

Homily of Fr. Mark McDonald MSC, Superior General of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart at the Pilgrimage of Thanksgiving at Knock Shrine on Saturday, 25 July 2009

Your eminence Sean Cardinal Brady, your grace Archbishop Neary, my lord Bishops O'Reilly, Kirby, Slattery, dear confreres and friends,

Together with all of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart around the world, I wish to express our congratulations and best wishes to all the members of our Irish Province as we celebrate this 100th anniversary of the arrival of our Congregation in Ireland. Together with you we thank God for the love and grace of the Lord that you have received and shared over this past century. May God continue to bless you – and all of us – as we work to make the Sacred Heart of Jesus known and loved everywhere.

Our thanks and appreciate goes also to you – and to all the members of this Province who have gone before you – for all that has been done to build up the body of Christ! I think especially of your missionary work outside of England, Ireland and the United States– in Papua New Guinea, in South Africa, in Venezuela, and now in Russia. The generosity of many people – of MSC's and of their families and friends; of our priests and brothers and of all our benefactors – the generosity and sacrifice of many people has made this history possible. We thank God for all that God has done through you and through those who have preceded you.

I might add that even though Missionaries of the Sacred Heart have been in Ireland since 1909, Irish confreres have been an important part of our world-wide mission since the very beginning. It was 130 years ago, in 1879, that the first Irish MSC died in my home town. Fr. John Mary Neenan from the diocese of Coyne was just 26 years old. Like so many who came after him, he gave everything for the mission.

My friends, to celebrate these 100 years we have chosen to come as pilgrims to this Marian shrine. For many reasons, this is an excellent way to celebrate and give thanks.

- We are, as the Christian community, *a pilgrim people*. We are at home everywhere and yet we are never really at home. We are on a journey towards the new world we see emerging from the open Heart of Christ. This pilgrimage is a beautiful symbol of our mission and of our life in Ireland over the past 100 years.
- A pilgrimage is something we do *together*. Another powerful way to symbolize this past century. We have worked as a religious community with a common mission and this common mission has been supported and made possible by all the lay women and men who have walked with us, who have prayed for us and who have supported us with their means. The Irish people have always been ready to share their faith, their gifts and their lives with people of all nations. The generosity of our missionaries and of so many benefactors like yourselves have created the history we celebrate today.

I take this occasion to thank all of you, on behalf of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and on behalf of all the young churches you have helped found, for your part in this history. You are a real part of our missionary work in so many places. Just last month I visited our parish in the Diocese of Dindigul in southern India where the local bishop was dedicating the new school building. How were they able to build the new addition to the school? Through your generosity, through your gifts that came through our Mission Support Centre in Cork.

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- Pilgrimage has been part of humanity's *religious experience* since the beginning. Abraham, our father in faith, left home to seek the place where God wanted him to be. The first People of God were pilgrims as they left Egypt to seek that same promised land. The holy family went as pilgrims to the temple in Jerusalem every Passover. After his transfiguration, Jesus began his last, fateful paschal pilgrimage to the Holy City where he would be arrested, tried and executed – for us a, with her, pilgrims who are always seeking the Lord, who are always in search of God's love – to experience it ourselves and to share it with others.
- Yes, we are here today as pilgrims because that is exactly what we are. As St. Augustine said, “we are restless until we rest in the Lord.” I urge you to continue to live this attitude of the pilgrim today – and every day. It is a very concrete way of showing and living our true relationship with God.
- There is one more aspect of a pilgrimage that we must not forget. Most pilgrims make their journey to a holy place to ask for the *forgiveness of their sins*. We have come to celebrate and give thanks but we are also mindful that during these 100 years we have not always been faithful to our baptismal and religious promises and that we have not always been faithful witnesses of God's love. I make mine the voice of all the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart from Ireland in asking God's pardon and the pardon of all the people we have hurt in the course of these 100 years. With all the Church, we simply say, “*Lord, have mercy.*”
- To conclude, I would like to quote the words that our Founder, Fr. Jules Chevalier, pronounced during the homily he gave, in 1876, as he missioned the first MSC's to work outside of France. Today is not just the end of 100 years, it is the beginning of a new time in the life of Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and of our co-pilgrims in Ireland. Like all pilgrims, we leave our place of pilgrimage to go back home renewed and reinvigorated, filled with God's grace, to continue the mission. At that first missioning ceremony, Fr. Chevalier simply said to the three men kneeling before him: “*Go and serve that Heart that has loved you so much.*”

My friends, may we all go from this celebration to continue to serve, as religious and as lay men and women, that Heart that has loved us so much!