have the name of the police officer, someone from the clinic, the shelter and so on.

Sr McAteer said the idea is that when they are at the home, if the woman in question "can't

speak freely – because maybe the man is near – that she is a victim of abuse, they just say goodbye, shake hands and put this card into their hand just so they have it".

She added that she visits the young CAs (Community Advocates) saying they "are full of idealism they think the world is good and marriages are good and then they come across these desperate stories and at that stage... they are half broken. They were weighed down by it."

Sr McAteer highlighted the importance of Misean Cara's support to keep the project up and running. Among other aspects, they pay the CAs which allows them to continue doing their work, helping women suffering gender-based violence.

Encouraging

The current Chair of the Misean Cara Board of Directors, Kevin Carroll – who has been involved in overseas development for 40 years – spoke to *The Irish Catholic* about the importance of Irish missionaries, who have and continue to make a huge positive dif-

ference in countries all over the world to this day.

Having lived in Kenya, Zambia, Uganda, India and Sudan, working with Irish Aid, Trócaire, Concern, Mr Carroll is no stranger to missionaries around the world.

He said: "They have a commitment that you may not get in other areas. NGOs do tremendous work as well, but where missionaries shine is that they are a witness, they have a presence when they move into wherever location it's going to be – and it's often places that are in the middle of nowhere. They learn the local language, they become a part of the community and when things get tough as they often do in war torn areas like South Sudan and even in Uganda, they stay."

He explained: "When I was in Uganda, parts of the country where quite unsafe, but the missionaries stayed, they didn't leave. That gives people, local communities, a huge sense of reassurance that they are cared for, that they are valued. That is

"It tears your heart apart, what you see does that, but at the same time you know you're making a difference in the lives of people, and it makes it all very worthwhile"

what attracted me, when I retired, to become involved with Misean Cara because I believe that not only just the presence but the quality of the work that they do in development is in many cases quite extraordinary and it's quite varied. They do the basic stuff – the really important basic stuff – the building blocks for development are education, healthcare, those kinds of things. But they also have done extraordinary work in the promotion of human rights often at great personal cost.

"There's a transition taking place and there's a lot of very capable missionaries emerging, I've met them in my travels – young and highly enthusiastic, working in Sudan, Kenya, Nigeria"

Mr Carroll gives Fr Gabriel Dolan SPS, a Kiltegan missionary, as an example of a person who went beyond the building blocks of development work in his tireless fight for human rights in Turkana, a very poor region of northern Kenya.

Fr Donal wrote a memoir called *Undaunted* which Mr Carroll recommends, saying if you want to know the impact of missionary work "read the last piece of each chapter".

Giving an example, Mr Carroll said: "He was getting legal aid for people to get registration of their land so they can stay where they live and not be evicted. The impact small initiatives like that can have on people's livelihood is quite

extraordinary. You are often targeted because you are challenging the system, challenging unjust structures."

Looking to the future of Irish missionaries, Mr Carroll guesses there are about 400-500 left around the world, when there used to be thousands.

He said: "The encouraging thing about it is there a lot of young non-Irish missionaries joining congregations. The Holy Rosary Sisters in Ireland currently have their first African Superior General. There's a transition taking place and there's a lot of very capable missionaries emerging, I've met them in my travels – young and highly enthusiastic, working in Sudan, Kenya, Nigeria. So that is the encouraging part, that transition is happening at the moment... encouraging African, Asian, South American people into the congregations.

"I think that's a very healthy thing because in reality the age cohort of the Irish missionaries is quite high. A lot of them are quite elderly now, they're not going to be there forever, so I would be encouraged by that."

Hopes

Sr McAteer – still a very active Irish missionary – asked about her hopes for South Africa, which continues to face a plethora of social issues including unemployment and crime, said she would like to see those who have nothing "get a fairer share of the world's goods" and that their right to dignity is accepted "and they are able to live in peace and harmony and develop their gifts".

"If your big concern every day is getting something to eat these other things get pushed aside. So if people had their basic rights,

it could be a very different place," she said.

Faith

"If it wasn't for my Faith I don't know where I would be, especially for those first four years," Sr McAteer said. "I suppose when you're younger, I was all idealistic in my 20s full of energy to change the world, and then met police brutality and oppression. There's a bit in the Bible where it talks about the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, and I remember, there's a big church there beside the school where I was in the first four years and I remember going in and saying 'And who are you, this God, who is here, and all of this... you know, a child would be playing in a garden and the next thing he's shot by a bullet that's meant for somebody else'."

Despite these challenges she insists that "Faith is what makes it all possible".

Regarding the work of Irish missionaries, Sr McAteer said that it is her conviction that what missionaries give is small in comparison to what they receive from the poorest of the poor and that young Irish people should consider a vocation to the missionary life.

"I would encourage this present generation of Irish youth to think about coming to help in an area that is developing and has not got all that Ireland has," she said, continuing "I would encourage the Irish youth to follow in the steps of those who have gone ahead of them and to live their lives to serve and make a difference. It tears your heart apart, what you see does that, but at the same time you know you're making a difference in the lives of people, and it makes it all very worthwhile."



Kevin Carroll (left) Chair of the Misean Cara Board of Directors, with Misean Cara CEO, John Moffett at the Misean Cara 2023 AGM in June 2023. Photo: Jennifer Barker Photography

Missionaries leading the way on reform of care for children with disabilities

During the summer of 2022, Misesan Cara CEO John Moffett travelled with staff to South Africa and Zambia to visit projects run by Irish missionaries demonstrating innovation in tackling gender-based violence, access to education for migrant children, protecting the rights of women and girls, and care for children with disabilities.

"Seeing the incredible work and impact of missionaries in person is very inspiring and can spark a lot of new ideas," remarks Mr Moffett. "A real lightbulb moment for us on that trip was the excellence of the support to children with disabilities that we witnessed, compassionate and thoughtful approaches

"Exposure to projects like this eventually led to an idea to promote these approaches within the wider care reform agenda taking place across east and southern Africa. Misesan Cara has successfully secured funding from the GHR Foundation to support and learn from our members' wider disability projects, and bring that expertise to the wider catholic care for children initiative taking place under oversight of the UISG (International Union of Secretaries General)," he says.

"Children with disabilities are often the first and always the last to leave institutional care and we hope that this initiative will help to change that situation and broaden adoption of support for families."

poor access to schools with programmes for disabled children, discrimination and stigma, broken families and other factors also contribute to the placement of children with disabilities in care institutions, sometimes for their entire lives.

With a deep, long-term understanding of the institutions and mechanisms in place to care for children with disabilities, Sister-led missionary organisations in Africa are ideally placed to lead the charge for care reform.

