

Remarks by President Mary McAleese when visiting the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart at Western Road, Cork on 10 June as part of their centenary celebrations in Ireland. She launched a photographic exhibition depicting the early departures of missionaries from Ireland and the humanitarian work they undertake in mission countries.

It is good to be in your company in particular to celebrate 100 years of service by Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in Ireland, and to say ‘thank you’ for all that you have invested in this country and in your outreach missions to so many other countries. Your very complex story could not be done justice by the photographs in this exhibition .. the story of generations of outreach that went out from Ireland to poorer countries of the world. That outreach sustained people with hope, with compassion, and with love.

I know that that outreach could not have been possible without the support and generosity of local people here and throughout Ireland. The priests came back with their stories ... stories that inspired people to help them in their expression of love and compassion... and inspired them to be instruments of care for others.

A religious sister said to me recently “it is a difficult time to be in religious”. I think we all know the reason for that. Recent events have reminded us, sadly, of the abuse of love, the lack of care, and the lack of compassion by some religious in decades past in our country. Somewhere along the line love was lost. But here in the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart we see the other side of that story ... a story of genuine care and love for people ... 100 years of giving. I know that each of the Sacred Heart Missionaries has stories of goodness that would lift our hearts especially at this time when we most need such a lift. These missionaries were the hands of the work inspired by parents and the people in general in our country.

So, it is important to say ‘thank you’ so richly deserved for 100 years of humble and compassionate work that was driven by the heart. I know that Missionaries of the Sacred Heart have a special charism that focuses on and around the heart. The heart is the engine that drives us. It is a symbol of all that is good. It showcases for us what we are capable of doing. It is about giving rather than about receiving. Missionaries of the Sacred Heart found that love has the capacity to change first of all the individual person committed to this vocation, and then through their show-casing of that love and the generous giving, to draw from them a loving response that in turn is generous across the world with things that are good, things that are uplifting to help us get through life, things that heal people, reconcile, and make sense of their lives and their suffering.

The photographs here give us a sense of pride in what people have accomplished by harnessing the energy of love ... works that are uplifting, are healing and are reconciling. Missionaries of the Sacred Heart were the engine and the heart of that work.

In the gospel it is said “those who hurt children, it is better that a milestone is hung around their neck”. We all have a milestone hung around our neck at the present time. By showcasing the good work done by our missionaries ... their uplifting the burdens of other people, by showing the power of generosity, we can help in lightening or removing that milestone. We can lift it together.

Irish missionaries are held in respect and in friendship around the world. I travel to many countries, and am always greeted as trusted friends... not because of whom I am but simply because I am Irish. The reason for that respect and friendship is the work of our missionaries in providing educational facilities for poor people, for initiating health services for them, and above all showing that they cared for strangers in foreign lands.

Missionaries of the Sacred Heart are present in over 50 countries, and have been in existence for 150 years. That is 150 years of distilled goodness that our country benefits from worldwide. As wonderful missionaries you have been ambassadors of the true spirit and character of the Irish. It is that true character which is certain among us that will reconcile and heal us.

Summary of Response by Fr. Pat Courtney, MSC Provincial

I thank you for launching our photographic exhibition, which shows the early days of our MSC society in Cork, some places of ministry, as well as missionaries departing for the various missions overseas. I thank you for your well chosen words to us. I note with keen interest and deep appreciation your knowledge of our history as a religious congregation, of our spirituality, of our expansion and developments within Ireland and abroad and of our ministry undertakings, in various places, in particular in our missionary involvement overseas. This latter has been and is today a priority ministry for us.

We treasure very much your kind words of appreciation and encouragement. They offer us affirmation, energy and inspiration. Above all they enable us to keep focused on the core values of our identity and mission as religious.

10 June 2009