



## PROVINCIAL'S REPORT FOR THE PROVINCIAL CHAPTER 2011

It is my pleasure and privilege to present this report to you the delegates and participants in the forthcoming Provincial Chapter which takes place from May 9<sup>th</sup> until May 20<sup>th</sup> 2011. A Provincial Chapter is a defining time in the life and mission of the Province. It is a grace filled opportunity to experience the wonder of God's spirit empowering us individually and collectively to reflect, evaluate and deepen our vocation as Missionaries of the Sacred Heart as well as to discern our mission, i.e. what God wants of us in these changing times. A Provincial Chapter is also a time of preparation for the General Chapter, and acknowledging this, we have chosen our chapter theme to integrate with that of the General Chapter, **Obedience and Mission**.

A Chapter is an occasion when we review our accountability as leaders and members of the Province, when we take stock of our implementation of the directives and recommendations of the previous Chapter. It is a time also when we strive to offer direction, vision and hope for ourselves and for our mission into the future. Accordingly, it is necessary in

this report to look back to review the past six years and to look forward and identify some of the challenges that lie ahead.

## **IMPLEMENTATION OF CHAPTER RESOLUTIONS**

The participants at the 2005 Chapter, noting the suggestions for the Chapter agenda from the members of the Province in preparation for the chapter, decided to focus on the following seven themes/issues: MSC religious life, vocations, formation, forming a vision for MSC leadership, mission and ministry, lay members of the Chevalier Family and lay collaboration. Each of the themes was addressed from the perspectives of vision and of struggle with a very specific plan of action for implementation following the Chapter. The Provincial Chapter mandate is recorded in the Acts of the Chapter.

As outlined in my report for the Provincial Conference in April 2008, the Provincial leadership team concentrated on the first four chapter themes for the first three years of its tenure of office. We reported at the conference on the progress achieved as well as on some of the struggles encountered as we strove to deliver on the chapter recommendations. I will briefly remind you again of our undertakings. **MSC Religious Life and Community:** In the months following the Chapter I and/or a member of the Provincial Council visited every community in Ireland and England as well as those overseas, the major thrust of such visits being to help

the communities reflect on the quality of MSC religious and community life. As regards **Vocations**, a full time Vocations' Director was appointed for Ireland and England. Likewise, the Region of Venezuela appointed a full time Vocations' Director. Vocation advisory groups were established throughout the Province. **Formation:** A Formation Advisory Group for Ireland and England was established and given the task of putting in place a new model for initial formation. This new model of 'receiving communities' was adopted for the pre-novitiate formation in St Albans. **Leadership:** Several facilitated meetings were held for superiors and community leaders in Ireland, where the role, the challenges and the difficulties of leadership in religious life today were discussed at length. While it is difficult to measure the real effectiveness of these meetings participants felt they were a much needed support for superiors and leaders themselves.

Since the Provincial Conference we have maintained an ongoing focus and momentum on these Chapter themes through review, discussion, animation, and challenge with varying degrees of success across the different areas of the Province. We are very mindful of the diverse cultural realities and the different concerns within the different areas of the Province.

## **PLANNING OUR FUTURE MINISTRIES**

At the Provincial Conference in 2008 the need for reviewing and planning for our future ministries in the different areas of the Province was acknowledged and a very clear directive was issued from the conference with an agreed action plan of how this might be executed. Consultation of the confreres was considered to be crucial to progress this review of mission and ministries. Underpinning the need for it was the reality of our ageing profile and an awareness that we were no longer in a position to staff all our existing ministry commitments. The objective of the process was to disengage from some ministries. As well as reducing the number of our ministry commitments, this would also free some personnel to engage in a new and invigorating way in new ministries or in new ways of executing existing ministries as we strive to discern what God wants of us in these changing times. The consultation process differed in the different areas of the Province. The process adopted for England and Ireland was to establish a Consultative Body of the members from both countries to facilitate the process, to plan the different stages of the consultation. This body was assisted by outside facilitators from the Kinharvie Institute. Part of the consultation included the convening of two joint assemblies of our confreres in England and Ireland.

