2024

Retired Missionaries and Faith in a Changing Society

Carmel Gallagher
Technological University Dublin, carmel.gallagher@tudublin.ie

Chapter 1 Irish Catholic Missionaries: Their life course in a changing world and changing Church

Carmel Gallagher

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6512-4915

Abstract

This chapter expands on the rationale and purpose of the book. It sets the context of the Irish missionary diaspora and the Irish mission project. The life stories of the 37 missionaries parallel changes in their own orders, in the Catholic Church, in Irish society and in their host countries. The life course perspective adopted in the book is explained as well as the interlocking interculturalities that framed the experiences of Irish missionaries and relevant contextual theological perspectives.

A brief history of the mission project in Ireland is provided: the era when thousands of idealistic young people became missionaries supported by the certitudes of a powerful Church and an ethnocentric view of the world. Changes wrought by Vatican II and Liberation theology are outlined as well as change underway through the current worldwide Synod in the Catholic Church.

The chapter sets the context for the key question posed in the book as to whether these returned missionaries offer any critical stances that reflect on living justly and interculturally in the world today. With life courses spanning a period from the 1930s to date, the enormous cultural, theological and personal changes missionaries of that era experienced are outlined.

I was in Africa for 54 years and not one person has asked me anything about the work I did there (Boland, 2019).

Introduction

The chapter begins by explaining the life course perspective adopted in the book, the interlocking interculturalities that framed the experiences of Irish missionaries and contextual theological perspectives used to understand the meaning of mission. Key features of the life course of the cohort of missionaries who were born in Ireland between the 1930s and the 1960s are outlined including denominational education, a highly institutionalised and conservative society, and a structure of traditional and devotional Catholicism. There were significant gender

differences in the experiences of missionary women and men, reflecting role and status differences in the institutionalised Church. Yet, missionary women carved out unique roles for themselves overseas in areas like medicine. However, we have limited knowledge about the lives of missionaries or how they made sense of their missionary experiences and life choices.

A brief history of the missionary movement in Ireland is outlined, including the role of religious orders in the growth of missionary enterprise and the backdrop of colonialism especially in Africa where many Irish missionaries worked. Vatican II heralded enormous changes in approaches to and understandings of mission work.[i] Contextual theology that emphasises the relationship between faith and culture led to a focus on inculturation and social justice as central missionary aims. With the advent of Liberation theology in Latin America in the late 1960s[ii], a methodology of mission work was adopted by many missionary orders that synthesised an analysis of unjust political and economic systems with a strong bible-based social spirituality through the medium of base ecclesial communities (BECs)[iii]. Suess (2013, p. 51) points out that all this required a long period of conscientisation and organisation. Furthermore, Liberation theology brought divisions and challenges for the Church. From the 1980s on, concerns about and work for environmental justice were adopted by many missionary orders.

The extent to which inculturation challenged and changed approaches to evangelisation are discussed. While racist discourses were evident in missionary publications in the 1920s and 1930s in Ireland, especially in relation to mission in Africa, these representations changed especially from the 1960s on and it was often missionaries themselves who were to the fore in arguing that Christianity had to be understood in cultural terms relevant to place and time. Missionaries themselves have been critical of understandings of inculturation based on assumptions of the superiority of Western values.

The work of Irish missionaries in campaigning for social justice and their solidarity with poor and oppressed people are examined. Irish missionaries helped to shape humanitarian and social justice responses to global inequalities and influenced Irish government policy on development aid. Furthermore, their influence on Ireland's global reputation for balance and fairness in its international relations is highlighted. However, while individual missionaries have been lauded in their host countries for their exceptional contributions in areas of human welfare, there has been little research on the impact of missionaries in the countries in which they worked.

The final section of the chapter addresses questions about mission in the twenty-first century. At a global church level, the meaning of mission has changed fundamentally with 'reverse evangelisation' in place for several decades into secularised Europe and new theological thinking that emphasises the responsibility of every Christian and every local Church to be missionary. By recruiting from their host countries, Irish missionaries continued to respond in innovative ways to emerging human and social problems despite their own falling numbers. However, in Ireland the future of their orders is uncertain with many orders preoccupied with historic abuse allegations, disposal of property and care for ageing members.

With their unique experiences of cultural and religious diversity, it might be expected that missionaries have much to contribute to the synodal process currently underway in the Catholic Church (endnote 11). However, it is not apparent that the contributions of missionaries have been valued within the Catholic Church in Ireland let alone within contemporary Irish society.

The chapter concludes by reiterating the questions posed in the book about what can be learnt from these missionaries about living meaningfully and ethically in contemporary society.

A humanistic life course perspective

The life course perspective adopted in the study seeks to capture the intertwined experiences of the missionaries, and the social contexts they inhabited over their lifetime. The concept of 'linked lives' (Elder et al., 2003) highlights the extent to which an individual's life is intimately shaped by the needs, circumstances, and choices of others. In one sense missionaries were 'cultural products' of their time - shaped by shared meanings and practices in their families and communities as well as a particular model of church that prescribed ways of living. While we all inhabit worlds of meaning that were already constituted before we were born, these practices are not immutable and shared understandings change over time (Edmondson, 2015).

Retired missionaries constitute a distinctive group whose view of their own life courses will have changed retrospectively possibly many times over. Rapid social change and secularising trends may make it harder for this group to interpret their own life courses. It is frequently noted by social gerontologists that societal expectations, at least in the West, fail to acknowledge the contributions of older people or to utilise their capacities and skills. Older missionaries may experience additional exclusionary processes from a loss of status and withdrawal of cultural respect due to the decline of the Catholic Church in Ireland - what Charles Taylor (1989) referred to as 'the politics of recognition' whereby if no one believes that what you are doing, or what you are, is significant, it is difficult to believe it yourself.

Moody's concept of 'conscious aging' that focuses on purposiveness and interconnectedness in the older years challenged instrumental and rationalised views of ageing (Moody, 2005). Elizabeth MacKinlay (2001) has suggested that there is a natural process involved in ageing of moving from doing as a way of being human, to a growing emphasis on being as a way of *being* human (p. 232).

Edmondson has argued that creating meaning is a central project in ageing, and that people in later life have significant views to offer on human conduct (Edmondson, 2015). How people perceive the meaning of their lives - a question that generally becomes more pressing as they get older - depends on what they did and what happened to them at earlier stages of their lives. Edmondson (2015) explored how meanings and insight of older people are embedded in the lived experiences of everyday life. What missionaries did and how they did it are crucial in grasping a sense of the meanings they attribute to their lives and how their moral commitments and life purpose were sustained over varied and challenging work experiences. Retired missionaries would have experienced losses and regrets similar to others in their age group including illness, death of loved ones and personal disappointments. They experienced unique challenges associated with living and working in different cultures and in difficult and sometimes dangerous situations. As members of religious orders who took vows of chastity, they lived their lives without the comforts and consolation of intimate relationships and everyday family life.

Temporality is central to understanding social processes inherent in any human enterprise (Rau & Edmondson, 2013) and the meaning of mission work reflects interlocking interculturalities of

both time and cultural settings. Ireland has changed so radically over the lifetimes of ex-missionaries that the meanings and status publicly attached to their work have fundamentally changed (Bateman, 2008, 2012; Inglis, 1998).

The meaning of mission within the Catholic Church has changed especially since the 1960s. Moreover, the Church as an institution has changed during the missionaries' lifetimes: becoming radically more open, partially swinging back again (Lane, 2004) and now more open under the present Pope (O'Hanlon, 2017b). Gender differences and inequalities are salient in the experiences of female and male missionaries leading to different expressions of religiosity and spirituality and political consequences for the role of women within the Church.

Missionaries experienced entirely unfamiliar cultural settings during their life courses (Donovan, 2019), then needed to re-adjust to a changed Ireland on return (Boland, 2019). Novel values and practices in contemporary Ireland may seem incompatible with living side-by-side with 'the poor and marginalised' 'as a way of life' (Moran, 2016, p. 26). In terms of ageing and enormous personal and professional demands over their careers, the book addresses how missionaries as a subcultural group in contemporary Irish society have constructed coherent life stories (Blaikie, 2002).

There are methodological and theoretical challenges in how we should listen to and interpret what people say and do about their lifetimes. People often convey meaning indirectly and much relies on meaning that is as much shared as it is individual. Inductive approaches that privilege the voices of people themselves and their own communicative forms are best suited to illuminating meanings. In seeking to decipher the meaning of missionaries' lives within such fluid and changing social contexts, narrative approaches are effective because they include time and process as well as sociality and practice. Thus, through in-depth and open-ended narrative interviews the book aims to show how different aspects of the lives of missionaries blend together in the way they lived their lives and what their experiences were like for them.

