

**Speech by Fr. Michael Curran - immediate past MSC Superior General – at the launch of the Centenary Celebrations of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart at Sacred Heart Church, Cork on 6 January, 2009**

Mass was celebrated for the first time in Dyke House on 5<sup>th</sup> July 1909 by three very happy MSC, Fathers John Field, Michael Tierney and John Power. The three North Cork men had taken possession of the house five days earlier, thereby bringing to a satisfactory conclusion the long-standing desire of many people to have an MSC foundation in Ireland. The Bishop of Cork, Dr. O’Callaghan, O.P., had given his consent to the opening of an apostolic school for the preparation of young men for work on the foreign missions, and the school opened without delay in September 1909. Michael Tierney would continue for some time to be parish priest in St Albans, near London, but from the beginning he was the acknowledged and charismatic leader of the new community in Cork.

The foundation in 1909 was long in coming. A young priest from the diocese of Cloyne, Fr. John Mary Neenan, had discovered the new Society (founded in Issoudun, France, in 1854) through reading the French Annals of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. He went to France, where he did his novitiate training and joined our Society in 1877. He was instrumental in recruiting many young men from North Cork as candidates for our Society. They did their formation in France, and after their ordination they were posted by our Founder, Fr. Chevalier, to many places around the world, notably to England, Australia and North America. The possibility of making a foundation in Ireland was often talked about, but it was left to Michael Tierney to deal effectively with this project. It was natural that he should consider the possibility of a foundation in his native County of Cork.

The ultimate objective of Fr. Tierney and those who worked with him was to have an Irish Province of the MSC. There were many forces and motivations at work in the unfolding of this project. The first one was the love they had for the MSC Society, for its characteristic spirit and apostolic drive. They loved the Society and wanted to promote its spirit of devotion to the Sacred Heart, to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart and St. Joseph. They valued its pastoral and missionary spirit of humanity, compassion, courage and outreach to the ends of the earth.

The second factor was their recognition of the suitability of Ireland as the preferred site for an apostolic school. Fr. Chevalier had cherished the idea of a foundation in England, looking on it as a place for missionary activity, but most of the attempts to get started in England came to naught for lack of support from the local Church. There were too few Catholics to enable an apostolic school to flourish, and most of the candidates continued to come from Ireland.

When they settled in Cork, the MSC established a good rapport with the people, and they carved out a niche for themselves in the life of the local Church. To provide for the religious services, they at first worked with a little oratory, which was in due course developed into the Church we see today. They built up a circle of friendly supporters and provided such services as were open to them in the local Church in Cork. The MSC brought with them a high esteem of the diocesan clergy and were always available to support them in time of need. They published the *Annals of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart*, promoted their characteristic devotions and sent out teams of preachers to give retreats and missions around the country. They promoted their school and developed it into a flourishing seminary for MSC vocations.

In due course, they opened other houses in Ireland (Cork, Galway, Dublin and Waterford) to provide for the spiritual and intellectual formation of their candidates and of the laity. The community continued to grow in numbers and was recognised as a Province of the Society in 1951. It reached a high point of membership in the 60s and sent out missionaries to work in other parts of Europe (England, Russia and Italy), Asia (Papua New Guinea and Indonesia), Southern Africa (South Africa and Namibia), Venezuela and the United States of America.

A centenary is an invitation to take stock of what has been achieved and to make plans for the time ahead. As we look back, we can be thankful for the effort and commitment put into the human development and formation of our members and of the faithful entrusted to our care. The spirit of the Society was always evident in the fraternal bond among us and in our friendly relationship with the people. The spread of our congregation across the world has given us plenty of scope for initiatives in the education of people in the faith, and the development of their gifts for the growth of the Christian community. Our supporters in Ireland and England have given us faithful and generous assistance in providing for all of these initiatives in formation and missionary outreach in favour of people in need.