The participants of the first assembly reflected and shared on our vision, *Being Christ's Heart in Solidarity with People*, and likewise on our values, charism, solidarity, compassion, belonging and being prophetic. There was a strong conviction among the participants that our vision and values should permeate the decisions regarding our ministries. The second assembly focused on formulating and working towards agreement on the recommendations to be presented to the Provincial and members of his Council who would then make the relevant decisions. The decisions agreed were :-

- **to discontinue retreat ministry at Grace Dieu with effect from September 2011;**
- **to discontinue residential retreat ministry at Myross Wood from the end of summer 2012;**
- **to disengage from the following parishes in England: the Parish of St John the Baptist in Tamworth in August 2011, the Parish of St Albert's in Liverpool in August 2011 and the Parish of Sacred Heart and St William in Uppermill in July 2012.**

All the interested parties affected by these decisions were informed of them by the Provincial and a member of his Council. While some were very disappointed with the news, all were most understanding of our position and were extremely appreciative of the MSC ministry extending over many years.

In the Region of Venezuela, following on a review by the members of their ministries, the difficult decision was taken in 2010 **to disengage from the Parish of Santissimo Sacramento in Maracaibo.**

Our confreres in Southern Africa have devoted much time at their recent assemblies exploring how best to plan their future ministries in the Region and are at the point now of making some difficult decisions in this regard.

In the US Section, where the ministry is predominately parish ministry, there is much freedom and flexibility in relation to continuing or discontinuing in a particular parish. There is no long-term MSC contract or commitment to any of the parishes where we serve in the section as happens in other areas of the Province.

While planning for the future of our ministries was a difficult undertaking, it was however very necessary. I believe the outcome has been a very significant achievement. There is of course further work to be done in exploring new ministries and on how we can best serve the needs of the church and society today. This has already commenced in relation to MSC spirituality and retreat ministry by some members in Ireland and England. I wish to acknowledge with deep gratitude the participation, co-operation and support of the members of the Province in this task.

## **SIGNIFICANT EVENTS**

### **Celebration of Foundations in Ireland and Venezuela**

A number of very special events took place in 2009 to commemorate the centenary of the first MSC foundation in Ireland at the Western Road, Cork, in 1909 by Fr Michael Tierney MSC. Representatives of church and state honoured us by their presence and by their words of affirmation and appreciation of the splendid work and achievements of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of the Irish Province through their ministry in Ireland, England and in the overseas missions during the preceding hundred years. The centenary thanksgiving Mass at the Cathedral in Cork, led by Bishop John Buckley, Bishop of Cork and Ross, and the pilgrimage Mass in the Basilica at Our Lady's Shrine at Knock, led by His Eminence, Cardinal Seán Brady, were marked by a huge presence of MSCs, some of them being representatives from other Provinces and the General Administration, and by a large gathering of benefactors. The media coverage and reporting of the various centenary events, which included a televised Mass and a Mass on the national radio, was very positive. The feedback from benefactors was very encouraging. It was undoubtedly a milestone and a very significant year for all of us. It was furthermore a great morale boost at a time when there was a lot of anger and hostility towards the Church in Ireland and when our ageing

profile is rising very much and only a trickle of vocations is on the horizon.

Another very important celebration in the Province took place in 2007 when the Region of Venezuela celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the establishment of the MSC mission there and also to celebrate the work and achievements of the mission. The homilist at the thanksgiving Mass was Padre Eduardo Ortigoza, Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Maracaibo. His words were deeply appreciative of the work and service of the MSCs in Venezuela. I quote here from what he said: "The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart have given a valuable service to the Church in Venezuela over the past forty years. 'Los Misioneros', as we like to call them, all the way from Catholic Ireland, brought with them the spirituality of the Heart of Christ which they have lived and preached during all these years. We are happy to have with us still two of the first four pioneers who arrived in 1967, José Ruddy and Vicente Screene. I would especially like to mention the fact that the congregation has taken root in Venezuela. There are three Venezuelan MSC priests and a sizeable group of seminarians. We are grateful to the Lord for their presence among us and hope they continue the good work they are doing." Fr General was represented by John McCarthy MSC. I was very honoured to be invited to represent the Province and participate in this historic and most happy celebration. We too wish to acknowledge with profound gratitude the dedication and

commitment of our confreres down through the years in a difficult and challenging ministry. It is wonderful to have Venezuelan MSCs forming part of our mission cohort there today.