Misesan Cara's recently announced part-

better, more child-focused model of care.

Why is Care Reform important?

It is estimated that between 5.5 and 8 million children worldwide live in institutions. A Human Rights Watch figure from 2014 shows that in some countries close to 50 percent of these children in institutions are also living with some form of disability.

Tragically, research has also shown that institutionalisation profoundly and negatively



Teachers and students in a class for deadblind pupils at the Bauleni Special Needs Project and School (BSNP) in Lusaka, Zambia. Run by the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, the BSNP is Zambia's only school to provide education and support to children who are deafblind. Photo: Moses Mtonga

that support families to care for children with severe disabilities at home and provide opportunities for those children to reach their full potential."

Mr Moffett recalls being particularly struck by a visit to the home of a young boy named John, living on the outskirts of Lusaka, Zambia with his mother and siblings. The boy, who was born with Spina Bifida, has suffered physical and intellectual delays, and due to the family's lack of resources was unable to attend school or access rehabilitation. John had recently been connected by outreach workers to the Bauleni Special Needs Project and School in Lusaka, which now visits him regularly to provide basic schooling and at-home physical therapy to build his mobility. He is making great strides and becoming much more independent as a result of this specialised care and attention.

Missionaries setting the stage for change

Around the world, children with disabilities are among the most vulnerable populations in the world today and are the most at risk of having their fundamental rights violated. One of the most critical rights violations of children with disabilities is the right to live safely and securely in a home where they are loved and have adequate care and access to education.

For disabled children in the developing world, whether their disabilities are physical or intellectual, it's not just their special needs that make it hard for their families to keep them at home. Many other factors lead to children with disabilities often having to be taken into residential care, away from their families and communities. Poverty, lack of social services in their communities,



Misesan Cara staff tour construction of a new physical and psychosocial therapy block for students at the Bauleni Special Needs Project, funded by Misesan Cara. Photo: Moses Mtonga

nership with US-based, Catholic GHR Foundation and Catholic Care for Children International (CCCI) aims to lead the development of a new approach to care for children with disabilities in Africa, aimed at preventing children with disabilities from entering care institutions and also to transition disabled children from institutions back home or at least to home-like environments in the community.

Funded by a \$1million grant from GHR Foundation, the three-year initiative will research and promote home-based care and community-level services as a preferred model for caring for children with disabilities within the wider movement of care reform in Africa.

2,000 children in Four Countries

Along with GHR and CCCI, Misesan Cara is joining with five of its member congregations on the initiative: Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary; Franciscan Missionaries of St Joseph; Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood; Missionary Sisters of the Assumption; and Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul.

All five congregations are active in providing quality care and education to children with disabilities, in home and community settings in Uganda, Zambia, South Africa, and Kenya. Collectively, they share a rich, long-standing expertise in working with children with disabilities at the community level, providing services that enable children to stay with their families and are currently involved in Misesan Cara-supported initiatives reaching nearly 2,000 children with disabilities.

Through an extensive religious network in Africa, these organisations will leverage their shared expertise and resources to advocate and build this change, enabling a

impacts a child's physical and psychological development, and can be associated with long-term mental health problems, emotional attachment problems, higher criminality, and suicide. It is also known that children with disabilities are up to seventeen times more likely to live in institutions than their peers, without disabilities.

This widespread evidence of the dangers of long-term institutionalisation is a driving basis for the move towards care reform, towards transitioning from institutional to family-based and community-based care.

At the heart of the movement is preventing the separation of families, and the reuniting of families in cases where separation has taken place. In situations where children cannot be reunited with their families, alternative care options, such as foster care and adoption, are prioritised over institutional care.

Meet the missionaries and projects at the heart of disability care for children

Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (Uganda and Zambia)

(www.sacredheartsjm.org)

In Uganda, where the country's Population and Housing Census reports that the population of children aged 18 years and below living with disabilities is between 5.8% and 15%, the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary (SSHJM) operates the Children in Need (CHIN) project in Uganda's Mukono District. First established in 2004 to respond to the underserved needs of people with disabilities in the area, especially children with disabilities CHIN now operates a widespread programme throughout Mukono that encompasses inclusive education, health, livelihoods training, and human rights.



At the Children in Need (CHIN) project in Uganda, Physiotherapist and Community Based Rehabilitation staff conduct therapeutic exercises with students. Photo: Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary



On the outskirts of Lusaka, Zambia John (aged 5) and his mother Catherine, receive frequent home therapy and education visits from staff of the Bauleni Special Needs Project to help with John's physical and intellectual delays caused by Spina Bifida. Photo: Moses Mtonga

Another SSHJM project in Amuru District in Northern Uganda, is the Women and Children First Organisation (WACFO), a disability prevention and management project that applies a holistic and inclusive approach to supporting children and youth with disabilities in this largely rural, poor area. The project supports not only disabled children, but also their guardians and families, mothers to be, and the community at large, with the aim of achieving mainstream disability into all parts of the community.

The SSHJM also run projects in Zambia. In Lusaka, the Bauleni Special Needs Project (BSNP) is a recognised centre of excellence for inclusive education that provides quality, holistic and accessible education for more than 1,400 students, including children with special needs, orphaned and vulnerable children, and is the only school in the country with a programme for deafblind persons.

Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Saint Joseph (Kenya)

(www.fmsj.co.uk)

The Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Saint Joseph run the St. Francis Rehabilitation project in Malindi, Kilifi County, Kenya, where the poverty level stands at 42% and only a third of all people with disabilities are able to access adequate care for their needs.

The St Francis Rehabilitation project serves 75 children and youth with disabilities with therapies including physiotherapy, speech and occupational therapy, medication, and psychosocial support. The project strengthens home-based outreaches to support caregivers through training on best practices in the care of children with disabilities to maximise their health outcomes and reduce dependence in undertaking day-to-day tasks. Through community sensitisation, the project is also striving to create an enabling



Irish-based Misean Cara provides funding and support to the Bauleni Special Needs Project in Lusaka, Zambia, for its facilities and programmes serving children with disabilities. Photo: Moses Mtonga

environment for people with special needs to participate in society with prejudice or stigma.

Daughters of Charity (Kenya)

(www.daughtersofcharity.ie)

In Kiambu County, Kenya, the Daughters of Charity Services Thigio (DCST) operates day centres for people with physical and intellectual disabilities at three different primary schools in the area. The Special Needs Programs at DCST provide education and care for 118 children, youth, and adults with intellectual and physical disabilities. Children come to classes daily and parents attend classes as well to learn to participate in their child's development. Regardless of whether a child is in need of total respite care, or are preparing to enter Kenyan schools, they are cared for with compassion and caring in an atmosphere that enhances their dignity.