Key features of the life course of Irish missionaries

Key features of the life course of the cohort of missionaries who were born in Ireland between the 1930s and the 1960s - the subjects of this book - include an educational system controlled by the Catholic Church, a politically conservative, institutionalised and largely rural society, widespread emigration, and a gradual opening up of a more pluralist liberal society from the late 1960s. Religion was a taken-for-granted part of family and community life and the decision to become a priest or nun would have been supported by the culture of the time.

In her review of the Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, Clair Wills reflects on the high levels of institutionalisation in Irish society for much of the twentieth century. For example, Ireland had the highest admission rate to Mother and Baby Homes in Europe as well as the largest percentage of the population in psychiatric hospitals. She also remarks on the high numbers ''institutionalised in the church'' (Wills, 2021, p. 22).

The introduction of free second-level education in 1967 was a watershed event which, over time, changed the ''uniquely Irish model of education with in-built religious indoctrination'' (Scally,

2021, p.73) and provided more options for young people in education and careers. Within the Catholic Church, Vatican II was a seminal movement, the implications of which are still being worked out in the Church.

Most missionaries joined religious orders after second level education. Of the 37 participants in this study, 34 were members of religious orders (the others were a lay missionary, an ex-priest and a diocesan priest) and some 20 orders are represented in the sample. (endnote 4). While dedicated missionary orders were the principal vehicle of recruitment to 'the missions', many other orders whose focus was not exclusively on mission work in the Global South, but who worked in areas like education, provided opportunities for their members to serve overseas. Each religious order has its own distinctive ethos or charism, that determined the type of work undertaken and the participants' missionary approach. Female and male religious missionaries received different types of training, reflecting traditional roles of men and women in sacramental and pastoral roles within the Church.

The formation of priests and nuns was strict and austere especially prior to Vatican II. While nuns often experienced a more discipled regime in their training, formation was narrow and authoritarian for both men and women, reflecting the educational philosophy of the time which focused on formal knowledge that was handed down rather than experiential learning, and little encouragement of self-knowledge or critical thought.

In an interview in 2015 with journalist Deirdre Purcell (2015), a missionary from the Spiritan order, Father Quinn, reflected on the limited formation he and his confreres had received in the seminary:

> We didn't have either the language or education to exchange deep thoughts. ...The
>
> whole caring-and-sharing thing - we didn't even know how to do it. ... And when you
>
> went there and got into ministry in Africa, plunged into the work, it was so bizzare and
>
> busy, you didn't have the opportunity to spend time divining what other people thought
>
> or felt. Certainly not how you yourself felt. That was always put off, and I think the first
>
> time any of us had a chance to think about ourselves, our reaction, our feelings, was
>
> after Biafra (Purcell, 2015, pp. 39-40).

However, following Vatican II, missionaries along with other religious experienced an easing of strict norms in their orders, for example in dress code, having greater autonomy in their work and more freedom to visit family. Furthermore, over time, missionaries were given opportunities and encouraged by their leaders to undertake relevant educational and training courses at regular intervals. This enabled missionaries to update their work and respond to emerging needs and new methods of pastoral work.

While missionary priests were responsible for the traditional evangelising work of establishing church structures in mission territories, women missionaries developed distinctive roles for themselves in medicine, health care and personal social services. When the Church lifted the ban on clerics and religious practising midwifery and gynecology in 1936 (Humphreys, 2010, p. 34), this paved the way for orders like the Medical Missionaries of Mary established in 1936 who were described as 'trailblazers' in terms of bringing women religious into health care (op. cit. p. 55). A contemporaneous account described this development as ''as much an innovation today in the recognised activities of religious women as was the education of youth, nursing the sick, and care of the aged and poor, outside the cloister, in the 17th century when St Vincent de Paul founded the first community of non-cloistered Sisters'' (cited in Hogan, 1990, pp. 107-108).

Memoirs of missionaries provide insights into the types of work Irish missionaries did in the earlier decades under review and the contexts. Sr Hilary Lyons, now deceased, from the Holy Rosary Order described her work as a missionary medical doctor in Sierra Leone where the health care facilities were extremely poor (Lyons, 2001). She lived in Sierra Leone for forty-two years from 1954 until 1995 when she and her fellow sisters were forced to flee after war broke out. At a ceremony where she was awarded an Honorary Fellowship of the Faculty of Public Health by the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland in 2016, the citation stated:

''At 29 years of age, she took on the challenge of working on the frontline in Serabu which served a population of 40,000 in a tropical rain forest burdened with endemic diseases including malaria, typhoid, diarrhoea diseases, small pox, Lassa fever and cholera. She was physician, pediatrician, surgeon and obstetrician.'' https://www.catholicireland.net/irish-missionary-nun-awarded-honorary-fellowship/

In contrast, missionary priests at that time were predominantly involved in administering the sacraments and running schools in large remote areas. In 1960s Nigeria, Spiritan priest, Fr Reynolds, said of the newly arrived priests from his order: ''Most of us were on their own in the bush within twelve months'' (Purcell, 2015, p. 37). They had long days celebrating Mass, hearing confessions and running schools. He described confessions as a ''formulaic thing'' as they did not have the language used by the people. This experience is quite different from that of Sister Hilary Lyons, yet both were integral to the Irish missionary enterprise.

Missionaries were generally assigned to postings in challenging living and social conditions. While some spent their entire career in one country, albeit in different parishes and positions, others worked in different countries, even different continents and had to adapt to unfamiliar cultural contexts several time during their missionary careers.

Returning from active mission work overseas, we know little about how missionaries integrated their experiences, adapted to a changed Ireland and church, and found outlets for their new learning. Coleman (2011) expressed the paradox of old age as the need to both affirm values and identity and adapt to change:

Older people are expected to give witness to what has been important in their lives and

what is of lasting value. They need to do this also for maintaining their own sense of

identity. At the same time their own adaptation to new times and customs requires that

they acknowledge and accept inevitable change (p. 23).

Missionaries would have had to be particularly adaptable to respond to myriad cultural, institutional and political changes while retaining a sense of missionary purpose.

The Irish missionary movement - key historical markers

The Irish missionary movement refers to a renewed awareness and commitment within the Catholic Church in Ireland in the early decades of the twentieth century to the evangelisation of peoples who were not Christian. The institutional source for the drive to evangelise overseas came from religious orders,[iv] both continental and indigenous, and while the missionary movement was supported by the Irish hierarchy, it remained largely separate from the diocesan Church. An important feature of religious orders is their relative independence and autonomy from ecclesial structures. The practice of General Chapters held every 4-6 years aims to provide all members with an opportunity to participate in reflection and decision-making about future directions for the order.[v]

The nineteenth century was an important period of innovation within Catholic religious orders who began to develop methods of working among the poor which combined evangelising work with charitable service: "Taking their cue from the active, charitable tradition typified by St Vincent de Paul [seventeenth century France], a wave of religious founders emerged at that time and set up scores of new orders and congregations" (Fahey, 2007, p. 145). This branching out into social services was also novel in its openness to female religious, and there was a mushrooming of female orders in the Catholic Church throughout the nineteenth century who were mainly devoted to education and social service work rather than a contemplative life.

Hogan points out that in the modern period, the work of Christian missions was spearheaded by Protestants, for example Protestant missionaries were working in Africa almost fifty years before their Catholic counterparts.[vi]

However, since the early decades of the twentieth century, Catholic missionaries have dominated Ireland's mission outreach to the Global South.

By the 1830s, they [Protestant missionaries] had already developed many of the

evangelising techniques which were later adopted by Catholic missionaries including the

use of catechists, the ordination of indigenous ministers and the establishment of

orphanages, leper settlements, dispensaries and hospitals (Hogan, 1990, p. 106).

Competition between Catholic and Protestant missionaries had its origins in the interplay of politics and religion in European countries for centuries after the Reformation. The entanglement of politics, religion and greed of Western powers in the nineteenth century with the so-called

''Scramble for Africa'' saw evangelisation being used as a clear tool for ''civilizing'' native Africans in order to enrich Western political elites and profiteers and at the same time expand the influence of the Catholic or Protestant churches.

Rivalry between the churches could lead to unchristian attitudes and practices as the following example illustrates. In his recently published book, *The Power of Women*, Dr Denis Mukwege, gynaecologist, activist for women's rights and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, recounts a personal story from 1955 of how his mother was turned away from a health clinic run by Belgian Catholic nuns in Congo with a critically sick infant (Dr Mukwege himself who was only days old) because her husband was a Protestant pastor and the clinic only served Catholics. The context was Pope Leo XIII's agreement with King Leopold II of Belgium in the mid-1880s that Congo would be evangelised by Belgian Catholics, and Protestants found themselves squeezed out (Mukwege, 2021, p. 4).

