

Brief Response to Cardinal Turkson's address on The Mission of the Church Today (Kathleen McGarvey, OLA)

Missionary generosity of the Irish people

Cardinal Turkson has spoken to us about the Extraordinary Month of Mission which we are celebrating this month of October and has reminded us that "without a vision there cannot be a mission". We can safely say that in Ireland, which has traditionally been a missionary church, there has certainly been both vision and mission.

In any history of mission, the great contribution Ireland has made to the spread of the Christian faith to the ends of the earth since the early centuries cannot but be acknowledged. We can claim to have been pioneers of the Church in so many parts of the world: SMA and OLA were pioneers in Ghana, for example, among who was Sr Ignace from Limerick who went to Ghana (known as the Gold Coast) as the first Catholic religious in 1883. Many missionary and religious institutes which today are international were founded here in Ireland

Today, although there are fewer, indeed very few, young Irish people joining our institutes, including even as lay missionaries, the generosity of Irish people to overseas development including through support of Catholic missionaries, is still strong. Despite the many challenges to the Church and indeed to faith here in our country, and despite the questions posed about the role of faith based organizations in development work, which indeed the Cardinal has referred to, many Irish people still believe in the value of missionary work to promote integral human development and they trust that missionaries will use their generosity well. They know that missionaries are present at the frontiers of poverty, suffering and conflict, are inserted in the lives of the people, know the reality of the communities, are trusted by the people they live among, and offer strength to the people as well as ethics and value to development work.

This gives us hope and encouragement and for it we are grateful. Hence, we also use this opportunity to thank Cardinal Turkson for the work of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development which serves as an instrument and voice of the work of the Church in the promotion of justice and peace, the care of the poor and needy, the pastoral care of migrants and itinerant people, and the pastoral care of health workers. The Cardinal has spoken of the active involvement of the Dicastery even at the World Economic Forum and the influence there of the 'Economics of Pope Francis'. As we well know, mission and integral human development go hand in hand, but they are not synonymous; it is our faith which inspires our commitment and the Social Doctrine of the Church, of which the Cardinal has spoken, which encourages and helps to strengthen and shape our efforts. Irish Missionaries as well as international members of our missionary institutes are still very much involved in all these fields throughout the world. Your Eminence, we appreciate your efforts and your support, and we assure you of our prayer.

Mutuality in Mission: Receiving missionaries in Ireland

As I have said, Ireland has traditionally been a missionary church; but it must also be said that we have been so primarily in a one-directional sense: that of sending missionaries abroad; we have not been used to *receiving*. We can claim to have been pioneers of the Church in places such as Ghana. Today the Church in Ghana, like in so many other African countries, is dynamic. Only last week an international conference was held in Nairobi looking at the theme: Mission in Africa: Evangelizing the Future. Similar conferences are to be held in Asia and Latin America. These vibrant Churches are very much aware of their missionary call and are aware that they too are *sent* to be missionary to the ends of the earth.

Over the past one hundred years since *Maximum Illud* was written, an important change which we must consider is that the Church is now most dynamic in those countries where it was only then beginning, whereas those countries from which most missionaries went, such as Ireland, have now become quite secularised and religion is oftentimes seen as something backward, of little or no relevance, and of course people have become disillusioned by the Church. Our young people especially grow up here today with little or no faith, no sense of God in their lives. Hence, our own country today is in need of missionaries, is in need of mission *ad gentes*. This demands not only that we who call ourselves Catholic become more aware of our responsibility to share the faith with those around us but also that we open our doors to receiving more missionaries from abroad.

I believe that it is difficult for us in Ireland, including even in our missionary institutes among our members, since we have been used to sending and giving, to accept and admit that we need to receive. Africa and Asia, for example, do not only need to receive from us but have something to give us; are we humble enough to admit that and receive it? We have been trained in the practice of the West to the Rest. Can we accept that the Rest has something very worthwhile to share with the West?

I believe that if priests, religious and lay people come to Ireland on mission, they should come as *missionaries*, they should not be filling slots which were once filled by Irish priests or religious. Instead with them we must find new ways of being Church, reaching out to people, especially our youth, finding new openings, what people respond to. Finding new ways of reaching out to people and finding what people respond to is what missionaries have done throughout the ages and it is what missionaries are called to do in Ireland today. Here people may not want an 'explicit' church of mass attendance or sacraments, but maybe we can with people, and with the new dynamism and ways of missionaries here, find a new way of being disciples of Christ in our lives and our community and society today. Emphasis here must be on youth and lay people. Certainly, we need the witness and commitment of dedicated lay, priests and religious who, with renewed hope and fervent zeal, work to sustain the faith of the faithful and accompany future generations in their search for God.

As we know, in this new context of Church and faith in Ireland (Europe) today, discernment is a critical challenge. Together, missionaries and local church, including lay people, must listen attentively to read correctly the 'signs of the times'.

These include, as the Cardinal has mentioned, the issues of climate justice, social inequalities, our throw-away culture, the disregard for life and human dignity. Another sign of our times in Ireland is an increasing 'commodification' of the faith, seen in the way Baptism and First Holy Communion and even Marriage and funerals are primarily social occasions. If the Church here is to become what it is called to be in Christ, it will have to interrogate the culture critically and become a counter-cultural community in many respects. In other words, instead of being perceived as the norm, the Church will be here a community that is 'other'. Being peripheral in this manner is not a very comfortable place to be for an institution which hitherto has defined the norm but is the place where it can be most faithful to the Gospel. Discernment and prayer will have to be at the centre of the life of this community as we try to share our common home - with others and with all of creation.