In Kiio, a semi-arid locale in Kitui County, eastern Kenya, many families go without basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing due to high poverty rates among the population. They also have limited access to medical care and education, creating few opportunities for care and therapy for children and young people living with special needs. The Daughters of Charity in Kiio work with 119 children and young people living with various disabilities. They also assist their families with basic needs and also training and information on caregiving and rights for people with disabilities.

Missionary Sisters of the Assumption (South Africa)

(<http://msassumption.org/>)

In South Africa, government policies are very clear on protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, however the reality is that there is far too little implementation of these policies. The Enkuthazweni project of the Missionary Sisters of the Assumption serves 100 intellectually disabled people from the rural coastal town of Port Alfred in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, the poorest province in South Africa, with two thirds of children living in poverty.

Enkuthazweni provides services to 40 children through its special needs educational programme; 30 children with severe multiple disabilities through its physical rehabilitation programme; and 30 young adults through its skills development and employment programme. Enkuthazweni also works closely with parents to offer training and support to improve parenting skills, attitudes and conditions at home. It is estimated that each family has five members in the household, which extends the reach of the programmes.

Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood (Zambia)

(<https://fmdminternational.co.uk/>)

The Little Assisi Special School of the Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood has been run from a residential dwelling in Ng'ombe compound in the capital, Lusaka, for the past 16 years. Housed in just four rooms, it caters for a diverse range of ages and special needs, provid-

ing education and care to over 200 children with special needs since it opened.

Plans for expanded facilities for the school will provide specialised classrooms and equipment to cater to the range of pupils' needs – a specialist learning environment for those with autism, and for those with Down Syndrome and epilepsy. A skills section and computer lab will help teaching staff ensure that each pupil reaches their full potential, learning life skills through whatever means is most effective for them, and increasing their opportunity of finding a livelihood and achieving independence when they leave school. The new school also hopes to have a rehabilitation centre, offering physical and psychosocial therapies, to support primary school pupils and those aged up to five; and to provide counselling and training for the parents of children with disabilities.

About Misean Cara

Misean Cara is an Irish faith-based organisation established in 2004 to support overseas development work of Irish missionaries. With funding from Ireland's Irish Aid Programme, Misean Cara, through the unique missionary approach to development, supports its 77 missionary member organisations to deliver effective development projects on behalf of the poorest and most vulnerable communities around the world. In 2022, Misean Cara supported 327 projects in 53 countries reaching almost 1.7million people. To learn more about Misean Cara, including how to make a donation to support the work of Ireland's overseas missionaries, visit www.miseancara.ie.

Learn about Misean Cara's partners in the Reform for Care initiative

Catholic Care for Children International

(www.catholiccareforchildren.org)

"A FAMILY FOR EVERY CHILD"

Catholic Care for Children International is a visionary initiative led by Catholic Sisters to ensure that every child grows up in a safe, nurturing family environment. Learn more at

GHR Foundation

(www.ghrfoundation.org)

"A hope-fueled global funder of service to people and their limitless potential for good."

GHR is a US-based foundation providing funds to organisations working in areas including global development and education. GHR supports projects rooted in dignity, equity and care as instruments of social justice for the most vulnerable and marginalized. Their work, and who they fund, is guided by two core truths:

- 1) All children deserve and thrive best in nurturing families or family-like environments.
- 2) The Catholic Church, related networks and allies can be a powerful force for good in serving, advocating, resourcing and creating space for the most vulnerable to lead the way forward.



Misean Cara CEO John Moffett on a visit to the Little Assisi Special School in Lusaka, Zambia. Photo: Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood

Capuchin Missions - With Gratitude for the Past with Hope for the Future

In October each year we are reminded that the Church is missionary. Pope Francis underlines this truth by his journeys to the margins or peripheries of the world. He, like his namesake St Francis, has made the World his cloister bringing the message of the Gospel to all corners of the world. The missionary heart seeks encounter with Christ and with our brothers and sisters. This desire has compelled Irish women and men to leave their homeland and travel to all parts of the World bringing with them Christ's peace, love and joy. The global influence of

Irish missionaries over the past hundred years has been immense. It has been a chapter of our history that should not be forgotten. The Irish Capuchins have been part of this endeavour from the early 1900's when Capuchin Friars from Ireland spread their wings from California to Capetown, from Zambia to Wellington, from Korea to Madagascar. The Psalmist writes "They go out sowing in tears, they come back rejoicing" (Psalm 126) and this has long been the cry of battle cry of the missionary. We can ask 'Has it been worthwhile? Has it been successful?' For a

full and honest answer to those questions, one would need to ask the peoples who received these messengers of the gospel. For the most part the little seed planted has borne fruit, in growth of the Church in mission lands as well as local vocations to our Capuchin way of life. "Unless the Lord builds the house in vain do the labourers toil." (Psalm 127) - We thank the Lord for being with us and blessing our labours over the past decades. We can look to the future with hope in the Lord who calls and sustains his people. For the most part Irish

missionaries are part of our history however a new chapter continues to be written as our missions are getting local vocations. These young men need our encouragement and material support to set up and aid their formation.
You can support the work of the Capuchin Missions through enrollment in the Seraphic Mass Association. More information is available from the Capuchin Mission Office, Church Street, Dublin 7 - Phone 01 873 1022 Email: capuchinmissions@gmail.com



Building of new church at Makometsane outstation



Serving Christmas lunch to the homeless in Parow



Mass 2018, St Anthony's, Siyabuswa



Siyabuswa 1st Communion

Mission and Synodality: A Symbiotic Journey in the Church

The convergence of the Synod on Synodality, which commenced on October 4th in Rome, with Mission Month holds significant meaning. Marking a departure from traditional synodal gatherings, this Synod stands out by actively incorporating a diverse range of voices, including women and laypeople, and addressing a wide range of reforms, reflecting the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. It uniquely underscores the Synod's commitment to embracing a more inclusive, participatory, and mission-driven Church.

This alignment underscores the symbiotic relationship between mission and synodality within the life of the Church. Just as mission calls us to engage with the world and share the Gospel, synodality encourages us to listen and to discern together as a community of believers. Both mission and synodality are rooted in the idea of going out, of reaching beyond ourselves, and of being open to the movement of the Holy Spirit. In this intricate dance of faith, mission, and synodality are inseparable partners, each informing and enriching the other.

Mission, the heartbeat of the Church's existence, propels us outward, urging us to carry the message of Christ's love and salvation to the world. It is the driving force that compels us to engage with the challenges and joys of humanity, to be the hands and feet of Christ in a broken world. In this sense, mission provides the purpose and direction for our synodal journey.

