

**Address by Fr. Patrick Courtney MSC, Provincial of Missionaries of the Sacred Heart at
the launch of the Centenary Celebrations on 6 January 2009 in Sacred Heart Church,
Western Road, Cork**

Most of us are happy and indeed excited by the celebration of special and significant events in life whether these are personal, family, cultural, national or otherwise. We attach special importance to the celebration of birthdays, marriages, religious professions, priesthood anniversaries as well as to the celebrations of memorable achievements in life, whether these are personal or in the world of the arts, literature, music, sport or politics.

It is fair to say that celebration is part of the human psyche. We find it very meaningful to recall our past, to remember, to give thanks for what has been, while not allowing ourselves to be imprisoned by the past. A distinguished writer expresses it well in the following words:

“Christians are people of memory and spirit. We need our memories to root us in real life. We need the Spirit to move beyond what has been, if life is going to stay real and reach its full dignity.” Or again, articulated in another way, “We need our story to be open to our destiny; we need our roots to grow our wings.”

It is my honour and joy as Provincial Superior, to welcome you all here this evening to the Sacred Heart Church, Western Road, Cork, as we gather to launch this special year of remembrance for the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. We recall our story, our beginning as a Religious Congregation here, in 1909. In doing so we give thanks to God for what has been, we embrace the present and we look to the future with faith and hope. We are honoured and privileged to have as special guests for our launch Bishop John Buckley, Bishop of Cork and Ross, our speakers, Mr Pat Cox and Fr Michael Curran and our singers, the Waterford and Omagh Peace Choir.

I also extend a very special welcome to the members of our sister Congregation, the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, represented this evening by Sisters Vianney and Bridget. They have journeyed with us at home and abroad in the service of the same mission with love, affection and zeal for the kingdom of God. I likewise welcome representatives of the religious congregations and the diocesan clergy.

I am very conscious that we assemble here this evening in the footsteps of an intrepid visionary and missionary who pioneered our presence in Ireland, namely, Fr Michael Tierney, who hailed from Churchtown in North Cork. I am conscious too that for us Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, this is a holy place. God was at work in the decision to come here, and His Spirit has been active in the many developments and expansions both in Ireland and overseas consequent to that initial planting of the seed in 1909. God’s generous giving evokes a human response.

Accordingly from here a very powerful missionary tradition took root and grew, of which we can feel justifiably proud. Many of our members, supported by the tremendous generosity of our benefactors, in a spirit of heroic self-sacrifice and generosity, went forth from this church. They dedicated themselves and their work to the service of the Gospel as well as providing for the basic humanitarian needs of the poor and the marginalised.

Last week I read a very insightful and uplifting article in the London Times by Matthew Parris, entitled, “As an atheist, I truly believe Africa needs God.” The following paragraph in the article summarises his message. “Now a confirmed atheist, I’ve become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa: sharply distinct from the work of secular NGOs, government projects and international aid efforts. These alone will not do. Education and training alone will not do. In Africa, Christianity changes people’s hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good”. Truly this is a strange but reassuring message for all missionaries, coming, as it does, from an unexpected source.

My prayer is that the mission begun here a hundred years ago will continue to touch and transform the lives of many today and into the future through the witness of our members and in their many diverse ministries both in Ireland and overseas. In the words of our motto we say: “May the Sacred Heart of Jesus be everywhere known and loved.”

Fr. Patrick Courtney MSC