## **Visits of Superior General**

Fr General made official visits to the different areas of the Province in the course of the past five years. His listening and sharing with the members, his advice as well as his words of animation, affirmation and challenge have been very much appreciated by our confreres. He plans to visit our confreres in the Russian mission in late May/early June of this year. On behalf of the Province I wish to thank him for his generosity, care and concern for our members.

## **MSC Europe (PEC)**

These meetings of the European Provincials have been held annually. Carl Tranter, as secretary to PEC, and I, usually accompanied by another member of the Provincial Council, attended each of the meetings. In 2007, the Irish Province hosted the meeting at Grace Dieu. These meetings have proven to be very informative and helpful where issues of common interest and concern within the provinces in Europe are considered and where one province can learn from the experiences of others. As one might expect in recent years the ageing membership of the provinces and the

future of some of these provinces are issues of urgent attention. At the same time there is also a passion for collaboration amongst the provinces. The Cordate Community project is a tangible expression of this spirit.

## **The Cordate Community**

In 2005 we witnessed the establishment of the Cordate Community as a special community of the Irish Province. The community consists of Carl Tranter (Irish Province), Ton Zwart (Dutch Province) and Mark Van Beeumen (Belgian Province). Initially, the community was located in Gardener's Cottage in the grounds of Princethorpe College for a period of preparation. Subsequently, following the purchase of a newly constructed house, the community moved to Aston, Birmingham. This is the first collaborative project of its kind between the eight European provinces. It has recently been evaluated by the Provincials of Europe and has received a very encouraging and affirming report urging PEC to continue its commitment to this new, innovative, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural important ministry.

## **Mission Support Ministry**

Under the leadership of the Director, Michael O'Connell, the Manager, Matt Moran, and more recently the Manager, Ashley Hennessy, and with the support of the Advisory Board, we have been very pleased with the

fantastic work done by the Mission Support Centre, both in terms of its publicity and fundraising efforts and in its outreach ministry and care for our many benefactors. Despite a challenging economic climate we have fared quite well due in no small way to good stewardship and accountability. Tight administrative cost control has resulted in greater fundraising efficiency. The Mission Support Centre continues to be a crucial element of our continued resourcing of the province. It is inevitable that funding from it will not be as plentiful in the future and hence we will need to be ever vigilant in our responsible stewardship of our material resources.

### **Safeguarding of Children Policy**

I am very glad to be able to report that we have overseen the adoption of new procedures for the safeguarding of children in Ireland, England, the US Section, Southern Africa and Venezuela. I wish to thank those members in the different areas who gave so much of their time and energy in formulating these policies. These policies are testimony that the Province undertakes to do all in its power to create a safe environment for children, young people and vulnerable adults.

### **The Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation Group**

Following on the last MSC European Assembly, the Provincial and Council enthusiastically supported the

establishment of the first Irish Province JPIC Group and has welcomed its swift development in partnership with lay JPIC groups from within our areas of ministry in England and Ireland. I wish to commend those confreres who joined this group and for the excellent projects they have undertaken since its inception. They ensure that we are all made aware of the fundamental life issues of peace and justice and environmental issues of creation and care for the earth, issues that are very much in tune with our spirituality of the heart.