On the other hand, synodality, with its emphasis on communion, participation, and mission, informs and revitalises our mission. It reminds us that we are not solitary travellers on this mission but members of a diverse and interconnected community. Synodality encourages us to listen, to discern together, and to embrace the particularities of our faith and culture as we carry out our mission.

As Missionary Sisters, we understand mission to be a collaborative and transformative journey, guided by principles of partnership, mutual respect, and a reverence for the sacred art of listening. Mission is about a synergistic, transformative journey and a shared purpose that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. It's a sharing of gifts and a recog-

nition that each individual we encounter, regardless of their origin, has valuable contributions to offer in our collective pursuit of growth. Mission highlights our belief in the profound interconnectedness of humanity and our shared home. It is a commitment to fostering meaningful relationships that transcend the illusions of separateness between cultures and individuals - a vision of mission that embodies the divine choreography of compassion, understanding, and unity; and holds a deep appreciation for the diversity of human experiences.

Religious Sisters Part of Synodal Process

Several of our Sisters actively participated in the synodal processes in Ireland, contributing to the rich tapestry of voices shaping the Church's evolving narrative. Our Provincial Leader, Sister Kathleen McGarvey, was one of fourteen delegates from Ireland to participate in the assembly held in Prague earlier this year. This was one of seven continental assemblies that took place in February and March in preparation for the Synod on Synodality currently tak-

ing place and continuing in October 2024.

In an important moment for the Church, five women religious representing the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) are participating in the first session of the Synod 2021-2024, themed "For a Synodal Church: communion, participation, and mission". Congregational Leader of the Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles and UISG President, Mary T Barron OLA, is one of these women. Other participants are: UISG Executive Secretary, Patricia Murray IBVM, Elizabeth Mary Davis RSM, Elysée Izerimana, Op. S.D.N. and Maria Nirmalini, A.C.

Sister Mary Barron, in a broader statement on UISG's participation in the Synod, conveyed her enthusiasm, stating, "We respond with joy to Pope Francis' call to participate in the Synod of Bishops and to commit ourselves to the ecclesial journey of the Synod on communion, participation and mission. We are convinced that religious life, with its experience of community life and discernment, can help the Church achieve this synodal conversion." She believes that consecrated life is strongly called to synodality at this moment. UISG's presence at

the Synod carries with it the hope of bringing a prophetic voice to the discussions.

Synodality is a journey that transcends structures and engages the very heart of what it means to be the Church. Pope Francis eloquently captures the essence of synodality when he describes it as "a style, a walk together, what the Lord expects from the Church of the third millennium."

In an era where the Catholic Church seeks a more inclusive approach, UISG's

active role in the Synod brings the hope for a commitment to fostering greater unity, participation, and shared mission within the Church. As these committed women Religious join the conversation at the Synod, we hold them in prayer, recognising that their presence and contributions will play a crucial role in shaping the Church's path towards a more synodal and inclusive future, where the voices and experiences of all believers are valued and embraced.



Mary T Barron, OLA Congregational Leader



Courageously committed to God's Reign of Peace and Justice



Prayer

Simplicity

Zeal

Mission

Courage

Faith

Fidelity

The joys of our Mission are many and varied. Being part of a community of believers and living out a vocation of service to God and others is incredibly rewarding. There is a great sense of joy in deepening one's spiritual life, being part of a spiritual family, and living according to a set of values and principles that promote peace, love, and justice. Our vocation provides us with the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with others and serve as a living witness to the power of the Gospel. Ultimately, our vocation to consecrated life is a beautiful way to share in the joy of the Gospel and witness to the presence of God in our lives.

We are an international group of Religious sisters; apostles rooted in faith and hope. Ready to risk it all for the Lord.

We strive to be examples of "Women in Communion". Living in international communities, we continue to fulfill the intense missionary dream of our founder, Father Augustine Planque.

There are many ways in which you can share in our mission, find out more on our website.

WWW.OLAIRELAND.IE



For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in" (Matthew 25: 35)



Displaced people come from every continent. Conflicts, wars, persecutions, natural disasters, poverty, and the effects of climate change are the main reasons people are forced to flee their homeland. In our response to the situation of migration "we find ourselves at a crossroads of civilisation". Pope Francis in Marseilles on 22 Sept. 2023. The United Nations estimates there were 103 million refugees at the start of 2023. There are 35 million minors displaced and over 1 million have been born while fleeing emergencies.

The Response of our Salesian Missionaries

Salesian missionaries are in direct daily contact with refugees and displaced people. Fr Timothy Ploch, director Salesian Missions New York states, "Salesian missionaries live among the communities they work in and are on the front lines of the refugee crisis. They provide support and services for refugees and internally displaced persons whose lives have been affected by war, persecution, famine, and natural disasters."

At Tijuana in Mexico 'Padre Casa', a welcoming

"Salesian missionaries live among the communities they work in and are on the front lines of the refugee crisis. They provide support and services for refugees and internally displaced persons whose lives have been affected by war, persecution, famine, and natural disasters"



Children playing at the Salesian Mission Centre at Juba, South Sudan.

three thousand people in front of our gates. Almost exclusively women and children fleeing the war. I knew I had to help them and provide shelter."

"They always walk beside the displaced people and offering hope in a concrete way through education, technical and professional formation, and showing them the face of the God who loves them"

Two Salesian mission centres, Don Bosco Ngangi and Don Bosco Shasha in the Democratic Republic of the Congo have been offering shelter, support, food and medical aid to thousands of displaced people due to the war in the country.

Salesian Missionaries of Hope – Lighting a candle in the darkness

The United Nations, refugee agencies, local governments, care agencies, Salesian NGOs and donors all help the missionaries access resources. Our approach is collaborative which is essential.

Pope Francis has described refugees as "People like everyone, who have been deprived by war of their homes, their jobs, their parents and their



Refugees at Palabek Refugee Camp, Uganda.

friends." They need hope and a way forward. A very large cohort are children and young people. At Palabek and Kakuma in Kenya, primary, secondary and vocational centres have been put in place to educate the young and give them a future. Counselling centres are provided to assist the traumatised.

Kakuma has a population of 200,000 and over half are minors. In this camp there are refugees fleeing the tribal wars in South Sudan, others trying to escape political persecution in Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Ethiopia or from the Eritrean dictatorship. More are fleeing social and political insecurity in the East of the Democratic Republic of Congo or civil war and fundamentalism in Somalia.

For this troubled group of people education for coexistence is the greatest need. In

the camp the Dinka and the Nuer of South Sudan play together; Muslims and Christians are studying side by side; Ethiopians with Burundians, Rwandans with Eritreans. Young people learn to know, value and respect each other, and to live together. While being educated they are preparing to be people of reconciliation in their various countries.

