

Moment of Reflection – Reaching in to reach out

**Address by Mr. Pat Cox at the launch of the centenary celebrations in Sacred Heart Church,
Western Road, Cork on Tuesday, 6 January 2009**

It is a great pleasure for me to join you this evening to mark the occasion of the beginning of the centenary year celebrations of the presence of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in Ireland. They first came to Ireland to Dyke House one hundred years ago in 1909. In particular I should like to thank the Provincial Superior of the Irish Province of the MSC, Father Pat Courtney, for the invitation and the privilege to participate in and contribute to this happy event.

Today the 6th of January is the feast of the Epiphany, when following a star and bearing their gifts the Magi, who travelled from the East, were presented to the Christ child. In our Irish lore this last day of Christmas, little Christmas, is Nollaig na mban, women's Christmas, traditionally the day, when after their seasonal exertions, women took some time out to visit neighbours and friends.

This MSC centenary is a time both to remember the past and to anticipate the future. No history is simple or linear. I am attracted to the view that suggests that history is analogous to geology with successive layers of stone and earth laid down one upon the other each revealing their separate but interconnected qualities, no one of which can be fully appreciated without contemplating the whole, without appreciating what has gone before. Starting with the departure from Cork in 1877 of Father Michael Tierney to undertake his MSC religious formation in France and his return home to establish a new community 100 years ago, all the young men who over the years volunteered to follow the spiritual call and to reach out through missionary work carried in their hearts and minds a strong inherited sense of faith and belief.

On this Nollaig na mban it is right to recall the contribution of family and in particular of mothers and grandmothers who through the generations in Ireland were the repositories of a strong, simple but sturdy faith whose transmission was the bedrock upon which so much achievement stands.

I have reason to know your good work here in Cork and recall with particular fondness an MSC pilgrimage to the Holy Land which my wife and I shared with you more than ten years ago. It was a visit to a place full to overflowing with biblical imagination but alas also scarred in its self expression by the walls of its contemporary political divisions. As our new year begins these wounds are bleeding again in Gaza and challenge the international community and the Israelis and the Palestinians respectively to renew efforts to secure a just, harmonious and durable solution and more immediately to cease hostilities and mobilise flows of humanitarian aid.

The work of the Irish Province of the MSC today extends from the searing summer heat of shanty towns in Venezuela to the freezing winters of the Caucuses in Southern Russia, from poorer Hispanic immigrant communities in Texas and California to dealing with the aids pandemic in South Africa. It is a rich tapestry which informed by experience, reflection and insight progressively has anchored itself in its host communities and

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cultures as the surest means to secure its continuity and development. The MSC missionaries through their personal fortitude and spiritual calling, through their dedicated service and their compassionate engagement and through their selflessness and sense of duty have honoured their vocations, their Church, their families and our country.

At a reflective moment such as this we extend to them and their families tonight, those living and those who have passed away, our heartfelt gratitude for the goodness and the light that they have brought to us and to so many people in so many places. Their missionary work is a testament to values in action and stands as a sharp contrast to the false witness of the shallow celebrity so celebrated in today's popular culture.

The rich flow of vocations to the religious life of 1950s Ireland has slowed to a trickle today. Our priests, brothers and nuns are ageing. The fulfilment of traditional commitments in traditional ways is stretched. New responses are called for to meet the challenges that lie ahead. More and more the institutional church through a combination of doctrine and necessity has recognised the vital need for lay engagement, giving a real meaning to the concept of the Church as the people of God. As a former CBS pupil and as a member of the recently established Edmund Rice Schools Trust I share with a group of lay men and women the responsibility as trustees for the evolution of Christian Brother Schools in Ireland. The Christian Brothers formally handed over this responsibility last June. This reflects not just the preferences of an ageing community of brothers but also wider social change.

Here in Ireland our former practice of social conformity has yielded to a sense of stronger individualism and of individual fulfilment. This new self confidence and self assertion by individuals is the positive product of greater access to education, media, communications, travel and technology. It is a genie that once released will not be returned to the bottle. Also the powerful forces of globalisation, the information and communications revolution, the greening of the global agenda and the rise of Asia are here to stay. As with all change there are winners and losers. Social harmony and political stability require that these different interests be fairly mediated.

The current global financial and economic crisis and its Irish variant have occurred with such devastating speed and depth that in truth none yet knows what their ultimate outcome or true social consequences may be. What is clear is that these forces both individual and global have changed the landscape for all who survey it, the Catholic Church included. For some this frenetic pace of change is a source of mistrust and disdain. Others hark to a paralysing nostalgia for the past. Neither of these approaches disdain or nostalgia seems to me to be a viable option.