The revival of modern Irish Catholicism occurred after Catholic Emancipation in 1829. Derek Scally (2021) in his examination of the relationship between the Irish Catholic Church and the state outlines a 'devotional revolution' and a major reform programme led by influential church figures like Archbishop Cullen in the latter decades of the 19th century. Spiralling numbers of young women and men entered religious life. For example, in 1800, there were just 120 nuns in Ireland, by 1850 there were 1,500 and by 1900 there were 9,000 (Fahey, 2007, p. 146). There was a corresponding major growth in religious run health and education institutions: a total of 37 institutions including schools, hospitals, convents and laundries opened between 1852 and 1878 (Scally, 2021, p. 208).

By the mid-1960s, there were approximately 16,000 nuns and 14,000 male religious and clergy which made the Irish Catholic Church the most heavily staffed in the Catholic world (Inglis, 1987). Thus, a Catholic political identity became established with a rigid moral code and the Catholic church filled ''deep-seated needs in the people: for order, safety, pride, education and economic security … salvation and consolation in the desolation of post-Famine Ireland.'' (Scally, 2021, p. 210). It was in this context that religious life became an attractive career option for young people and ''protected both the patriarchal order and the economic interests of an emerging new middle class'' (op. cit. p. 209).

While it was continental missionary orders who introduced the modern missionary drive into Ireland, Hogan outlines the reasons that led to a period of unprecedented growth in modern Irish missionary activity from 1916 to 1937 - a period that coincided with the political, cultural and revolutionary movement towards Irish independence and the establishment in 1922 of the Irish Free State. Firstly, the successful establishment of continental missionary orders in Ireland, for example the Society of Missionaries in Africa, marked the ending of suspicion towards 'foreign' missions, particularly towards the French Church. Secondly, the Irish Catholic church was better organised, more settled and capable of looking outwards beyond its own diaspora. Thirdly, new cultural and political forces favoured the establishment of a national missionary movement (Hogan, 1990, pps 9-10). This climate of cultural and political nationalism, in particular a yearning to re-enact Ireland's distinguished missionary past - a period when Ireland was known throughout Europe as the 'Land of Saints and Scholars' (McMahon, 2001) - was a

motivating force for the emergence of indigenous missionary orders in the early decades of the new state

Hogan described the formation of the Maynooth Mission to China, later named the Columban Foreign Missionary Society (Columbans) in 1916 as a great watershed in the history of the modern Irish missionary movement (1990, p. 91). This represented a commitment to evangelise in non-Christian countries and re-establish mission in counties like China where orders had had a troubled history, and in some cases had withdrawn altogether from mission work there. The formation of the Columbans was followed rapidly by the founding of four additional Irish missionary orders within two decades - Missionary Sisters of St Columban, 1922; Sisters of the Holy Rosary, 1924; St Patrick's Missionary Society, 1932 and Medical Missionaries of Mary, 1937 (op. cit. p. 91).

While the missionary diaspora came predominantly from religious orders, when there were sufficient numbers of clerics to service parishes, diocesan priests were given an opportunity to volunteer to work as overseas missionaries. Lay organisations with links to the Catholic Church provided a route to mission work for lay women and men, typically for shorter periods of time than religious missionaries.

It has been argued that the Irish missionary movement is the most significant contribution that Ireland has made to the world in its first 50 years of independence; between 1920 and 1970 over 30,000 men and women joined missionary orders, both Irish and continental religious institutes (Moran, 2015, p. 5). These missionaries worked in over ninety countries in Africa, Asia, South and Central America. Today Irish missionaries are a rapidly dwindling group. The most recent statistics show that there are just 626 Irish Catholic missionaries active outside Ireland (Personal communication from AMRI, 2022). This can be contrasted with six decades ago when in 1965, Ireland had 7,085 priests, nuns, brothers and laity working as overseas Catholic missionaries (Hogan, 1990, p. 8). Religious orders in Ireland have been experiencing falling numbers since the 1960s (Fahey, 2007) and have a rapidly ageing membership. Since these trends became apparent, most orders have been planning for a different role and many face an uncertain future for their organisations. The book therefore seeks to capture the voices of this group before they are lost in historical time.

New directions - Vatican II

According to Hogan (1990), missionary work was conducted in a similar way since its revival at the beginning of the nineteenth century until Vatican II. This methodology involved 'traditional mission territories' being designated by the Vatican and 'allocated' to religious orders, an emphasis on catechesis, administering the sacraments including the Eucharist and Baptism, and the formation of indigenous clergy. While a traditional understanding of evangelisation prevailed - that of attracting adherents to the Catholic Church and building a type of 'Catholic Empire' - education and health were also important for Christian humanitarian reasons.

A new direction for mission work was set out in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. New local churches removed from the historical centres of Christianity in Europe, were encouraged to take responsibility for mission in their own and in other countries. Vatican II

promoted a broader and deeper understanding of missionary work more closely tied to ideas about human development.

The idea of inculturation emphasised in *Ad Gentes* (1965), Vatican II decree on the missionary activity of the Church, was that the Church should be rooted in the traditions and philosophy of those it seeks to evangelise:

> Thus it will be more clearly seen in what ways faith may seek for understanding, with due
>
> regard for the philosophy and wisdom of these peoples; it will be seen in what ways their
>
> customs, views on life, and social order, can be reconciled with the manner of living
>
> taught by divine revelation. From here the way will be opened to a more profound
>
> adaptation in the whole area of Christian life. By this manner of acting, every appearance
>
> of syncretism and of false particularism will be excluded, and Christian life will be
>
> accommodated to the genius and the dispositions of each culture (*Ad Gentes*, para 22).

https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html

Key principles of *Ad Gentes* were that the Church 'is missionary by its very nature'; mission was seen as an outreach of persons, and not confined to particular places; and Christians must witness to the gospel by living in full participation with the culture and values of the people of other traditions (Bevans, 2013 b, pp. 106-107).

The Vatican Council's declaration that all people have a right to religious freedom and that all religions contain truths, invalidated simplistic notions of proselytism and promoted dialogue with people of other religions (Bevans, 2013 b, p. 102). Since Vatican II, the meaning of Catholic mission has become less exclusionary and more open to how other cultures and religions could enrich the living out of Christianity. Theological developments under Pope Francis have extended understanding of interculturality to focus more on promoting interreligious dialogue. Pope Francis ends his latest encyclical[vii] on fraternity and social friendship with a chapter entitled *Religions at the Service of Fraternity in the World* (Fratelli Tutti, 2020). He calls for believers belonging to different religions to work together in building universal fraternity, promoting the common good and standing in solidarity with the poor and excluded of the world (O'Reilly, 2021).

Hogan argued that the full implications of the theme of human development took much more time to evolve and subsequent encyclicals elaborated a theology of mission (1990, p. 182). For example, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1976) articulated that the Church must itself be continuously evangelised, and this paved the way for more focus on post-Christian Europe and Latin America, where Christianity had been established under colonial expansion in the sixteenth century, and not just evangelisation in countries where Christianity was a new or a minority religion (op. cit.

1990, p. 186). However, in his analysis of *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), Hogan suggests that the coceptualisation of initial evangelisation and re-evangelisation did not show sufficient understanding of processes of secularisation in the West (Hogan, 1990, pp. 199-200).

The efforts of lay missionaries increased following Vatican II, influenced by the impact of the Nigerian civil war, 1967-1970 (often referred to in Ireland as the Biafran war) on Irish people (see p.) and the increase in development work spearheaded by religious missionaries (Humphreys, 2010). Two influential lay missionary organisations that operated in Ireland were Viatores Christi (VC), an indigenous organisation founded in 1960 and Volunteer Missionary Movement (VMM) founded in England in 1964 and formally extended to Ireland in 1969. Both organisations were determined that lay missionaries constituted a distinct vocation within the Church: they sought cooperation with the clergy rather than supervision and they saw their role as parallel to religious missionaries in building up the Kingdom of God. They found validation for their position in *Lumen Gentium* (1964), one of the principal documents of Vatican II which asserted that the work of laity in the Church was no less valuable than that of priests and nuns (Hogan, pp.133- (Chapter 1v, para 32)

https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

Vatican II initiated a renewal process within religious orders and had transformative effects for women religious. Many female religious orders re-wrote their constitutions and loosened rules of obedience and conformity with community life. However, Vatican II also confirmed that, while women religious were different from lay Catholics, they were not an ordained ministry (Clevenger, 2021, p. 15).