Fr Ángel Fernández Artime is the Rector Major of the Salesian Congregation visited Kakuma in 2017 and observed that, "At the United Nations refugee camp at Kakuma people of the most diverse races, tribes, customs, and religious professions all live together. The Salesian technical school provides courses and trades to prepare the young for life after the refugee camp."

A Salesian technical centre in Egypt has provided employment skills training to 3,000 Sub-Saharan African, Yemeni, and Syrian refugees, and vulnerable Egyptians. A similar project in Ethiopia is benefiting migrants, returning refugees and internally displaced people.

All the Salesian provinces in Europe have welcomed Ukrainian refugees creating spaces for them in schools, youth centres, hostels and parishes. Earthquakes such as the one in Syria in 2023 impact on missionaries. Terrified people sheltered at the Salesian centre in Aleppo. It was necessary to provide support for one thousand people.

In his 2022 Message for The World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Pope Francis wrote that the building of the Kingdom of God must have people from the peripheries at the centre. He said, "Eve-

rybody must be included. The Kingdom of God is to be built with the most vulnerable, for without them it would not be the Kingdom that God wants. The inclusion of those most vulnerable is the necessary condition for full citizenship in God's Kingdom."

Salesian missionaries live this vision. They always walk beside the displaced people and offering hope in a concrete way through education, technical and professional formation, and showing them the face of the God who loves them.

After his visit to Kakuma Fr Ángel said, "I came away with a heart filled with the joy of having touched with my own hands, in the midst of poverty, so much humanity and so great a presence of the God of Love." Br Máximo Herrera, a Salesian from Argentina living at Palabek has stated, "I believe I have learned to pray since I have been in Africa because I have seen the commitment and conviction with which the refugees and displaced people pray and worship."

Through their deeds and actions Salesian missionaries bring hope and new possibilities to refugees and displaced people in many locations throughout the world. No matter what their ethnic, religious or cultural background displaced people seeking assistance are always made welcome at the mission centres.

Don Bosco Aid Ireland supports many Salesian missionary projects throughout the world. We are very grateful to all who support us in any way with this work.

Proclaiming God to the poor the Salesians' mission



Salesian missionaries proclaim God in word and deed to the marginalised, Fr Dan Carroll SDB tells Ruadhán Jones

For almost 150 years, Salesian missionaries have been bringing God's word and hope to the poorest and most marginalised in society, says Fr Dan Carroll SDB.

The congregation's charism is to bring "the Word of God to young people, particularly to those who are poor, marginalised and abandoned", the Irish Salesian continues.

They do this both by word and action, witnessing to the Faith through their acts of charity, and then teaching the good news to all.

The Salesians have a missionary presence on most of the continents, including hard-hit countries in Africa such as South Sudan and the Congo, as well as parts of South America, India and Europe.

"Work for the migrants and immigrants and internally displaced people has been going on for decades in the Salesian mission work," Fr Carroll tells *The Irish Catholic*.

Turin

"The mission work began in 1875 when a group of Salesians went from Turin to work with a group of Italian

migrants in Argentina. A few years later, in 1879, they began to work with what we would now call indigenous peoples in Patagonia."

The congregation was just 16 years old when it began its missionary work. Founded by St Don Bosco in 1859, the congregation focuses on attending to the needs of young people.

Don Bosco founded the congregation "in response to the great need he saw in Turin" to help young boys who, because of rapid economic change, were forced to move from farms to big cities.

They weren't able to cope with the changes "and became a major problem. When he began ministry, he noticed this and in 1841, he began a ministry with those young people," Fr Carroll explains. "Basically many of them were refugees, they had come a long distance to that place. All the problems of the modern world were in that that group at that stage."

Following on from Don Bosco, the first call for each Salesian is to go out and proclaim God's word, bringing his hope to those who need it.

"In Ireland now we have Salesian missionaries from India, from Vietnam, a couple from Nigeria and one from East Timor"

First, though, they strive to meet people's material needs, whether it be "education, health needs, having a direction in life... welcoming young people in particular", says Fr Carroll.

While much of the congregation's missionary work has been carried out in developing nations, the Irish Salesian says



Salesian volunteers help to organise aid to refugees from the war against Ukraine.

the congregation has noticed a growing need for a missionary focus in Europe too: "We need missionaries here in our part of Europe as well since the cultural change and so forth, there are a lot of young people who haven't heard the word of God. That's certainly part of the focus."

Trend

There is a "reverse missionary trend", he says, highlighting the changing demographics for vocations: "Our missionaries were coming from the Western world, now they come from everywhere. In Ireland now we have Salesian



Dan Carroll, Don Bosco Aid Ireland

missionaries from India, from Vietnam, a couple from Nigeria and one from East Timor."

In Ireland, the congregation has a relatively small membership. They work in secondary schools and agricultural colleges predominantly, and also with vulnerable people in Dublin city. A number of Irish Salesians went 'on the missions' in Africa, South America and particularly India.

"The missionaries in India are reaching out to all these different caste groups and ethnic groups. Witness there is the first thing and they proclaim where they can"

One aspect of Salesian life the Irish province is seeking to promote is volunteer centres, Fr Carroll tells this paper.

"We offer opportunities to people who would like to go to a missionary centre maybe for a few months or a year, just for

that experience. Volunteering is quite big in the congregation in other places in South America, in Europe and so forth. We're trying to develop that, it's an important part of it."

In some parts of the world, the missionaries' work can be fraught with danger, due to hostility to Christianity and other minority faiths. Fr Carroll gives the example of North Africa, where the word of God can't be openly proclaimed.

"But by their example and their values, social services, education centres and refugee centres, they give witness to the Gospel," Fr Carroll stresses. "The missionaries in India are reaching out to all these different caste groups and ethnic groups. Witness there is the first thing and they proclaim where they can."

Europe

Looking at Europe, "there is a lot of work in nearly all the parishes and there are Salesian centres in all European countries, supporting migrants and displaced people, supporting young people who are very poor and not able to access education," Fr Carroll explains.

"Skills education has become a focus of our work, enabling young people

to have skills that will hopefully help them enter the workplace. That was one of Don Bosco's core themes, helping young people to take their place in society, to be good citizens and good Christians. That encapsulates what he was about."

"Misean Cara has been wonderful in supporting the projects we have sent to them over the years"

Over the many decades that the Salesians have been sending out missionaries, the Irish people have been very generous to their noble cause.

"People very kindly and generously respond to our requests for support for places like South Sudan, the Congo, the Philippines, Asia, Syria," Fr Carroll says gratefully.