To treat with today's world we need to be able to do so on its available terms. I am reminded of the quote of Saint Francis of Assisi: 'Lord grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference'.

Perhaps one of the most significant shifts has come about in day to day attitudes to authority. Trust and confidence in all forms of authority increasingly need to be earned rather than to be taken for granted. These vital assets stand lower in Ireland today than

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they have for some time. None of our institutions secular or religious has been immune from this trend. This collapse in standing has resulted not just from social change but unhappily has been exacerbated by a combination of sins of omission and commission on the part of these institutions. It is remarkable how few Irish leaders in any walk of life willing accept responsibility or quickly act upon their consequences when confronted with uncomfortable evidence of mis-behaviour or poor judgement.

At this time of perceived crisis there is an uneasy air stalking the land as the New Year begins. Our malaise is, I believe, deeper than issues of economy and finance alone. Solving these grave economic problems will not present us with any soft options in the coming years but even this will not be enough. Our society no less than our economy calls for attention.

How we conduct business and its governance needs to be overhauled. Our political and public institutions need to be renewed to make them fit for purpose and to give us hope for the times we live in. Change will carry a price but it should not be at the expense of the most vulnerable. Our leaders must reclaim the Republic for the people by asserting the national interest over sectional interests and personal greed. We need to emphasise a sense of duty over a sense of entitlement. We need public boards which are subject to democratic scrutiny prior to appointment and to full democratic accountability thereafter.

We need public watchdogs who not only watch but who, when warranted, also bark and bite. We need less venality and better judgement in the higher reaches of our society. We need to afflict comfortable and cosy cartels and to comfort the afflicted more than has been our habit in recent years. Leadership based on good authority needs to be founded on sound judgement. This applies no less to the church than it does to other key actors.

Our materialism is expressed in the form of consumerism. Personal identity today frequently is expressed less by what one does and more by what one consumes. Consumption both when subtle and conspicuous signals one's status and position, clothes, footwear, accessories, cars, homes, lifestyles all speak of who we are. This starts today in the schoolyard, possibly even as early as the cradle. Unsustainable national debt has been replaced by equally unsustainable consumer credit at household level to maintain this lifestyle. Alongside this apparent plenty we suffer from affluenza, the influenza of affluence. Our debit balances, our endless commuting and traffic jams, higher stress, lower self esteem, binge drinking, obesity, suicide and social isolation especially of the socially vulnerable and the old all bear testament to the flip side of our new found material success.

Our sense of community too has paid a price as many previously active or likely to be so in the voluntary sector succumbed to a new poverty of time rather than money. In a more individual and less socially conformist age those who must do without because of their limited means stand out more than in the past, more excluded and marginalised than would have been the case in similar circumstances in the Ireland of the 1950s or 1960s. We are not short of challenges. There is a persistent sense that we are searching for better answers than those we have found so far.

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The global personal and societal trends to which I have referred have made us simultaneously both more independent and more interdependent. Sustainable lifestyles in terms of our physical exercise, our diet, our patterns of consumption and production connect individual action to global outcomes for our health systems, for equality and inequality at home and globally and for our planet and environment in ways that are better understood and more widely discussed than before. Creation within us and us within creation and the interdependence between the two is one of the great themes of our times. It connects the local to the global. It recalls that no man is an island but is part of the whole. Like never before it links individual responsibility and behaviour to global consequences. A values in action framework that emphasises the dignity and uniqueness of each person as well as a values based foundation for what we do offers a promising window of opportunity opening onto the soul of today's generation, not least our young. We may be more individualistic in terms of prevailing cultural norms but instinctively we understand and live with global interdependence more than any earlier generation.

Addressing this complex but balanced equation which mirrors the world we live in and share can be both a chance and a hope for the future. It is an invitation in terms of nurturing values to reach the person within the better to reach out to the wider world. It highlights personal and not just economic growth and development. Reaching the inner person is one of the intrinsic strengths of all organised religions.

Reaching in to reach out is a worthy mission and one that in terms of enduring values can appeal to the spirit of the age. It is a mission for which the Church as the people of God, clerical and lay, is especially well placed. This is not a search for a new faith but it is a plea for a renewed interpretation and application of the one which we have inherited, one that tries to understand and embrace the forces shaping our times rather than standing aloof from them, one that tries to address the demons of the age by whispering to our good angels within, one that leads me to conclude that, like the charism of the MSC whose Irish centenary we celebrate here this evening, invites its adherents, as Father Pat Courtney explained to me, to 'live your spirituality wherever you are'.

Beannacht Dé libh agus go raibh maith agaibh.

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