## **CHALLENGES**

### **Keeping the Voice of God Alive**

We live in a time of uncertainty where many of our securities of the past are undermined including those relating to religious life and the Church. We see less and less people entering religious life and priesthood especially in Europe. We feel the pain and the anger of those who were hurt and damaged by the Church. In recent years it is true to say that we have been through our valley of tears. In the midst of much uncertainty and even turmoil it is vitally important for us at a personal level to devote time to our spiritual life, the bedrock of our vocation and life. The following words from Joan Chittister OSB in her book, *The Fire in these Ashes*, challenge each one of us: "If the fire is to be kept for another generation, religious life at this time must be about keeping the voice of God alive no matter what

happens to the works of the congregation or the structures of the order or even the ecclesial definitions of life ... Without a commitment to the spiritual life we bury no coals for the future, light no fires, leave no embers for kindling the ongoing quest for others to come.” These words summon us to be steeped in the spirit of God, to be attuned more to the spirit than to our own personal aspirations or even to the work at hand.

### **To Promote and Facilitate a Better Sense of Communion and Brotherhood in Mission**

While the dedication and commitment of the confreres in all the areas of the Province is beyond question and is indeed exemplary, I do believe that our effectiveness and witness in mission throughout the Province could be greatly enhanced if we would adopt a greater corporate ownership of our MSC identity and mission which is at the heart of our charism and our call to mission. Individualism seems to be on the increase and manifests itself in different forms. It does impede and weaken our experience of communion and brotherhood. It also impacts on the availability of confreres for mission. To be effective ministers of our MSC mission we need to make ourselves available and commit ourselves to ongoing dialogue and search for how best we can respond to the signs of the times and contemporary needs. This will entail openness to look beyond our current ministries. It may very well entail letting go of the individual ministry preference “I have

and I want". Hence there is a need for promoting a deeper sense of communion, brotherhood and corporate ownership of the mission, a difficult challenge for the leadership in the Province. However, the achievements in planning our ministries for the future give us encouragement and hope for the future in this respect also.

## **Vocations' Promotion and Formation**

Vocations' promotion and formation have for many years been identified as priority ministries at provincial chapters, provincial conferences and assemblies. Nevertheless we have struggled to get our hopes and expectations realised. We have appointed very competent, full-time, Vocations' Directors in England/Ireland and Venezuela. We have strongly encouraged the Region of Southern Africa to do likewise, and while they are committed to do so, they find it difficult to release a confrere for this ministry. We have interviewed some lay people for vocations promotion in Ireland without success. The climate in Ireland is not very conducive to vocations for priesthood and religious life following on the scandals in the Church. Our programmes for formation need to be regularly reviewed and evaluated. Having only one or two candidates in initial formation in Ireland/England is a new experience for us. A lot of reflection and discussion has gone into deciding on a new model for formation, more tailored to this new reality. Yet, the experience of implementing this

model was not without its difficulties. We also need to make available some of our younger confreres for training in formation since our future in the different areas of the province is dependent on getting new members to join us and providing them with the best formation possible. The shared novitiate formation arrangement between the Region of Southern Africa and the UAF has had its difficulties and it has been decided to discontinue it. Vocations' promotion and formation must continue to be ongoing pre-occupations and challenges for the future in the Province. Alongside this we need to explore some creative ways of engaging with young people on a more temporary rather than permanent commitment basis, sharing our spirituality with them and involving them in mission. Work already commenced by David Nixon and Ken McCabe on the setting up of overseas volunteering possibilities for interested young people is very much in line with this.

## **Lay Collaboration and Lay Members of the Chevalier Family**

Despite debating these themes at chapters, conferences and assemblies for many years and formulating resolutions such as “We as Missionaries of the Sacred Heart renew our commitment to collaboration as our way of being in mission and ministry” (Acts of Provincial Chapter 2005 on Lay Collaboration) and “The professed MSC members in all their ministries will promote and support the formation

and development of the Lay Association of the Chevalier Family” (Acts of Provincial Chapter on Lay Members of the Chevalier Family) little progress has been made with some exceptions. The members of the US Section have been wonderful in promoting the development of the lay members of the Chevalier Family. The membership has grown from strength to strength in recent years. They have also put in place a formation programme for the laity. Our future in terms of sharing our charism with others and being partners in mission with others depend on our commitment to the laity. Without this I believe our life and mission is very much impoverished. I urge everyone to examine why this resistance or malaise exists, to clarify precisely what we mean by lay collaboration and membership of the Chevalier Family, to identify how we can best promote them and to re-commit ourselves to do so with conviction and confidence.