"Misean Cara has been wonderful in supporting the projects we have sent to them over the years. When we look back over time, all the generations of Irish people have supported missions in India, in South America – an enormous amount of support has been forwarded to the missions."

"We need missionaries here in our part of Europe as well since the cultural change and so forth, there are a lot of young people who haven't heard the word of God"

Celebrating 86 Years of Healing

Since we, Medical Missionaries of Mary (MMM), were founded in 1937 by Mother Mary Martin, we have been bringing hope to people in some of the poorest and most remote areas of the world. As MMMs we bring our faith, skills and tenacity to the work that needs to be done despite the possible challenges of the place or situation. Over the years, our work has changed, but the focus of bringing health and healing and the love of God to women and children in need has been constant.

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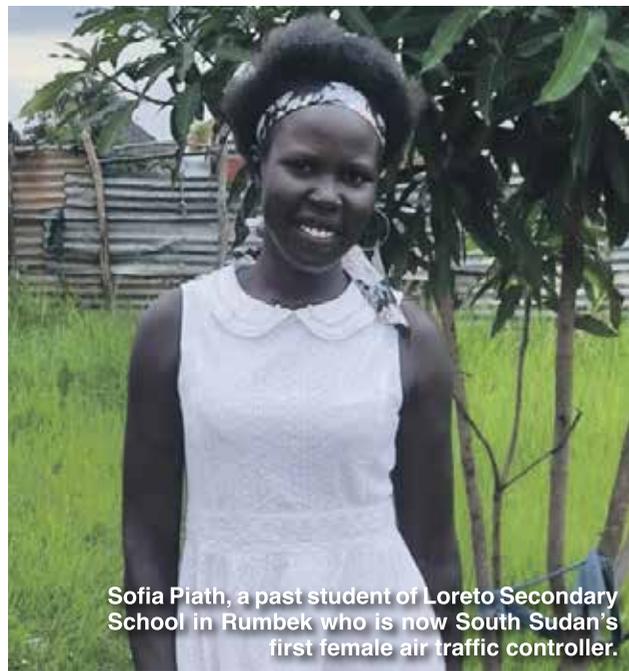
Loreto Sisters – Transforming Lives with Commitment and Love

The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, more commonly known as the Loreto Sisters, have missions in 24 countries. We work towards promoting the dignity and liberation of all, particularly women and children. We are involved in both formal and informal Education, in Advocacy & Human Rights, Pastoral Work, Health, and in Spirituality & Faith development. Our mission is based on the vision of our founder, Mary Ward, which inspires all to reach their full potential. It is underpinned by our values of freedom, justice, joy and truth, giving hope through compassionate and committed service. We, with our lay colleagues, work to support and empower some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

SOUTH SUDAN: Girls Education and Empowerment

The Loreto Mission in Rumbek, South Sudan started in 2008 with a secondary school for girls. Over the years it has established itself as one of the leading schools in this newly emerging nation. This is in a context where, shockingly, girls are more likely to die in childbirth than to complete second level education and where 53% of girls are married before their 18th birthday. As well as providing quality education, the school acts as a refuge and protector of girls who are at risk of a forced early marriage. Over the years the Loreto mission in Rumbek has expanded to provide primary education and health care. It is a prime example of the effectiveness of the missionary approach to development with its ability to reach, and uplift, people living in extreme poverty.

The school pursues an excellence which is appropriate to each student and strives to maximise the students potential. Many of the 345 girls who have graduated through the school to date, have been supported to proceed to 3rd level. Sofia Piath is one such past student. Sofia recently became South Sudan's first female Air Traffic Controller. In a recent interview she stated that "I love challenges. When you are told you cannot do this, you really have to challenge it, so that you can really make it".



Sofia Piath, a past student of Loreto Secondary School in Rumbek who is now South Sudan's first female air traffic controller.

ALBANIA, KENYA and INDIA: Fighting against Human Trafficking

It is estimated by the International Labour Organisation that Human Trafficking generates profits of \$150 Billion yearly for criminal gangs. Only 1-2% of victims are rescued and, in Europe, less than 1% of traffickers are convicted. In places like West Bengal in India, Kangemi slum in Kenya and in Albania the Loreto Sisters have established professional, committed and fearless teams who work collaboratively strengthening the capacity of law enforcement, judiciary and other organisations, to fight against human trafficking. They provide empathetic support to victims / survivors of trafficking that is trauma informed, person centred and designed to empower, enabling the survivor to stand on their own two feet as dignified members of society.

Survivors are the most important people in combating human trafficking. An example is Enkeleda (not her real name), an Albanian trafficked to the UK, who had been terribly abused in the sex market. She was eventually rescued

by a client in one of the brothels. Enkeleda, in her process of recovery, wished to denounce her traffickers. She had been collaborating with law officers for over one year when, sadly, her traffickers took revenge and murdered her brother in Albania. The Loreto Team in Albania was requested to safeguard Enkeleda as she travelled from the UK to Albania to attend her brother's funeral. This was accomplished by collaborating with trusted police officers and shelter staff. Enkeleda was eventually successful in convicting the traffickers. Consequent to this denunciation many other girls were rescued from human trafficking.

The Loreto Sisters team in West Bengal pioneered an innovative model where children, trained about issues like trafficking and early marriage, identify vulnerable children among their peers. Any child rights violations are shared with the Loreto team who assess the situation and make the necessary follow-ups. Arifa Khatun is one such club member who was awarded for her courage in stopping her own child marriage and for creating awareness on the issue. The guidance and training provided by the team gave her the awareness and confidence to understand the severity of the situation and to stand up for herself.



Arifa Khatun awarded for her courage in standing up against early marriage in Kolkata, India

INDIA: Education and Empowerment of Migrant Workers

Whole families migrate from very poor areas near West Bengal, to work in the brickfields from around November to May each year. For the remainder of the year, they return to their home villages. Children, as young as five, are engaged in making the bricks. While in the brickfields the children have no access to education. Since 2008, a curriculum, geared to the needs of the children, is delivered by the Loreto team in an interactive and fun way. Classes are conducted in the open air. Over the years the project has evolved to include a health programme and awareness campaigns on rights and entitlements.



Children attending class within the brickfields

In more recent years the project has explored ways of supporting the children to continue with their education when they return to their home villages. They engaged with the families, local schools, and local government departments. In 2022 this initiative was a remarkable success with 577 children enrolling in their local school when they returned from the brickfields. In some cases children also stayed with their grandparents, or other family relatives, in their native village and attended their local school for the full year while their parents migrated. These children are now becoming the first generation in their families to complete their education.