Of immense significance for missionaries was Vatican II's assertion that local and regional voices could be authoritative in determining the proper course of Catholic social action. This allowed for variation and flexibility in Catholic teaching, particularly in the application of Catholic principles to social questions (Fahey, 2007, p.155).

New directions - Liberation theology

A profound movement for change occurred in the Catholic Church in Latin America in the 1960s (endnote 2). From a position of complicity with the conquering European colonists in the 15th and 16th centuries to alignment with conservatives, landowners and the old aristocracy following the independence of many Latin American countries in the 19th century, the Catholic Church adopted Liberation theology amidst much debate, controversy and opposition - both internal and external (Smith, 1991). One of the most important principles of Liberation theology was 'the preferential option for the poor' and this principle and model of engaging with people living at the margins of society (Suess, 2015, p. 51) was endorsed by the Latin American Bishops Conference in Medellin, Colombia in 1968 (Medellin, 1968) and later at their Conference in Puebla, Mexico in 1979 (Puebla, 1979).

Irish missionaries working in South America, Central America, the Caribbean and the Philippines enthusiastically espoused Liberation theology. According to theologian and missionary, Donal

Dorr, liberation theology provided poor and oppressed people with a Christian and biblical motivation and encouragement to challenge unjust political authorities and unjust economic systems (Dorr, 2013). Liberation theologians employed a method for pastoral work - 'See, Judge, Act' (Sands, 2018) and applied the philosophy of 'The bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other' attributed to the renowned Protestant Christian theologian, Karl Barth, to help the people identify the fundamental social issues blighting their lives. Educational programmes were developed for missionaries and lay people in training institutes established by Liberation theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez (1971), for example Institute Bartolomé de las Casas in Lima, Peru founded in the early 1970s.

From a social movements' perspective, an interesting confluence of social democracy and Christian theology took place in countries in central and South America in the 1960s. The Catholic Church imported European models of social action influenced by people like Jacques Maritain which organised Catholics for religiously informed participation in the spheres of education, politics, the economy, culture and the family (Smith, 1991, p. 14). Base ecclesial communities (BECs) (endnote 3) became intertwined with the Liberation theology movement, and by 1978, there were an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 BECs in Latin America (Smith, 1991, pp. 19-20)

In a theological sense BECs were seen as ''the focal point of evangelization and the motors of liberation and development'' (Puebla 1979, p. 96).   Missionaries helped form BECs which were often led by women, and these became an important vehicle for promoting social justice. This approach applies community development principles of self-help and empowerment alongside a strong social spirituality based on the gospels. Base ecclesial communities developed beyond Latin America to the Philippines, Asia and Africa where they were variously termed basic Christian communities or small Christian communities (Healey, 2012).

In Africa, self-help and community development principles were central to a programme 'Training for Transformation' developed by Anne Hope and Sally Timmel in their work in Kenya (Hope & Timmel, 1984). Designed to train community leaders and based on the principle of people being supported to find solutions to their own identified needs, this programme became an important framework for both development workers and missionaries. This model was widely adopted by NGOs, both faith-based and those with no obvious religious ethos, for example Bernard Van Leer Foundation in their work in the early years sector (https://bernardvanleer.org/about-us/). The approach was popular especially in projects with women and families at community level and was practised in countries outside Africa including Ireland.

Complex questions arose for the Catholic Church in relation to Liberation theology and led to conflict between priests and bishops, among bishops themselves and between church authorities and political and economic elites. The murder of Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, El Salvador in 1980, by a right-wing assassin while he was saying Mass, was a shocking indicator of the opposition to the ideas of Liberation theology espoused by Church leaders like Romero.

Liberation theology fell into disfavour with the Vatican when bishops and missionaries were accused of acting like social workers and being too aligned to left-wing political parties.

However, according to Hoddy (2021), the popular education movement was steeped in Christian ideas and not just on a Marxist materialist structural analysis of society. There was a swing to a more conservative theology under Pope John Paul II who replaced bishops who favoured liberation theology with bishops who opposed it (Dorr, 2014). Some missionaries themselves have been critical of the 'naivete' of missionaries who were wedded to Liberation theology and socialist ideas but lacked economic knowledge and pragmatism (Humphreys, 2010, p. 197). Nonetheless, Liberation theology has had a long-term impact on the Church and on the work of missionaries bringing new models of church participation and pastoral work.

Environmental justice

Concerns for the environment arising from their experiences of working with people whose environments were being degraded by industrialisation and global capitalism, led to many missionaries adopting a strong ecological focus in their mission work. In his 2015 encyclical *On Care for our Common Home* (Laudato Si') Pope Francis called for an inclusive dialogue on how we are caring for our planet. Making sense of the ecological challenges facing humanity and caring for the natural world has become a central justice focus in many Christian churches, and Irish missionaries have contributed to the theological debate (for example Donal Dorr (2013) and Sean McDonagh (2016; 2006; 1986).

Inculturation, evangelisation and mission

Classical theology of mission was based on notions of the superiority of Western civilization and disdain for local cultures and ancient religions. Revision began from the mid twentieth century influenced by Protestant theologians like Karl Barth and later in the Catholic church through Vatican II (Bevans, 2012, pp. 101-102).

Questions about the relationship between faith and culture are central in contextual theology with Bevans describing this as a 'theological imperative' (Bevans, 2013 a, p. 275). Bevans points out that while *Ad Gentes* spoke straightforwardly about the need to adapt theology to local contexts and cultures, these ideas have been further developed since then and the terms used today are inculcate and contextual theology (2013 a, p. 271). For Bevans, Christian faith must be based not only on scripture and tradition but on human experience in all cultures. He suggests that missionaries who participate in other cultures in an open way generally understand this, and their spirituality and religious orientation are attuned to finding God wherever they work.

However, adapting to new cultures may have been interpreted as making small adjustments to the message for purposes of cultural relevance, whereas Donovan (2019) and MacMahon (2015), both of whom served as overseas missionaries, have argued that missionaries and Christians generally must be more open to truths in other cultures and religions and see how Christianity can be expressed in different ways.

Vincent Donovan evinced a strong anthropological model of contextual theology following his missionary work among the Masai in East Africa and saw the preservation of cultural identity by

a person practising the Christian faith as paramount. Like many other missionaries, Donovan lived closely with diverse cultures, befriending and observing their lives as cultural outsiders with unique inside knowledge, and developed a cultural sensitivity and an outlook that was often critical of the church that sent them and indeed the dominant values of the society that they came from (Donovan, 2019). Moreover, Donovan was extremely critical of the missionary approach in East Africa in the 1960s. He was critical of the equation of mission work with both the 'school apostolate' and the 'medical apostolate' in the colonial era, and the missionary emphasis on material progress through development work in the aftermath of Independence in those countries: ''Born in slavery, disoriented by the school system, startled by independence, and smothered in nation building - mission in East Africa has never had the chance to be true to itself'' (Donovan, 2019, p. 12).

From his experiences as a missionary in Korea and China, Hugh MacMahon was critical of how limited understandings of interculturality were in Irish missionary and Church circles (MacMahon, 2015). He suggested that, in Korea, few missionaries ever met non-Catholics as equals or had a chance to learn from them. This was due to their isolation, limited opportunities to learn the language and tendency to focus on ''church talk'' (p. 84). He reflected that when he first went to Korea in the 1960s, the idea of learning from the people was not considered a priority:

> I was more curious than expectant, intrigued by the way the people acted, built houses,
>
> ate and even thought differently. However, I was too convinced of the superiority of my
>
> Western ways and religious beliefs to suppose I could become a better person by
>
> listening to them (MacMahon, 2015, pp. 15-16).

In Ireland prior to Vatican II and despite the availability of anthropological material which described the complex and developed cultures which the missionaries would encounter, Bateman found that representations of African culture in missionary magazines were disrespectful towards African culture. Bateman argued that in the early decades of the Irish state, the missionary enterprise mirrored the discourse of colonisers through a form of evangelisation that sought to diminish many aspects of indigenous culture.

Missionary magazines published by missionary orders themselves, were a powerful means of communication and funding for the work of missionaries (Hogan, 1990).[viii] Hogan suggests that the magazines appealed on a number of fronts - to the 'Golden Age' of Saints and Scholars (McMahon, 2001), to a spirit of nationalism befitting the historical period in Ireland, and to heroism, self-sacrifice and a spirit of adventure (Hogan, 1990, pp. 148-150).