## **Membership**

There is no doubt that our numbers throughout the Province are on the decrease. Fifteen members have died since the last Provincial Chapter. In the meantime one has been ordained a priest, one has been ordained a deacon, two are temporarily professed, two are in novitiate formation, five are in pre-novitiate formation and a number of candidates are in an orientation programme in Southern Africa. When we compare our numbers with those of other European provinces we are

in a very good place. We have a significant number of confreres in their thirties, forties, fifties, sixties and we have active seventy and eighty year olds. We have every reason to have hope, courage and confidence for the future. However the huge drop in vocations in England and Ireland is a challenge for all of us. The promotion of vocations is the responsibility of each one of us. In this respect we need to pray consistently for vocations and to use every opportunity in our ministry contexts to build good positive relationships with young people. Let them see our lives witnessing to the joy of our own vocation. Let them see us respecting and caring for each other. Let them see us as a community living and working in unison rather than as isolated individuals. Over and above this we need to review our vocation promotion strategies and seek advice on how best to engage with prospective vocations.

## **Dialogue and Co-Responsibility in Decision Making**

From my experience in leadership over many years I have no doubt that the more members are involved in decision making the more they feel their views and opinions are important, the more they feel they have a vital contribution to make in the ongoing direction and decisions of the Province. This makes them feel wanted and not merely passive onlookers where they have little or no say in matters. Much has been written in recent years on obedience, authority and leadership in religious life. It is no longer sufficient to rely on dated models of

understanding these issues in religious communities today. We need transparency, engagement, consultation and dialogue with the members. A feature of the exercise of co-responsibility for many years in our Province has been the work of the advisory groups for finance, formation, vocation promotion and mission support ministry. Another expression of co-responsibility was the consultative process adopted for planning our future ministries. The advisory groups have proved to be invaluable in discussing and formulating policies/recommendations on these areas of responsibility. We wish to record our gratitude to the members of these advisory groups for their interest and dedication and for sharing their wisdom and expertise. However, in order to prevent complacency every organisation from time to time needs to be reviewed, to be sharpened in focus and to find new members.

## **Overseas Missions**

As a Province we have a proud history of dedicated service in the overseas missions. From the early years of our foundation in Ireland till the present time many of our young confreres, filled with selfless generosity, courage, and above all, a passion for the Kingdom of God, left their homes and country for faraway places to bring the Good News of God's love to people in very difficult and challenging places. In the early days we went to Papua New Guinea, later on to South Africa, Venezuela, Indonesia and more recently to Russia. The

commitment of our men on the missions has been wonderful. In the course of time two of our mission areas have been elevated to the status of Regions, namely South Africa and Venezuela.

The future of our overseas missions is a concern as members are getting old and numbers decrease. I saw in the report of the special pre-chapter South African assembly the stark figure that in five years time 58% of the present men in active ministry will be either retired or semi-retired. This raises some urgent questions for our men there, such as where do they see their future. Can they find personnel from some of the younger developing provinces? Where are they as regards reviewing their ministries and planning for the future? Is it possible to develop a more strategic vocation promotion planning programme for the Region?

The members in Venezuela likewise need to be proactive in looking towards the future while noting that thankfully they are getting a reasonable number of vocations.

