

Observations From Near and Afar.

Although these 'Observations' refer directly to experiences in Ireland and three African countries, but they are also relevant to the church in Australia. ACCCR

We are responding to a request to share our thoughts on our contrasting experiences of the church in Africa and Ireland – and by extension in the West. We came here as missionary priests in the 70s and 80s and have now worked in three countries in West and Central Africa.

In Ireland, formation for Church ministry and for mission from the 60's to the 80's was very standard fare, with a lot of emphasis on rules, regulations and maintaining vision and methods that had been the norm from time immemorial. True, there had been the Second Vatican Council in the early 60's, but it was felt that only lip service was being paid to what should have been a root and branch renewal of the Church. It was often left to individual teachers of theology and pastoral methodology – and sometimes even to students themselves – to really mine the wealth in the Council documents.

Again, it was often those same individuals who caught the new vision and insights of Liberation Theology, emerging from the 60's onwards in the South American church and who made an attempt to incorporate it into formation. There was a feeling that there was more openness to this within independent missionary seminaries than in the mainline ones at the time. This meant that we were more open to a church that was grounded in people, with a real social conscience, a strong commitment to justice and more collaborative in terms of leadership and pastoral practice. There was a sense that we received a grounding for mission that was not shared by the Church in Ireland.

And, what did we find in Africa? We certainly met a different church from the one we had left behind! We met participation with a capital "P" – Catechists; Prayer Leaders; Village Leaders; Choir Leaders; Women's Group Leaders; Parish Councils and lots more. Collaboration between local communities and clergy and religious had led to a commitment to education, health projects and development which meant the pastoral side of our work was very connected to and involved ordinary people.

Despite continuing to be a hierarchical church – and patriarchy being very deep-set in most African cultures – there was tremendous freedom. This was evidenced in a bodily way as we experienced African energy, dance movement and freedom of expression especially in liturgical celebrations. We felt overwhelmed by the sheer earthiness of it all. The use of local languages and cultural sensitivity in all aspects of our work were major contributing factors to making the Good News more grounded and authentic. It encouraged us to learn local languages and understand cultures as best we could, so as to be part of what were real celebrations of people's lives, their struggles and their hopes.

As we returned on leave to Ireland from time to time with these experiences fresh in our minds, there was a sense, even after a couple of years, that the model of church in operation there could not possibly hold. We couldn't help noticing the lack of respectful collaboration between clergy and lay Catholics and that people in their Church lives had become domesticated. The gap, already there at the time of our leaving, had opened even wider.

In Ireland, away from the immediate demands of our usual work, we felt the need to have conversations about our world, to share ideas, visions and strategies. We had the benefit of ongoing formation where we experienced intercultural programs and came in contact with movements such as Training for Transformation (TfT).

We found ourselves gravitating, from the 80's onward, towards groups such as Partners in Mission (later called "Partners"), and Partners in Faith, both of which had their origins in the thinking of Paulo Freire and the TfT approach. They were largely spearheaded by priests who were disillusioned with the Irish model of Church and had moved on to a broader and more inclusive ministry and by like-minded religious Sisters who had even greater reason to feel marginalized, given the way they were treated by the Church.

When these leadership figures were joined by open-minded and interested folk – and sometimes by official church people who were also searching for something different – for workshops, prayer experiences and other learning events, the results were extremely creative and life-giving. We were fortunate to be around for some of these events and up to now we watch out for them when return on leave.

In them, we find a great receptivity to ideas from many different spiritual sources and a search for a more open expression of the Christian faith and a more inclusive spirituality. Over the years we could never understand why this group of committed and thinking people were not permitted to continue in ministry in the official church. It is especially in this environment that we learned to carry our priesthood lightly, not relying on status and institution, but being more about solidarity and building from the ground up.

In the 90's the church in Ireland was among the first in the world to hit the headlines regarding the clerical child abuse scandal. Almost overnight, the church came to a halt, with membership numbers collapsing, very few people offering themselves for ministry and little or no candidates going on mission. This is the constantly declining church we continue to meet when we return from Africa.

It is, however, the church that has had Pope Francis as its leader for the past ten years – and he has been no ordinary leader. Right from the moment he was elected, by his way of relating, his light grip on authority, his ability to analyze and articulate, his willingness to be open, to accept criticism, to take on responsibility and make hard decisions, he has modelled a style of leadership for our time and for the future. He has

used the teaching aspect of his position in the best way possible to model and promote a different way of being a leader and also to highlight the Climate Change crisis – with its links to justice and the need for solidarity with all of Creation - as the defining issue of our time.

One could feel saddened by the present state of the Church in Ireland and in the West generally, but for those seeking spiritual meaning there are many signs of hope – not for the Church as such, but for a new reality of people freed from the shackles of hierarchy and patriarchy and energized by a spirituality that has its roots in their everyday lives and in an emerging consciousness linked intrinsically to the Universe Story, which has now begun to be shared and believed.

Tommy Hayden and Leo Traynor are members of St. Patrick's Missionary Society