ZAMBIA: Providing Hope and Healthcare in Remote Lukulu

The Loreto Sisters have a mission in Lukulu, a small remote town located in one of the most impoverished areas in the country. The majority of the people eke out a living from subsistence agriculture on poor sandy soils, with minuscule employment or tertiary education opportunities. This creates hopelessness among young people, causing some to drop out of school. Health services are grossly understaffed. Any qualified staff deployed to work in the area want to leave given its remoteness.

With a desire to address the needs of the people, and in collaboration with the Government and diocese, the Loreto Sisters established the Sancta Maria College of Nursing and Midwifery as a Grant Aided College which provides trained and skilled health workers for deployment within the local area. By training local people this is strengthening quality primary health care accessibility to the marginalized community while also providing an opportunity for employment. The 165 students currently studying in the college have the potential to break out of the cycle of poverty.



Lizzy Ipako is a nursing student at the college. She is the first in her family to have a third level education. As she says herself the college has "made my dreams of being a nurse come true".

i The Loreto Sisters would like to acknowledge, and thank, all who support the work we do, our supporters, the Loreto schools and Miseen Cara. If you would like to support the work we do please contact us at +353 1 4933827, email mwiireland@loreto.ie or visit our website www.loreto.ie/mary-ward-international

Supporting missionaries and seminaries to share Christ's message in a world at flux



Missionaries, as Christ's ambassadors, continue to give people tremendous hope, Missio Ireland's director tells **Chai Brady**

Irish missionaries are growing older and many have been forced to retire due to ill-health, but the fruits of their hard work remain, including the training of young seminarians all over the world to assist the vulnerable and the needy despite the dangers.

Missio Ireland is the Irish branch of the Pontifical Mission Society – which is the Pope's charity for overseas mission. Overall the charity reaches across five continents and supports more than 1,000 mission dioceses.

Speaking to *The Irish Catholic*, the National Director of Missio Ireland, Fr Michael Kelly SPS, spoke of the often-quiet work of missionaries around the world and what the charity is doing to ensure the creation of a new generation of priests – many of whom he believes may come to Ireland to assist where needed.

Fr Kelly, who is a member of St Patrick's Missionary Society (Kiltegan Fathers), was appointed in November 2021 following more than 30 years of missionary service in places such as Grenada and South Africa.

Dangers

Asked why many missionaries remain when others might leave a community due to a variety of dangers, Fr Kelly said they “stay on in solidarity with the poor and the marginalised, being ambassadors for Christ, their presence there with the people gives them such hope”.

“I think that's why, despite tremendous dangers, they continue to stay on and support the people. The love of Christ urges us on,” he said.

Data gathered by Vatican news agency *Fides*, each year, revealed that in 2022, 18 missionaries lost their lives violently across the world – a reminder of the risks they take. The deaths include 12 priests, one brother, three women reli-

Zimbabwean children are pictured in a file photo carrying vegetables as they walk past a house in Harare.



gious, one seminarian, and one lay person. Nine missionaries were killed in Africa, eight missionaries in the Americas, and one in Asia.

“The laity in mission countries are tremendous people, they're really involved in the Church, in the life of the Church and so on”

Asked about Ireland's view of missionaries nowadays, Fr Kelly said while a great sense of faith was handed down from generation to generation, “I suppose as we got more secular, God gets pushed a little bit to the side in people's lives, unless there's a disaster of some kind”.

He added: “In the past every parish would have had a number of priests, brothers or nuns on the missions so their families would be talking about them. Nowadays most Irish missionaries are very old and a lot of them are back in Ireland and retired at this stage, but then there's new fruit emerging. In our society [Kiltegan] now our superior general is Nigerian, and also on the council one person is from Zambia and the other from Kenya.

“This year we had 11 ordained and next year we have

ten and now they're thinking of sending some of those back to Ireland so hopefully that will help to invigorate a sense of Faith and mission in people's lives.”

Fr Kelly said the Kiltegan are training a “new generation of priests to come to Ireland or to Europe”, saying it is the missionary work Ireland did but in reverse.

With Missio Ireland's support of seminaries abroad, in Africa and Asia, “we're actually preparing the next generations of priests that we may have – but also the numbers might increase here as well”.

Shortage

However, he added that even in parishes where there is a shortage of priests, who may only be seen perhaps once a month, there are places in which it is the catechists keeping the Faith alive.

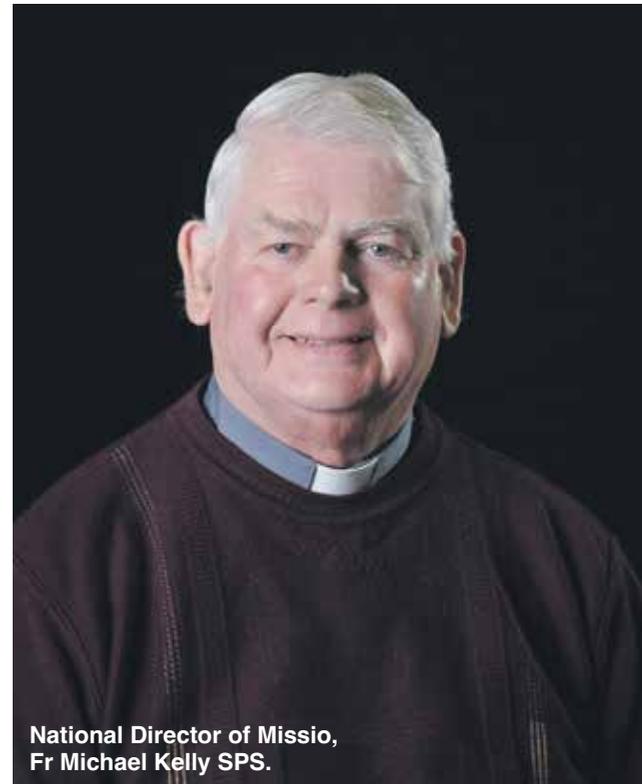
He said: “In one sense even though we don't have too many priests here, we're still very well off compared with some African countries and parishes. The laity in mission countries are tremendous people, they're really involved in the Church, in the life of the Church and so on. I'm 45 years a priest this year but I've never actually worked in a parish that didn't have a parish council at that time. They are involved in a big way, and a lot is about listening to them in a big way. In many ways we've been living out synodality as

missionaries over time, so this has come more into a European context at this stage.”

A lot of the projects Missio Ireland support are run by missionaries or local religious people. A project is sent through the local bishop – if he signs off on it – then will go to the papal nuncio of the country, who sends it on to the Pontifical Mission Society in Rome who go through the projects and then send them out.