However, analysis of the content of missionary publications related to mission work in Africa in the 1920s and 1930s, demonstrated a discourse of racism that regarded African people as inferior, culturally and spiritually (Bateman, 2008). Bateman argued that missionaries exploited this view of the African as 'the other' in order to justify their missionary endeavours of converting 'the pagan'. Many adults who were children in Ireland in the decades from the 1930s to the 1960s, would recall being encouraged at school to 'give a penny for black babies' to ensure they

had a Christian/Catholic education which would save them from a non-Christian and, by definition, an 'uncivilized' upbringing:

> These missionary efforts to spread civilisation and Christianity (apparently
>
> inextricably linked) were based largely on a notion that the benighted target
>
> populations had no religion which was deserving of the name and that their poor
>
> living conditions, laziness, and immoral behaviour were bound up in their state of
>
> religious ignorance, or worse, their affiliation to a false god or gods. These heathens
>
> were seen to be in a moral and cultural vacuum and, despite evidence to the contrary,
>
> a predominantly oral culture was assumed to signify an absence of both real culture
>
> and real history (Bateman, 2008, p. 74.)

While done largely for their own propaganda needs, the representations of Africa as 'uncivilized' and 'childlike' (op. cit. p.96) affected public perceptions. Bateman points out the irony in Ireland having its own 'spiritual, imperial project' in Africa while having just gained political independence from Britain. Missionaries were travelling from a newly-independent post-colonial state to countries where the remnants of the British empire prevailed (p. 95).

Expressing ideas of both superiority and paternalism, and despite their good intentions, Bateman suggested that:

> The Irish Catholic missionaries were quite blatant in their colonisation of the African
>
> continent, with what they described as a Spiritual Empire. References to Ireland as
>
> mother to Africa confirm both the idea of motherland and the nurturing role that Ireland
>
> is represented as having (2008, p. 96).

Bateman argued that this lack of ''appreciation of cultural forms which cannot be assessed in European terms'' did not change until the early 1970s when Irish missionaries began to acquire anthropological knowledge and information before going on the missions (2008, p. 75). However, Linehan (2021) suggests that Irish missionaries had largely shed these racist perspectives by the early 1960s.

Hogan (1990) agreed that missionaries may have played a colonising role in Africa but pointed out that, from the 1950s on, their work was mainly developmental in education, training and health and in this sense, they were not just treating the symptoms of underdevelopment (pp.137-138). Nonetheless, their presence was approved by the colonial powers like Britian as they were seen to have a settling effect. Hogan added that political self-determination in British controlled countries was often achieved by a mission-educated group of emerging African

leaders who had the self-confidence and capabilities to demand freedom and independence (op. cit. p.137).

Addressing the criticism levelled against missionaries that they induced a loss of respect among African people for aspects of their own beliefs and traditions, Humphreys concluded that in the absence of any critical research on the role of Irish missionaries from an African, Latin American or Asian perspective, it is difficult to reach any balanced conclusion on partial accounts and contradictory opinions:

> Some African commentators, for example, can be highly critical of the missionary
>
> movement while holding great affection for individual priests, nuns and brothers. Even
>
> strong critics of religious imperialism are capable of acknowledging certain benefits that
>
> came with the missionaries (Humphreys, 2010, p. 153).

It must also be acknowledged that membership of missionary orders became increasingly racially and culturally mixed over several decades. Indeed some, like the Medical Missionaries of Mary, were multicultural religious communities from the outset. Other orders which originated in Ireland and initially recruited only in Ireland, gradually opened membership to natives of the countries they worked in. For example, the Columban Order at their 1982 General Assembly in Lima, Peru, decided ''to invite candidates from the local churches in which we work to become members of our Society and share in our missionary enterprise.'' (Personal communication, Columban Order).

Missionaries, development work and human rights advocacy

Missionaries' experience of working in diverse cultures and societies and the traditional high esteem accorded to them, helped to shape Irish attitudes to poorer nations and a heightened practical concern about world poverty which is reflected in Ireland's favourable record in contributing to global voluntary aid agencies (Hogan, 1990, p. 9). Ireland has a reasonably good record among European countries in global giving having contributed 0.45 per cent of GDP in 2021.[ix]

Speaking at the launch of Misean Cara in 2008, former Minister of State, Liz O'Donnell commented: ''The Irish missionary position is very much the template of the official Irish government approach to overseas development aid.'' (Croke Park, Dublin, 24th June, 2008, cited in Humphreys, 2010, p. 91). Humphreys suggested that this approach meant that money was directed to the poorest of the world with few conditions attached and in sympathy with local culture (2010, p. 91).

Irish missionaries have also had a profound impact on the international development NGO sector (Linehan, 2021). Concern Worldwide, originally named Concern Africa, was established in 1968 by Irish missionaries from the Spiritan Order along with lay people in Ireland to respond

to imposed starvation in Biafra during the Nigerian civil war. It is now Ireland's largest aid and humanitarian agency and has worked in fifty countries.

Trocaire was established in 1973 by the Irish Catholic bishops as the official Church's response to the development needs of the Global South. Trocaire works in 20 countries across the world. While donations made through the churches and the general public remain an important source of funding, the majority of Trocaire's income now comes from governments (Irish government, UK government and the EU).

The influence of missionaries extends to political capital with Linehan (2021) arguing that Ireland's success in gaining a temporary seat at the United Nations Security Council in 2021 was greatly helped by the mission project despite no overt mention of this in Ireland's bid. Linehan sees the ''authentic claims to solidarity with struggling post-colonial'' countries of the world and how the ''Irish state operates in global development issues'' as part of the legacy of missionaries despite Ireland now being regarded as a post-Catholic society (2021, p. 1).

The influence of Irish missionaries can be seen in the valuable social networks they created in the Global South and in their work for social justice. Linehan (2021) outlines the personal connections of many middle-aged decision-makers in governments worldwide through having been educated by Catholic missionaries. Having consolidated their churches and established health and education services, many Irish missionaries went on to support Independence movements.

Missionaries supported campaigns for social justice in the Philippines and Central America, often at great cost to themselves. Well-known missionary priest, Fr Shay Cullen, set up the Preda Institute to improve the rights of exploited children in the Philippines and has won numerous national and international awards for highlighting the exploitation and abuse of children and women in that country (Cullen, 2006). Missionaries took brave stances to help people targeted by the government during periods of martial law in the Philippines. Fr Rufus Halley, an Irish Columban missionary was murdered in 2001 in the southern Philippines. He had been involved in promoting interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians in the region for 20 years and had fought for the rights of oppressed Muslims, who were being targeted by the Philippines army. Humphreys (2010) details four Irish missionaries who were murdered in the course of their work for social justice in different countries in the decades from the 1980s to 2003 and there have been others murdered since.

Missionaries also played a role in the establishment of the semi-state body, APSO (Association for Personal Services Overseas) in the early 1970s which enabled lay professionals to work in the Global South for two-year placements. Organisations like Concern, Trocaire and APSO, facilitated lay people to play a much greater role as professional and volunteer development workers. Social justice was at the heart of the work of these agencies and many young people were inspired to work in countries experiencing great hardships and inequalities.

The Nigerian civil war had a particularly profound effect on the missionary movement. Through the work of Irish missionaries from the Spiritan Order in organising and distributing food to the besieged Biafrans, and galvanising support from the Irish public, missionaries in Africa began to spend less time on religious duties and more time giving practical assistance to people

(Humphreys, 2010, p. 89). However, the role of Irish missionaries in organising famine relief in Biafra during the war was controversial. The politics of aid are complex and Irish missionaries have been accused of being interfering by their interventions. The Irish government's position was ambivalent - they were in a difficult position as Britain and most countries internationally supported Nigeria and Ireland had business interests in Nigeria. Furthermore, the position of other Irish missionaries serving in various parts of Nigeria became uncomfortable and many Irish missionaries were expelled from the country altogether (Humphreys, 2010, p. 88).[x]

Over the past 70 years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the idea of human rights has become central to international ethics and cooperation in seeking to reduce global poverty and eliminate injustices. Many would not see the Church as integral to economic and social development and would regard the work of missionaries as relevant only to the extent that it reduces poverty and promotes justice, yet there has been a high level of cooperation between development agencies and missionary organisations (Hogan, 1990, Moran, 2016). According to former President of Ireland and global advocate for climate justice, Mary Robinson, ''Religious leaders are now more at the heart of global decision-making where, through their extensive networks in the developing world, they advocate for living conditions there, abuses in civil rights and social justice, and climate change'' (Moran, 2016, Foreword).

