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Reflections on the Work of Mission in Ireland

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In order to understand the work of the Irish Mission Team you must first have some understanding of the context in which we work.

Ireland is a small island on the western edge of Europe the vast majority of our four million population is Catholic. We have moved from being an agricultural based economy to a more industrial, technical and service based economy. We have a young well educated population. The standard of living has improved for many people but we also have a number of people who are poor and unemployed that find themselves excluded from this new found prosperity. There has been a change in the social structures. We have smaller family units with both partners working outside the home in most cases by necessity. One parent families are increasing and a high number of births are outside marriage. The place and influence of the Church has shifted and many people are drifting away from the practice of their faith. In recent years we have had a number of scandals in the Irish Church and this has also had a negative effect. In the past the numbers of priests and religious in Ireland was high. Today there is a strong decline in men entering priesthood and in many dioceses there is a shortage of priests.

As a Team we work all over Ireland. Even within our small country there are differences evident, practice of the faith in the north of Ireland is still very traditional with large numbers of people attending Church. This is true also with rural parishes where whole families attend church together. In contrast, in many of the large urban centres many of the parishes have experienced a drop in numbers of people attending church.

I joined the Mission Team in 1994. There are five people working full time on the team: 4 priests and myself. There are also a number of people who have particular areas of specialty who work with us from time to time. The team is based in All Hallows College Dublin. It is a college specialising in the pastoral and spiritual formation of adults. It also has a degree and post graduate program in theology and pastoral ministry. We work in parishes by invitation of the parish priest or the pastoral council. In 1997 we worked in 17 different parishes and this year we will work with 15 parishes. Our calendar is full for 1999 and we have a waiting list for the year 2000.

We have developed an approach to mission which involves three distinct phases.

1. Pre Mission:

This consists of ongoing contact with the parish over a period of between 6 to 12 months before the mission event. During this time of preparation one member of our team has contact with the parish, meeting the priests and the pastoral council and helping them prepare their plan for mission and renewal. Each parish and community is different and so the way in which they approach the mission will be different. There are however elements which are common to all. There will be special liturgical and sacramental celebrations; a particular focus for the youth in which the young people of the parish help to plan events; time for discussion and dialogue around chosen topics relevant to peoples lives e.g., family, morality, faith, prayer, bereavement and loss, scripture, to name but a few. There is also the social side of mission where people gather to meet and to celebrate and to get to know one another in a very human way.

2. Mission Event:

An intense time of celebration focused on both the Church and in the community with an emphasis on outreach to those on the margins. During this time the team will live in the community and visit the housebound and the schools of the parish. There will be a program of events for each of the days of mission.

3. Post Mission:

Following from the planing and mission event some parishes request that the team get involved in the ongoing renewal and development of the parish. This is a new and increasing area for us. Using the links which we have with All Hallows College we have presented Advent and Lenten programs in various parts of Ireland. There is a growing need for the ongoing faith development of adults at parish level. This is an aspect of our work that continues to grow and develop and offers exciting new challenges for the future.

At the heart of mission today is a call to all of the baptised to participate fully in the life of the Church and to work together to build up the kingdom. Our call as a team is to work in a spirit of collaboration. If we ourselves do not model this in our own working lives how then can we invite others to do so. I have met great support in parishes as a woman working in this ministry. I can relate very well with the people I meet and work with. There have been one or two occasions when my presence as a woman speaking during a service has caused difficulty with some priests.

The process of change can be difficult for some and a great deal of understanding, patience and respect is needed. When I began to work with the team one of the main needs I saw was to involve laity in the life of the Church. Over the past four years I have come to understand that there is much work to be done with the Irish clergy in the area of education, support and renewal before they can begin to work in a spirit of true collaboration.

It was a new experience for me to be included as a member of the Vincentian Family at the Irish Assembly in June 1997. To understand that I was part of a wide network of committed people was inspiring and gave me renewed hope for the future. In July I had the privilege of representing the Irish Mission Team with Fr Jay Shanahan in Paris at the Vincentian Month devoted to the work of mission. It was a wonderful experience to listen and to share with so many people who are engaged in the work of mission all over the world. Having the opportunity to visit all of the sites associated with Vincent was something special which will remain with me forever. In May of this year I attended a meeting in the U.S.A. with members of the American Mission teams. It is hoped that the links that were begun in Paris last July will continue to grow and develop in a spirit of true collaboration following in the spirit of St. Vincent. The way forward is for all laity, religious and priests to work together in the work of renewal and mission.

Mission work is central to the Vincentian Family. It was to the needs of the people of his time that Vincent responded and gave his first mission. The world has changed in many ways since the time of Vincent but the needs of people on a spiritual level are similar to what they were in the days of Vincent. There is a deep hunger in the hearts of people to experience the loving presence of God in their lives. How we respond to that need is the challenge which faces all of us as we face into the new millennium.