

Mission Delegates Conference
Saturday, 19th October 2019
St Mary's University College, Belfast

On Saturday 19th October 2019 Fr Conor McGrath, Missions Delegate for the Diocese of Down and Connor welcomed a group of people passionate about the contribution of Irish Missionaries to St Mary's University College for a one day conference. The conference organised for the Extraordinary Month of Mission gave those gathered a rich array of inputs from three keynote speakers.

Joe Humphries began the day reflecting on his research with Missionaries who had returned home to Ireland. He brought to life the stories of pioneering men and women who often worked heroically through great adversity, harrowing poverty and often extreme violence.

Fr Paul Kangai opened by noting that when growing up in Nigeria he thought that all Priests were Irish! He spoke of the great impact that Irish Augustinians had in his home region in the North East of Nigeria when they arrived in 1939 and the current reality now being faced with the persecution of Christians taking place in Nigeria. Fr Paul stated;

"What cannot be destroyed in times of extreme persecution is the gift of faith. Our Church teaches us that faith is humanity's response to God, who reveals himself and gives himself to humanity, at the same time bringing humankind a super-abundant light as it searches for the ultimate meaning of his life. Henri de Lubac once described faith as "the source of universal light". He explains that: "The depth of the man [woman] will never be understood if it is not enlightened by a ray from the unfathomable brightness of the Trinitarian life".¹⁹ The enormous pains and sufferings that Christians go through in this part of the world can only be explained by the fact that the gift of faith which they received at baptism is well and truly rooted in their hearts.

The reason for mission is because Jesus mandated us: "Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19), "Come and see" (Jn 1:46), "Follow me" (Mt 9:9), and "Remain in me" (Jn 15:4). These injunctions are what sustain people in times of extreme challenge to the faith. What we have experienced since coming under sustained attacks is that mission is not simply about bringing the Good news but being the Good news. Our Christians who have lost virtually everything materially continue to inspire us with their quality of faith. They attend mass and participate joyfully, receive communion, support one another with their little rations, mourn and bury the dead together.

Persecution brings out the dimension of mission as service. When terrorists come into town, they do not make any distinction between who is a priest or not. They are not interested in the internal debates and disenchantments within the Church. We all wear the same badge of Christianity. Islamists murder every Christian they encounter. Many priests and nuns have found themselves in situations where they had to flee with their people for some time. This vividly brings home the point that in the end what is important is service to God's people and being with them in every circumstance. After all, Mission is bringing the Gospel to life and life to the Gospel. There is no better way than being with God's people in their time of need. "

Laudato Si was highlighted to the conference delegates through a passionate presentation given by Dr Lorna Gold. She gave a voice for those people who are impacted most by the consequences of climate change and highlighted how often Trocaire now finds itself as a first responder in developing countries due to the increasing prevalence of natural disasters. Speaking of her recent work with climate change activists Lorna spoke of the great hope she sees in people both young and old alike who have a great passion for the earth and all of humanity.

As well as the Keynote presentations there were exhibits from a variety of missionary organisations, a series of workshops and panel discussions allowing time for questioning and dialogue. Concluding the day Bishop Noel Treanor reflected that the Extraordinary Month of Mission has given us the opportunity to both reflect on the contributions of the Church to date and also to reflect on how we might intensify our efforts at mission and evangelisation especially when we reflect on the words of Pope Francis that we are all a Mission. Throughout the day delegates heard how missionaries have proven to be joyful, embracing of culture, courageous and acting with the broadest of horizons in mind. Bishop Treanor encouraged delegates to continue conversations in their parishes and communities; to consider the Persecuted Church and the rise of persecution that takes place across all religions, to reflect on climate change thinking of our actions and also how we must seek to influence the economic and financial systems calling them to act with compassion and responsibility for all of humanity. An important request was to reflect on the great work of inculturation embraced by Missionaries across Africa and Asia and to consider how we as an Irish Church must make the time to read the signs of the times for the Mission at home and respond with creativity, imagination, courage and hope.