As in all human endeavours, we have had our peaks and valleys. Today we experience growth in our former “mission” lands in Asia, Africa and South America, and decline in the old mission-sending countries. But our mission continues in Ireland and abroad, as we discern and decide on our response to the needs of the Church and the world. Our Founder was preoccupied by the evils that afflicted the people in his time. He found in devotion to the Sacred Heart an effective remedy to combat the evils of religious indifference, egoism and low morale that dragged the people down. We, his followers, continue to ask ourselves, “What are the evils that affect people today, and how do we respond to them out of our heritage of missionary spirituality?”

Of all the evils that afflict the world and its people today (damage to our environment, for example, and to the world’s resources, economic corruption, poverty of all kinds, abuse of women and children, disease, homelessness and war), the evils of religious nihilism or rejection of religion, on the one hand, and religious extremism or intolerance, on the other, have a special power to harm people. The first evil, rejection of religion, does not spring from the fact that we live in a secular world, which tries to manage its business in a rational way, without reference to God, acting indeed for the most part “as if God did not exist”. That is the way the world has evolved, and this secularism is not necessarily inimical to religion. It can remain open to the exercise of true religion, to the transcendence of the human spirit and our relationship to the living God who speaks to us, invites us to believe and promises us life beyond death. There was a big debate some few years ago about the absence of any reference to God in the proposed Constitution of the EU drawn up by Valéry Giscard d’Estaing. Although some people did not like this, it was the expression of a coherent philosophy, which had its roots in the French Revolution. Nobody can be forced any more to believe in God or to engage in the exercise of religion.

But now there is an awakening sense of the need of something more than secular humanism to nourish the human spirit. Even some politicians speak of the need for a “positive secularism” (Nicholas Sarkozy) or for the idealism that is grounded in religious faith (Tony Blair, who lately launched his Faith Foundation). The evils associated with the other extreme,

religious fundamentalism or intolerance, are well known. There are elements of it in every major religion, and it is the enemy of genuine progress in dealing with the world's real problems.

What contribution can the Catholic faith make to the progress of humanity? Speaking at the launch of World Youth Day in Sydney, Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, said that "Christianity has been an overwhelming force for good in the world". Now present in all the nations of the world, the Church needs to remain a powerful force for good. Our people, including our children and young people, need to have opportunities to experience something of the goodness of God, the joy of the faith and the attractiveness of the call of Jesus to be his disciples.

We have to create spaces for faith, for religion and for love in our homes and in our communities; we need to rediscover and recreate the symbols, the signs and the language of faith, so as to be able to relate to God and to engage with one another in the pursuit of religion and all that it inspires in terms of human development and the pursuit of happiness founded on truth, love, freedom, and our relationship with God.

Our MSC charism, with its heart-centred spirituality, seems to be well suited to meeting the need of our people for a good formation in the faith. It invites us to journey into our own heart, to discover our needs and yearnings, to journey into the heart of our contemporaries, to listen to their needs, and to journey into the heart of God, to discover the wonder of God's love for us. We are committed to "the way of the heart" in our pastoral relationship with people in our retreat centres, parishes, hospital ministries, counselling services and work among the victims of alcohol and drug abuse. We have good opportunities to play our part in the formation of the laity, in preparation for their assuming a growing role in ministry within the Church in Ireland and in other countries where we work.

With the passing years, the average age of our members in Ireland keeps climbing, the number of those retired keeps growing and the number of those in active ministry declines. We are, nevertheless, hopeful of being able to attract young men in sufficient numbers to join our community as MSC, so that we can continue our mission into the future in Ireland. We will not need the big numbers we once had, but we do need the few to keep our spirit and community alive. As we celebrate our centenary, we remember our past with gratitude, we live our present reality with loving commitment and we look forward to the future with hope. We also continue our Year of Vocation Prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to bless us with the variety of vocations needed today in the Church of God and especially with the grace of religious vocations to our MSC community.

**Michael Curran MSC**