Furthermore, missionaries in cooperation with committed lay people, have forged links at civil and political level between some of the poorest and most exploited countries of the world and Ireland. For example, The Sierra Leone Ireland Partnership established in 1993 by Irish missionaries and lay development workers, Catholic and Protestant, has advocated successfully for targeted development aid, embassy status and cooperation in areas including education, micro finance and campaigns on diamond mining (Bockarie et al., 2022).

However, there is limited critical assessment of the overall contribution of missionaries in the countries in which they worked. We have seen that in some countries, missionaries have been a thorn in the side of governments as they became centrally involved in human rights and humanitarian issues, while other missionaries have had civic honours bestowed on them by governments for their extraordinary contribution in a particular area of human welfare or education.[xi]

Irish Missionaries in the twenty-first century

From the latter decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, Irish missionaries have continued to respond to specific human and social problems in places where their orders had a presence, albeit with diminishing personnel and financial resources. However, their work was augmented by a growing NGO sector supported by the Irish government and committed lay development workers.

Missionaries adapted to help with a local population's greatest needs, as evidenced in the considerable number of Irish missionaries who worked with people suffering from HIV/AIDS in the early decades of the emergence of the disease (Humphreys, 2010). While the Church's conservative stance on contraception may have presented an ethical dilemma for some, the

conversations reported by Humphreys reveal a pragmatic, nuanced, sustainable and deep humanitarian response to HIV/AIDS by Irish missionaries (Humphreys, 2010, pp. 133-136).

We have already seen how Irish missionaries helped to co-create new understandings of mission work by their practices on the ground aided by new theological insights, many of which came from theologians who themselves had missionary experience. Missionaries had opportunities to take sabbaticals and pursue courses of study to update and renew their missionary focus. Furthermore, their orders held regular Chapters at which experiences on the ground were synthesised and future work was planned in the light of the changing needs of the people they served, the socio-political realities of their host country and the order's resources. (endnote 5)**.**

Changing meaning of mission in the Catholic church

The meaning of mission itself in the Catholic Church has continued to change and evolve in the twenty-first century. The kernel of the theology of mission articulated at Vatican II is the emphasis on cultural diversity in the Church and the role of local churches which are seen as 'sister churches' in a reciprocal relationship and in communion with the universal Catholic Church (Oborji, 2013, p. 145). As Christianity has become a more established world religion, and well embedded in Africa, Oborji argues that western oriented theology has failed to keep up with the southward shift in the Christian landscape.   A strong critique has developed among some African theologians of the dominance of European Christianity and an African theology only began to emerge in the mid-twentieth century (op. cit. p. 147).

One implication of this is 'reverse evangelisation' with cross-cultural learning from Africa assisting in the 're'-evangelisation of western secular societies (op. cit. p. 151). The secularisation of Irish society reflects processes already experienced in Europe with the head of the French Bishops' conference, Archbishop Eric de Moulins-Beaufort, stating recently that faith no longer gives the majority of Europeans a basis for their lives, their actions, for weighing decisions and for their views of the world. https://www.synodaltimes.com/features/faith-irrelevant-for-majority-of-europeans-says-head-of-french-bishops-conference/

Oborji argues that global migration processes will continue to impact on Christianity and on mission (2013, p. 153). Thus, a fundamental shift has occurred in the meaning of mission which is no longer seen as overseas service by religious personnel sent by the 'mother-church' from Christianised Europe to the 'underdeveloped' and 'un Christianised' Global South:

> What is being argued, however, is that the reshaping of global Christianity by the young
>
> churches of the southern continents, has rendered the old missionary outlook or rather
>
> the idea of mission as one-way traffic (as movement from the north to the south), a
>
> defunct and meaningless concept (Oborji, 2013, p. 154).

Reflecting on the meaning of mission today, from the perspective of a former overseas Irish missionary, and in light of the gospels, especially the Acts of the Apostoles, Fr Tom O'Reilly points out that the Christian faith has to find expression in the lived experience of every culture, that mission is the responsibility of every Christian and implies a partnership between religious and lay people, and that mission is no longer a one-way flow from Westernised Christian churches to poorer non-Western countries (O'Reilly, 2021, p. 16).

Return to a post-Catholic Ireland

On retirement or completion of their missionary assignments, Irish missionaries have returned to an Ireland greatly changed since they joined their orders and where some feel 'invisible' and lack a space to tell their missionary stories (p.). Scally outlines a ''quiet shift'' away from devotional religion ''at some point in the last forty years'' (2021 p. 254). The terms 'cultural Catholics' (Inglis, 2017) and 'post-Catholic' (Ganiel, 2017) have been used to describe how faith no longer resides widely among a significant percentage of Irish people, especially among younger generations and is not connected to their social idealism (O'Hanlon, 2017a). For example, in the Republic of Ireland, Mass attendance dropped from 91 per cent in 1972 to 36 per cent in 2016 (Ganiel, 2019). The proportion of people who identify as Catholic has dropped from 79 per cent of the population in 2016 to 69 per cent in 2022 (Census of Population, 2023).

The experiences of missionaries who devoted their lives to giving practical assistance to the poorest and most marginalised communities globally seem somewhat tangential to discourse on religion in Ireland today. For the past three to four decades, reporting on religion has been dominated by scandals of clerical abuse and cruel treatment of vulnerable people in church run institutions, and serious debate on religion in terms of how to live one's life has been remarkably absent in a country where a significant majority describe themselves as Roman Catholic.

The model of Church that prevailed in Ireland was characterised by anti-intellectualism and paternalism and the progressive ideas of Vatican II did not penetrate deeply (O'Hanlon, 2017b; Twomey, 2017). For example, theology remained the preserve of the clergy for most of the twentieth century, and there was no attempt by the hierarchy to encourage critical thinking or reflective thought on the place of religion in the development of human civilization or contemporary societal issues (Scally, 2021). Consequently, it is generally believed that adults' understanding of religion remained ''stunted'' at secondary school level (Scally, 2021, p. 83).

The experiences of missionaries could help to unpack 'taken-for-granted' categories often used uncritically to describe changes in religious practice and orientation and offer perspectives on different ways of serving as Christians or Catholics. Furthermore, in terms of religion and spirituality, the exposure of missionaries to cultural and religious diversity over their life course would contribute to useful perspectives on the role of faith in societies in the increasingly secularised Western world.

Synod of the Catholic Church

The Synod of the Catholic Church, initiated by Pope Francis, has been presented as a worldwide listening process and consultation - termed a process of 'discernment' - at grassroots level across all parishes and dioceses and with groups whose voices have been sidelined in Church teaching (https://synod.ie/).[xii] As a group, returned missionaries have contributed their views to the Irish synodal process underway since 2021. While some orders made individual submissions to the Synod, AMRI collected and collated the views of its member organisations. Three submissions were made by AMRI - a general submission, a submission on behalf of women missionaries and a submission on behalf of lay missionaries. These will be discussed in Chapter 6.

The synodal process has already raised many topics once considered taboo in church life from women's ordination to LGBTQ issues. The Synod has already revealed deep divisions in relation to these and other topics with regional and cultural differences emerging. In April 2023, the Vatican announced that laypeople will be able to vote at the concluding Synodal assembly that begins later this year. The votes are ultimately advisory and nearly 80% of participants will be bishops but taking the laity and women into the Church's decision-making process is said to represent a significant shift (Synodal Times, 28th April, 2023 Home - Synodal Times).

Practical concerns of orders

The missionaries interviewed by Humphreys (2012) a decade and a half ago, were concerned about how to ensure their work would be sustained after they left or retired. They worried about the future of their projects given precarious funding, the voluntary nature of their own work, and the issues that tend not to be priorities in the countries in which they worked such as visitation and advocacy for prisoners or work with prostitutes (Humphreys, 2010, pp. 212-2013). On the other hand, many countries that missionaries served in have made great strides in education and health services, and missionaries could be satisfied that they had contributed in some way to social and economic progress through training local staff and establishing good quality services.

The concerns of missionary and religious orders in the third decade of the twenty-first century in Ireland relate to their future role and practical problems of dismantling large institutional organisations as well as caring for older and infirm members. For example, of 90 Columbans in Ireland, 65% are over 80 years, and only seven people are under 70. (Personal communication, January 2023). Continuing revelations of historical abuse in religious controlled schools in Ireland and sometimes involving missionaries who served overseas have preoccupied orders in recent years. There are fewer and fewer active members available for administrative work and missionary-type work in Ireland. Despite this, many individuals who served as missionaries overseas have found meaningful work on their return to Ireland.