The Pontifical Mission Society gave Missio Ireland 16 projects dedicated to children, mostly in Africa. “So we fund those projects directly through the nuncio of the country and the local bishop and then down to the projects. So there's a good record and tracking of all the funds and then reporting back afterwards,” Fr Kelly said, adding that they are currently supporting children in poverty in Calcutta and “I was looking at those children, and the help they get reminded me very much of my own time in South Africa where we were feeding more than 1,000 orphans whose parents had died from AIDS.

“Initially we started with 50 children, we managed to get food and I suppose it brought home to me the extent of how we can help children with these different projects. At that time Missio was sending us some



National Director of Missio, Fr Michael Kelly SPS.

funds from their office in Malta,” he said.

One day he saw a little boy cleaning off dishes, and said to one of the ladies cooking, “that little fellow, his mother trained him very well”, she replied “Father, he is taking those scraps home to feed another child, nothing is wasted here”. Fr Kelly said it reminded him of the Gospel story of Jesus feeding the multitudes, saying “they picked up the scraps afterwards so nothing

was wasted – the children were living out of the Gospel”.

Support

Missio Ireland continue to support, with the help of donations, the work of the Church's mission across the world with many of their projects that help children currently being in Africa – in countries like Chad and Benin. This would involve feeding programmes, various materials to support schools, nurseries, clinics and more.

Serving those furthest behind in South Sudan

As we get closer to Christmas, places like South Sudan lie heavy on my heart. As the youngest country in the world, getting its independence 12 years ago, it's still one of the poorest countries in the world. Life expectancy is 57 years...a far cry from our 82 years in Ireland.

My woes and stresses of being a working mum with 3 young kids, is a world apart from what most are enduring in South Sudan. With Christmas approaching, I take a quiet joy in dodging the panic present buying for friends and in-laws. I've long given up on deliberating over what presents to buy – presents that are meant to somehow show how dear they are to me. Mind you, if I'm honest, it's more about never actually managing to get it right. This year, my plan is that they'll all get the same present, a gift for someone in South Sudan. That's a little stressor, I'm able to put neatly aside.

Hardship

I've always struggled to understand how a person can live through constant, unrelenting stress alongside the grief and trauma of losing their home, or someone in their family. How someone can live through so much hardship, yet still find a way to smile, laugh and get through the day. In Ireland, I don't think we give enough acknowledgment to the resilience that some of us have had to build up throughout our childhood, particularly when it's saturated with trauma. Even at that, it can still be a mere fragment of what many in South Sudan have had to go through in their own childhood years. I asked Irish Jesuit, Tony O'Riordan, from Cork, who worked for over four years in Maban, South Sudan, how he made sense of it...how he understood where people got the energy to continue. Hope. Compartmentalisation. Grief is no less to the grief we have in Ireland but feeding your family requires you to get up early in the morning, start the charcoal fire, set about your day walking to get as much water as you can carry from a river/borehole miles away, then walk to the market to get a small plastic bag of long-life milk, to just make porridge for the kids. A task that takes 3 minutes for us in Ireland with a microwave, can literally take hours for someone

living in a camp or rural area in South Sudan.

There are over 2 million people displaced in South Sudan – that's equivalent to all the people in Munster and Connaught living in a temporary setting that is not their home. As some of us start thinking of how we'll celebrate Christmas day, 2 million South Sudanese are dreaming of finally making it back to their original homes. Conflict in Sudan, has forced them back down to South Sudan. Instead of being greeted by hearty Christmas dinners, warmth and comfort, they are returning to a bleak reality of finally making it back to their original homesteads. They're not sure if their homestead is still there, or if someone else is occupying it...maybe by another displaced family, much like they were for the last 10-20 years. I've asked many returnees, what do you do, when you finally return to your original home and find a strange family living under the tree that you've planted yourself all those years ago. Their answer – patience. Many colleagues I worked with, talked about having to set up make-shift shelters on the outskirts of the camp, waiting for a time to come when it would be safe enough for them to get their homestead back, and for that family themselves to move on.

A tree that was planted in a homestead a generation ago, may not hold the warm memories we might expect – sheltering the family from the midday sun, or heavy rains. That tree could be holding so many memories and trauma, from rebels attacking, rounding up and killing children – neighbours children they had watched growing up. I remember all too well, a woman my age, Monica Illiha, still working her way through secondary school, point out a tree deep in the bush to me where she hid when the rebels last attacked, and that I should remember the route, as that's where we were to meet if the rebels were to come again.

Counselling

Many families won't even make it all the way home this Christmas, and will see themselves lucky to make it just across the border, to camps like Renk, where we are responding with partner, Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), providing relief items and psychosocial counselling.



Akir and her baby at a transit centre in Renk, a bordering town between Sudan and South Sudan

I get texts weekly from former colleagues I used to work with. More often, it's actually texts from their children who were toddlers 20 years ago when I first worked in South Sudan. It's rarely an ask, or a request for a transfer. More often it's just a text to say hello. To know that someone on another continent has the time to chat, to say a quick hello.

Working with the missionary congregations, in South Sudan, brings with it an immense sense of duty to reach those furthest left behind – to reach parts of South Sudan where the government and other NGOs can't reach, as they can be restricted by strict security protocols. There's a sense of pride that comes with that, for personnel that work with the missionaries. Personnel know they can get higher paid jobs elsewhere, but their heart is in serving those furthest behind.

South Sudan lights such a fire in our hearts, it's difficult to move on, once you've witnessed the immense need. Sligo man, Shane Burke, who went out to Kenya almost

14 years ago to work with the Jesuits, is still with us – working with JRS and serving at the moment as Acting Country Director for South Sudan. He's part of the team responding to the refugee crisis in Renk, South Sudan. We also welcome home, Cavan woman, Noelle Fitzpatrick, who dedicated four years to the role as JRS South Sudan Country Director – leading the teams in Juba, Yambio and Maban.

Richard O'Dwyer, from Marino, Dublin worked in South Sudan for 7 years, as a Jesuit missionary in Lobone

and Rumbek. Not an easy feat for anyone. A world apart from this current work as Parish Priest in Gardiner Street, yet not a day would go by without Richard remembering South Sudan and the people he served. As the Jesuit parish gets ready for their Christmas Concert, I can't help but be moved by the videos being sent to me over WhatsApp, from the Jesuit schools in South Sudan – students singing Christmas carols and teachers sending Christmas greetings – which we hope to show as the congregation settles into their seats at St

Francis Xavier Church for the Christmas Concert. The sense of solidarity is humbling.

We launch our Christmas Appeal for refugees and returnees in Renk this month. As Christmas approaches, please think of the people in South Sudan. They are thinking of you.

i Emer Kerrigan is Operations Manager of Irish Jesuits International. To donate to the South Sudan Emergency Response, contact Irish Jesuits International on 01 836 6509 or donate online at www.iji.ie/donate

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