Our Mission in Russia is a major concern. At the moment it appears that we will be reduced in 2012 to our two confreres from the Province to serve the mission. If this is the case one has to ask the question how long more can they remain there by themselves in a very pressurised, difficult and complex mission with many problems and frustrations. The presence of our

confreres from the South German/Austrian Province in the mission for the past four years has been an invaluable help from both a community and ministry perspective. Our very sincere thanks to them and their Province. I have tried to get confreres from the Philippines and other new provinces. The real difficulty lies in personnel from these countries not being able to get visas for Russia. I have asked our three MSCs currently in Russia to prepare a position paper for the Provincial Chapter on the future of our mission there. It would be a great loss to have to discontinue the mission. The service provided there in the mission in the midst of many difficulties and obstacles on a daily basis is truly admirable, responding to the spiritual and material needs, often of poor multi-ethnic communities, providing them with good pastoral care as well as catechetical and youth ministry. We hope and pray that the Holy Spirit will provide us with an answer to our fears and concerns for the future of the MSC mission there. Recently, courtesy of Fr General, I received a text of an address delivered at the General Assembly of the Russian National Conference of Major Superiors of Religious Institutes. It acknowledges the immense contribution made by religious congregations in the rebirth of the Catholic Church in Russia over the past twenty years. It speaks about the initial hope at the beginning about how much has been achieved as well as about the hopes and dreams not realised so far. It notes that our work in Russia can sometimes feel empty and its results disproportionate to our efforts and

investments. It makes a heartfelt plea not to be discouraged and to exhaust all possibilities before making the difficult and painful decision to close our houses in Russia. It further states that “in many ways our situation in Russia and our future is unclear, but the more we perceive the difficult reality as a challenge the more we need to be witnesses to hope. We can, by our very lives, give evidence to this hope through our perseverance and loyalty to Christ in serving this young fledgling, but much alive, Church in Russia.”

## **Properties**

With fewer members it is incumbent on the incoming Provincial Administration to consider if we are making the best possible use of our existing properties. Are some of them surplus to our requirements? What if anything more needs to be done to exercise better stewardship and accountability as regards our properties?

In concluding this section of the report, the eight challenges referred to above are some, not all, of the issues which will require consideration for the future as perceived by the present Provincial and Council. I have no doubt that the members of the Province in their submissions for the Chapter and the members at the Chapter will identify many other challenges for the future.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

I wish first of all to acknowledge the wonderful dedication and commitment of the members, both young and old, throughout the Province. This applies to both the living of religious life and to the faithful service in ministry. They have indeed been witnesses to the love of the Heart of Christ and an inspiration to the many whose lives they touch and enrich.

I wish to say that for the members of the Provincial Council and myself it was a great honour and privilege to be your Provincial Leadership Team for the past six years. We wish to thank you for placing your trust and confidence in us and for the support and encouragement you gave us. This has been very much appreciated. Leadership is never easy, as difficult and at times painful decisions have to be made. The support and understanding of others lighten the burden. We can honestly say on our part that we always tried to give of our best in the service of the members and the mission of the Province. We ask your forgiveness if we did not measure up to your expectations. We leave you with some profound words from the late Oscar Romero, which remind us all with patent honesty of what we are about:

“We plant the seeds that one day will grow.  
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something and to do it very well.”

Finally, as I come close to the end of my term as Provincial Superior, I wish to record my immense indebtedness to the wholehearted support and generosity of the members of the Provincial Council. I wish my successor Joe McGee and his team every success and blessing as they take on the challenging responsibility of Leadership in the Province for the next six years.



**Pat Courtney MSC,  
Provincial,  
on behalf of the Provincial Council.**

**April 2011**



## **Searching for What God wants of us in these Changing Times**

God our loving Father  
you are always with us as we travel into the future.  
You call us to new ventures, new ways to minister to your  
people,  
new ways to touch the hearts of all.

When we are fearful of what the future might hold  
give us courage.  
When we worry that we are not up to the task,  
remind us that you would not have called us  
if you did not believe in us;  
remind us of the power entrusted to us in the pierced Heart of  
your Son.

As our Chapter approaches  
let us hear once again in the depth of our own hearts  
our call to be Missionaries of the Heart of your Son.

As we give thanks for the many ways your creative Spirit has  
worked through us,  
inspire us to search together with confidence for what you  
are asking of us now in these changing times.  
Show us how we can continue to reach out in your name,  
giving witness to the wonder of your love and mercy to all.

**May the Sacred Heart of Jesus be everywhere loved.  
Forever**

**Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. Pray for us.**