Both individually and collectively, returned missionaries are likely to offer broad perspectives on living justly in intercultural contexts from their experiences of living closely and for extended periods of time with the poorest people of the world. The question posed in the book is whether these returned missionaries offer any critical stances that reflect on living justly and interculturally in the world today.

Summary and conclusions

The book centres on open-ended narrative interviews with 37 people, mainly nuns and priests, who worked as Catholic missionaries in countries in Asia, Africa, Central and South America in the decades from the 1960s to date. Many have worked for their entire careers in mission contexts, and often well beyond normal retirement age. The life stories relayed here parallel changes in their own orders, in the Catholic Church, in Irish society and in the countries in which they worked. Their accounts also illuminate their own understanding of their work as missionaries and give insight into the meaning frameworks that made their lives coherent.

The question posed in the book is whether these returned missionaries offer any critical stances that reflect on living justly and interculturally in the world today. Having lived across cultures in fluid, challenging and rapidly changing social and theological contexts, and having returned to a vastly different Ireland, the book explores how these missionaries have integrated their experiences in both socio-psychological terms and in their understandings of religion and spirituality.

The data presented in the book illuminate deep and complex questions of meaning making across the life course and provide insights into the relationship between faith and culture in contemporary secularised societies.

Highlighting the diversity of their experiences from life course, gender and cultural contexts, the book gives voice to a disappearing group whose unique experiences and perspectives may be overlooked in a rapidly changing Ireland.

Edmondson cautions that:

> All that is necessary to prevent any group of people from actively contributing to what
> goes on is the *absence* of a discourse, of any pervasive set of languages and
> expectations that anticipate that they will do and say things of importance. (Edmondson,
> 2015, p. 198).

This book seeks to ensure that the voices of returned and retired missionaries *are* heard.

References

Ad Gentes, Vatican II decree on the missionary activity of the Church, 1965

Ad gentes (vatican.va)

Bateman, F. (2008). Defining the heathen in Ireland and Africa: Two similar discourses a

century apart. *Social Sciences and Missions*, 21(1), 73-96.

Bevans, S .B. (2012) A theology of mission for the church of the twenty-first century. In S. B.

Bevans & K. Tahaafe-Williams. Contextual theology for the twenty-first century (pp. 99-

108). James Clarke Company Limited and The Lutterworth Press.

Bevans, S. B. (2013 a). Revisiting mission at Vatican II: Theology and practice for today's

missionary church. *Theological Studies* 74, (261-283).

Bevans, S. (2013 b). Mission at the Second Vatican Council: 1962-1965. In S. B. Bevans (Ed.), *A

century of Catholic mission - Roman Catholic Missiology 1910 to the present* (pp. 101-

111). Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series, Vol 15.

Bockarie, J., Farren, S., Horgan, G., Manning, J., McGlynn, L., Owens, J., Robinson, T., Rowan,

M. and Smith, E. (Eds.) (2022). *Leaves from the cotton tree. Celebrating thirty years of

the Sierra Leone Ireland Partnership*. Sierra Leone Ireland Partnership (SLIP).

Boland, R. (2019, January,12). The returned missionaries: 'I'm more African than I am Irish'.

Irish Times. The returned missionaries: 'I'm more African than I am Irish' – The Irish

Times

CAF world Giving Index 2019. World Giving Index 2021| CAF (cafonline.org)

Census of Population, 2023. Central Statistics Office, Ireland.

(Census of Population 2022 - Summary Results - CSO - Central Statistics Office).

Coleman, P. (2011). *Belief and ageing: spiritual pathways in later life*. Policy Press.

Cullen, S. (2006). *Passion and power*. Killynon House Books.

Donovan, V. ([1978] 2019) *Christianity rediscovered - an Epistle from the Masai*. SCM Press.

Dorr, D. (2013). *Option for the poor and for the earth*. Orbis books.

Dorr, D. (2014). Liberation Theology comes to Rome. *The Furrow*, 65(12), 616-621.

Edmondson, R. (2015) *Ageing, insight and wisdom: Meaning and practice across the life
course*. Policy Press.

Elder, G., Johnson, J. and Kirkpatrick, M. (2003). The life course and aging: Challenges, lessons
and new directions. In R. A. Settersten, Jr (Ed.), *Invitation to the Life Course: Toward
New Understandings of Later Life (*pp. 49-81). Baywood Publishing Co.

Evangelii Nuntiandi (1975) [Evangelii Nuntiandi (December 8, 1975) | Paul VI (vatican.va)](vatican.va)

Fahey, T. (2007). The Catholic Church and social policy. In B. Reynolds & S. Healy, (Eds.),
Values, Catholic social thought and public policy (pp. 143-163). CORI Justice.

Ganiel, G. (2019). Religious practice in a post-Catholic Ireland: Towards a concept of 'extra-
institutional religion.' *Social Compass*, *66*(4), 471-487.

https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768619868418

Ganiel, G. (2017). Ireland as a Post-Catholic religious market? The role of extra-institutionalised
religion. *Studies*, 106(421), 31-38.

Gutierrez, G. [1971] revised edition 2012. *A Theology of Liberation.* Orbis Books.

Healey, J. G. (2012). *Building the Church as family of God; Evaluation of small Christian communities in Eastern Africa,* AMECEA Gaba Publications-CUEA Press, Nairobi.

Hoddy, E. (2021). Transformative justice in practice: Reflections on the Pastoral Land Commission during Brazil's political transition. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 13(2), 339-356.

https://academic.oup.com/jhrp/article/13/2/339/6528419#The%20Origins%20of%20The%20Pastoral%20Land%20Commission

Hogan, E. M. (1990). *The Irish Missionary Movement - A historical survey, 1830-1980*. Gill & Macmillan.

Hope, A. & Timmel, S. (1984). *Training for Transformation: A Handbook for community workers. Books 1-3.* Mambo Press.

Humphreys, J. (2010). *God's entrepreneurs: how Irish missionaries tried to change the world*. New Island.

Inglis, T. (1987) *Moral Monopoly: The Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society*. Gill & Macmillan

Inglis, T. (1998). *Moral monopoly. The rise and fall of the Catholic Church in modern Ireland.* Dublin University Press.

Inglis, T. (2017). Church and culture in Catholic Ireland. *Studies,*106(421), 21-30.

Pope Francis. (2015). *Laudato Si': On care for our common home*. Encyclical letter

Pope Francis. (2020). Fratelli Tutti, 2020 Fratelli tutti (3 October 2020) | Francis (vatican.va)

Linehan, D. (2021) Common ground: How missionaries shape Ireland's global connections. *The Australian Outlook*, August 2021.

https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/common-ground-how-missionaries-shape-irelands-global-connections/

Lyons, H. (2001). *Old watering holes - Mayo to Serabu*. Dudu Nsomba Publications.

MacKinlay, E. (2001). *The spiritual dimension of ageing*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Medellin (1968) The second general conference of Latin American Bishops Conference at Medellin, Colombia. 1968: Latin American Bishops at Medellin - See Judge Act

McDonagh, S. (2016). *On Care for Our Common Home Laudato Si': The Encyclical of Pope Francis on the Environment with Commentary by Sean McDonagh*. Orbis.

McDonagh, S. (2006). *Climate change: The challenge to all of us*. Columba Press

McDonagh, S. (1986). *Our future, a mirage: Theological reflections on Philippine ecolog*y. Claretian Press.

MacMahon, H. (2015). *Guest from the West - Lessons for the West from a lifetime in the Eas*t. Original Writing Ltd.

McMahon, S. (2001). *The Island of Saints and Scholars*. Mercier Press.

Moody, H.R. (2005). From successful aging to conscious aging. In M. Wykle, P. Whitehouse, and D. Morris (Eds), *Successful aging through the life span: Intergenerational issues in health* (pp. 55-69). Springer.

Moran, M. (2016) *The legacy of Irish missionaries lives on*. Onstream Publications.

Mukwege, D. (2021). *The power of women - A doctor's journey of hope and healing.* Flatiron Books.

Oborji, F.A. (2013). Catholic mission in Arica 1910-2010. In S. B. Bevans (Ed.), *A century of Catholic mission - Roman Catholic Missiology 1910 to the present* (pp. 11-23). Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series, Vol 15.

O'Hanlon, G. (2017a). The Catholic Church in Ireland today. *Studies*, 106(421), 9-20.

O'Hanlon, G. (2017b). Ireland and the quiet revolution in the Catholic Church. *The Furrow*, 68(5), 259-267.

O'Reilly, T. (2021). *Acts of the Apostles - A reading for mission today*. Veritas.