The Cardinal has spoken of mission and omission, the latter being where we fail to live our mission due to fear of lack of resources such as young personnel, or where we yield to resignation and fail to share our joy. The scandals of our Church could easily suffocate us and lead us to omission. However, I feel confident that here in Ireland, we are not suffocated but, committed to the mission we have been called to, we seek today to be a more humble, transparent, accountable, inclusive and life-giving missionary Church.

[Prophetic witness??: Equal Voice of women and of laity](#)

The mission of AMRI emphasizes that our members are called to be missionary, prophetic and charismatic in the following of Jesus. Two issues somehow continue to undermine the ability of the Church today to be seen as 'prophetic' and really need to be addressed: that is the full recognition and participation of laity, and the full recognition and inclusion of women.

As regards Laity: The religious and missionaries of Ireland have recognised that we must collaborate with lay people, especially with those lay people who share our missionary charism. For this reason, we have sought permission from Rome to have lay people as full members of our Association. We are grateful that Rome has given some consideration to this request and we pray that gradually we as Church will learn to change our structures so as to be truly One Church, different vocations thinking and working together in the Lord's vineyard, with equal voice in terms not only of implementation but also of leadership and decision making.

Here in Ireland we are particularly challenged in this regard since we are used to a highly clericalized church and our lay people have not been used to truly being missionary disciples. Religious were in schools and hospitals or offering other services not provided by the state, and the priest ran the parish and led basically every church-related ceremony. To have a lay person lead a Sunday service is something we are simply not used to here. We are used to small parishes, which we might call parish enclosures, each community led by its priest. Today we see this is about to change - due to a shortage of clergy. As we missionaries know, in many of the countries where we worked, the Church is highly reliant on the work of the laity. On more than one occasion since coming to this country, our dear Papal Nuncio, Jude Thaddeus Okolo, has spoken of his own father leading Church services in his

home village fifty years ago. Ireland is rapidly moving towards a situation where the highly institutionalised, over-clericalized Church of the past has to give way to a lay-driven one where (properly trained) lay leaders/ministers and catechists play critical roles if the Church is to survive. This will surely be life-giving and is very much in line with the theme of this missionary month where we are reminded that all the Baptised are Sent and are on a Mission to the World.

As regards women: Maximum Illud spoke mainly of priests and bishops – they were the missionaries and mission was primarily about establishing a local institutional church with its own hierarchy. One short paragraph, number 30, is dedicated to women, especially women religious, and acknowledges their important contribution in mission, through health care and education, especially to women and children. Over the years, mission in terms of promoting God’s Kingdom through integral human development, justice, peace, reconciliation, interfaith dialogue, care of the earth, care and inclusion of the most marginalised, has been more and more recognised and emphasised. Cardinal Turkson has spoken to us a lot about that. However, the ‘important role’ of women is still spoken of in short paragraphs – on the margins! I think, if we are to be sincere in our acknowledgement of the mission of the church as a prophet, and if we are to expect to have credibility as Church with a voice that deserves to be listened to (and not only benefit from our charitable works), the full inclusion of women, religious and lay, not only through their works but also their voice, in leadership and decision making, must be given more consideration. It can no longer be one short paragraph of recognition and praise! As we know, some Canons in the church still limit those offices of leadership and decision making to clerics so it might indeed be time for the hierarchy of the Church to have the courage to look at these and revise them - In the name of our Prophetic mission as Church.

Conclusion

As religious and missionaries in Ireland, we live in a somewhat parallel state to the hierarchical church, particularly so the women religious. Yet, we are very much seeking to witness to a Church that loves, cares, includes and believes. Our communities are places of prayer and hospitality, especially to migrants from countries where we once worked. We are engaged in various and diverse ministries, with particular emphasis of ministry to migrants and refugees. AMRI has a housing project, in collaboration with the Irish Refugee Council, and offers accommodation to immigrant families. Some of our members are engaged in teaching English to refugees and migrants and helping them in other very meaningful ways to integrate into Irish society. Others accompany families in the Direct Provision Centres and challenge this inhuman living condition. Many are engaged in advocacy for the rights of people who are on the margins of society and whose rights are so often denied. Work for climate justice, care for people who are trafficked, service to the hungry and the disadvantaged, These and other ministries are being done today by committed religious and lay persons, and where possible religious continue to be engaged in pastoral care in parishes as well as in fields of health care and education. In this morning’s session, we have heard living testimonies of some of these engagements.

In this country we carry daily the weight of our history and while undoubtedly there is a lot of good to tell, the sins of our structures and of some of our personnel continue to dominate not only the news but also our energies and resources. Unfortunately, most of what media portrays of religious is not good news, since most is related to the past where amidst so much good, much harm was also done. Much of our energy today is put into ensuring gospel leadership and other necessary efforts to ensure that truth and justice are upheld, that the path towards reparation and healing are followed, and that leadership and ministry today are gospel-centred and of the highest standard. In this area of ensuring the highest standards in child safeguarding practices, we as AMRI work closely with the hierarchy.

We still believe we are called to be Prophets of Hope. Prophets of Hope in a world of suffering, migration, trafficking, conflict, violence, poverty, inequality, environmental degradation; Prophets of Hope in an increasingly secularised world and country where religion and all of us who represent religion are considered somewhat irrelevant. Prophets of hope in religious and missionary institutes where our age profile is increasing and our numbers declining, and within an Irish Church which is slow to recognise today any real space or value for the consecrated life. Within this context, we know that God continues to call us to be committed, engaged, faith-filled Prophets of Hope. We remain rooted in faith, committed to the mission to which we have been called, and trusting in God's vision for the emerging future.