[Puebla Conference (CELAM III)]. Crosthwaite, A. (2016). In H. Gooren, (Ed.) *Encyclopedia of Latin American Religions*, 1-3 Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-08956-0_215-1

Purcell. D. (2015). *Aonghus Finucane - In the heart of Concern*. New Island Books.

Rau, H. & Edmondson, R. (2013). Time and sustainability. In F. Fahey and H. Rau (Eds.), *Methods of sustainability research in the Social Sciences* (pp. 173-190). Sage.

Redemptoris Missio (1990) Redemptoris Missio (7 December 1990) | John Paul II (vatican.va)

Sands, J. (2018) Introducing Cardinal Carddijn's See-Judge-Act as an interdisciplinary method to move theory into practice. *Religions*, 9(129),1-10.

Scally. D. (2021). *The best Catholics in the world - The Irish, the Church and the end of a special   relationship*. Penguin Random House.

Smith, C. (1991). *The emergence of liberation theology: Radical religion and social movement theory*. University of Chicago Press.

Suess, P. (2013). Catholic mission in Latin America and the Caribbean 1910-2010. In S. B.

Bevans (Ed.), *A century of Catholic mission - Roman Catholic Missiology 1910 to the*

present (pp. 44-57). Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series, Vol 15.

Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity.* Harvard University

Press.

Twomey, V. (2017) The end of Catholicism? Fifteen years on. *Studies*, 106(421), 39-48.

Wills, C. (2021) *Architectures of containment*. London review of books.   43(10) 20 May 2021.

https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n10/clair-wills/architectures-of-containment

---

[i] The Second Vatican Council, (1962-1965), an exercise in review, reform and renewal of the Catholic Church on a worldwide basis that took place from 1962 until 1965 centred on meetings of Bishops in Rome, and heralded structural, theological and pastoral change in the Catholic church and in the work of mission.
Vatican II has been described as the most significant theological and religious event of the twentieth century after which the Catholic Church and many other Christian churches and communities would never be the same again (Bevans, 2013 b, p.101).
While the Council's 4 main 'Constitutions' on the Church, the Church in the modern world, the liturgy, and divine revelation, Bevans suggests that mission is what gave the Council its basic direction (op.cit., p. 102). Not only did the Council offer a different content on many issues, it also offered a new form or style (op. cit., p. 102).

[ii] Liberation theology was a radical movement that originated in Latin America in the 1960s that was spearheaded mainly by Catholics and sought to address gross racial and economic inequalities through a biblical understanding of transformative Christianity. According to Suess (2013), five key principles of Vatican II were translated in the Latin America and Caribbean context: 1) the Church possesses a missionary nature because of the common baptism of all Christians; 2) the Church is not merely the sum of individuals, but is the 'people of God'; 3) the Church has the responsibility of 'reading the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the gospel'; 4) the Church took a decisive step from the abstract option for mankind to the concrete option for the poor; and 5) key principles of Vatican II including freedom, autonomy, dialogue and aggiornamento (updating) were translated as the struggle for freedom and autonomy for previously colonised and now majority people in Latin America and the Caribbean. Participation was seen as dialogue in action while inculturation became more than mere adaptation (pp. 48-50).

[iii] Suess outlines how base ecclesial communities (BECs) which he terms ecclesial base communities (CEB) originated in Brazil in the 1960s and spread rapidly. He explains how the principles of 'liberation', 'option for the poor' and recognition of 'otherness' developed at Medellin (1968) and Puebla (1979) were applied through pastoral practices that brought in from the margins small farmers and indigenous people (Suess, 2013, pp. 51-52). BECs are also known as basic or small Christian communities (BCCs).

iv The term 'religious order' as used in the book is a generic term that encompasses distinct types of Catholic religious groupings: 1) Traditional religious orders founded many centuries ago, who take solemn vows e.g. Dominicans, Franciscans and Carmelites; 2) Religious congregations who take simple vows, e.g. Dominican Sisters, Marist Brothers and Daughters of Charity of St Vincent de Paul; and 3) Missionary Societies, e.g. the Columbans and St Patrick's Missionary Society.

Typically, these groups take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, however, members of missionary societies do not take vows of poverty and are allowed to own private property; in this respect they resemble diocesan priests. In practice, however, when working in the Global South, members of missionary societies use all their resources for their missionary work and for the Society itself passing on donations they receive.

Lay missionary groups, e.g. VMM and VCC have a looser structure in terms of vows and finances and the term ''religious order' is not applicable to them.

'Religious orders' have a long history in the Catholic Church. They have their own charism, their own constitution, are not under the direction of the bishops and are independent of one another. Hogan suggested there are around 80 Catholic missionary orders in Ireland (Hogan, 1990, p.171).

v Chapters refer to gatherings of representatives of religious orders and each order holds a General Chapter every 4 to 6 years. In transnational religious orders members travel to the meeting from the countries where the order is established. The purpose of these meetings is to pray, discuss, and make decisions about the future direction of their order with the aim of helping members live their vocation more authentically. Another important task is to elect a new leadership team. Pope Paul VI issued guidelines for religious life in 1964 https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1964/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19640523_capitolari.html

vi While Irish missionaries from Protestant denominations were also active abroad, their numbers were small reflecting the low percentage of Protestants in Ireland. For example, in 1982, there were 142 missionaries from Protestant denominations working in ten countries (Hogan, 1990, p.8).

vii An encyclical is an official document sent by the Pope to the bishops of the world that carries teaching weight.

viii The first missionary magazine, 'African Missionary', went into print in 1914 (Hogan, 1990, p. 146).

ix Ireland's overseas aid programme was established in 1974 (Multilateral Aid programme). Funding from the official programme, now called Irish Aid (https://www.irishaid.ie/) has been directed to NGOs working on the ground in developing countries and in partnership with governments, thereby significantly augmenting resources available and leading to greater effectiveness in programmes. Missionary organisations can apply for grants from Irish Aid through a coordinating body, Misean Cara, and all projects are evaluated on the same basis as secular development organisations.

The UN calls for economically advanced countries to spend at least 0.7% of gross national income on overseas aid. However, this remains an aspiration and Social Justice Ireland criticised Ireland's aid budget which currently stands at around 0.45 of GNI. https://www.socialjustice.ie/content/policy-issues/budget-2020-does-little-improve-oda-situation

It is noteworthy that according to Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) World Giving Index, 2021, Ireland which traditionally was in the top ten most generous countries in the world has slipped down the rankings in recent years. World Giving Index 2021| CAF (cafonline.org)

xThe Holy Ghost Order (now called the Spiritans) organised relief planes to be flown in to the besieged Biafrans undercover and in defiance of a Nigerian government blockade. After Biafra was defeated by Nigeria, 200 Irish Holy Ghost Fathers were expelled from Nigeria. While the Irish public believed the missionaries were unfairly treated and lauded their humanitarian work, according to the Irish Ambassador to Nigeria at the time ''Nigerian public opinion and large sections of the administration of Nigerian Catholicism, and even in some cases Irish missionaries, take a different point of view. They feel that the Holy Ghost fathers were impertinent busybodies from abroad who involved themselves in the internal affairs of Nigeria and, by their propaganda and aid and comfort to the Biafrans, unduly prolonged the war and caused great suffering to the Nigerian people'' (cited in Humphreys, 2010, p. 88).

[xi] For example, in 2007, Sister Cyril Mooney, Loreto Sister, was a recipient of the Padma Shri Award, the Government of India's fourth-highest civilian honour for her work as an educational innovator in pioneering inclusive education for the poorest classes in India (Humphreys, 2010, pp.158-159).

[xii] The synodal process in the Catholic Church under the papacy of Pope Francis has been underway since October 2021. It includes two Vatican Assemblies in October 2023 and October 2024.
Discussions were held at parish level in Ireland (and other countries) during early 2022 and a synthesis document was forwarded to the Irish Bishops. At an Assembly in June 2022 in Athlone, 15 emerging themes that resonated across all deliberations were compiled and a National Synthesis document was sent to the Vatican. National Synthesis - Irish Synodal Pathway
The synod office in Rome received 112 national syntheses from around the world and, in September 2022, members of the synod leadership team along with 20 other experts from 17 countries gathered in Frascati, Italy, to summarise all these documents. They produced an international document called 'Enlarge the Space of Your Tent', which was published in October 2022.
In addition, Continental meetings have been held in preparation for the meeting of bishops in Rome in 2023. The European Continental Assembly was held in February, 2023 in Prague with 45 different European countries represented.
https://catholicnews.ie/irish-synodal-pathway-continues-its-journey/