

## **Remarks by President McAleese at the Irish Jesuit Province Assembly, Saturday 12th April 2008, IMI Conference Centre, Sandyford, Dublin**

Good morning everyone, and thank you for your warm welcome. Thank you too to Fr Dardis, not only for his generous introduction but also for his invitation, as Provincial of the Order, to participate in your Province Assembly this morning.

2008 is a key moment in the histories both of our island and of the Society of Jesus. Fr Dardis has recently returned from the thirty-fifth General Congregation which was, among other things, tasked with electing a new Superior General, the first such election in twenty-five years. I am delighted to join you this morning in sending good wishes to Fr Adolfo Nicolás on his election and in his new role.

The Irish historical moment to which I refer is, of course, last Thursday's celebration of the tenth anniversary of the signature of the Good Friday Agreement, the constitutional cornerstone of the peace that has been and still is being so painstakingly and slowly constructed in Northern Ireland. The consolidation of peace in Northern Ireland and the sweeping changes brought to all areas of Irish life by our recent prosperity have done much to shift our long-familiar compass points. For the most part, these changes are positive, but they have profound implications for a host of organisations operating all over the State, the Church among them. I know that as you gather today to discuss the findings of the General Congregation, you will, in the best traditions of your Order, be conscious of their application to the times ahead and your role in those times.

### **Momentous time**

Ireland North and South has had to become, if not entirely comfortable then at least adaptable to significant change in recent times. Change itself is, of course, nothing new to the human condition. It is, if anything, ironically a constant, sometimes slow and evolutionary, sometimes cataclysmic or revolutionary. Ireland has been through many phases of change but none can match these times for the quality of change and the sweeping extent to which lives and standards of living have been improved and history's many grim legacies reversed. To this generation alone has been given a unique confluence of peace, prosperity and growing partnership with its yet to be exploited possibilities for creating a fully reconciled island working hand in hand to reveal its best potential.

This is rightly described as an extraordinary development - we are the first generation of Irishmen and women who have such a realistic prospect of altering the course of history on a grand scale. When Fr Nicolas' predecessor, Fr Kolvenbach was elected we were still held in thrall to history's vanities with high unemployment, mass emigration, a dwindling population and the mess of skewed relationships between Ireland and Great Britain, between Ireland North and South, between Catholic and Protestant, and the two competing Nationalisms, one Irish, one British, the latter more conventionally called Unionism. That landscape is now both transformed and still transforming and for Christians who were once mired in mutual mistrust at best, hatred at worse, the new landscape is infused with much greater evidence of tolerance and even love. The release of positive energies particularly in the past year must bring great vindication to those who worked so long and hard for reconciliation, among them many of your confreres.

The Churches are deeply implicated in the journey thus far and in the journey ahead, for underpinning the work of peace is the gospel challenge to love one another, to forgive one another, to be charitable especially to those from whom we are most estranged. Sometimes the Churches are accused of being part of the problem, of not doing enough to counter the toxic tide of sectarianism and bitter division but in truth, in often the most inhospitable of circumstances there have been church champions of dialogue, advocates for forgiveness, pastors and carers who have comforted and supported the broken-hearted, the wounded and the bereaved. In millions of quiet ways they have been critical sustainers of hope and believers in our individual and collective capacity to shake off the burden of history and create a shared future.

Now, though, we are in uncharted territory both North and South and though each has somewhat different characteristics both face into significant attitudinal, demographic, political and economic changes. For individuals and organisations there are considerable and indeed exciting challenges in adapting to this newly emerging Ireland and in shaping it coherently and effectively for the betterment of all.

Your work in areas like education, social justice, communications and the pastoral apostolate, places you right in the heart of everyday life. Bodies like the Jesuit Refugee Centre, the Centre for Faith and Justice, the Democracy Project, the Persons for Others Projects, the Arrupe Society and sacredspace.ie are contributing the work of both hands and heads to highlighting and helping us deal with some of the most current and difficult problems faced by Irish society and indeed the international community too in many instances.

## **New Ireland**

Old narratives are disappearing. Homogeneous insularity has given way to a globally focussed heterogeneity. Poverty has given way to wealth, generations old outward migration has given way to inward migration, the culture of ceann faoi has been overwhelmed by a confident "can do". We live our economy-driven lives in the eye of the unpredictable storm that is global commerce. We are members of the European Union, itself a phenomenon in the world of transnational politics, a place of miraculous reconciliations and huge shared progress and potential. We are a people who have always cared about the world's poor and whose care has been historically expressed largely through the endeavours of our missionaries. Now we are among the world's biggest donors of development aid and major contributors to a new culture of focussed and strategic cooperation with the developing countries of the world, designed with an amalgam of the best of scholarship and human values, to generate real momentum and traction in the lives of the poor. We have an agenda to complete the work of our own Proclamation by cherishing all the children of our nation equally and to complete the work of our human calling, to cherish the children of the world equally.

These are phenomenal challenges for all of us, the church included. We are all of us standing at the frontiers of an as yet uncharted future. Thankfully we are not without roadmaps or guidance or vision but we are also accompanied by what your new Superior General has described as an "uneasiness in... society and in the church that has not yet disappeared."

The sources and subjects of the uneasiness Fr Nicholas refers to are not of course identical for the Church and society though they probably overlap to a fair degree. The Church's preoccupation - and

presumably one shared by the Jesuit order like so many similar orders in the western World - is summed up in a question posed by Fr Nicholas and to which I have no intention of advancing even a hint of an answer, even if I had one, which I don't.

"How come" he asks "we elicit so much admiration and so little following?" Even as that question is being analysed and answers offered and tested, the question of social unease still has to be addressed and the social problems we face still have to be addressed. There are plenty of them - the cultural aneurism that is abuse of alcohol and drugs, their daily legacy of family and community violence which greatly interrupt our quiet enjoyment of life, the children whose lives are being destroyed by an absence of love in their homes, the adults whose lives have been warped by abuse and neglect, the men, women and children facing a daily diet of worry about money, or chronic or terminal illness, or relationships, or loneliness, or fear, or mental-ill-health, or bereavement, or sectarianism or racism, or any one of legion of things that can make life a difficult and lonely journey, so dispiriting and grindingly hard for the human person, all the more so in an era of widespread optimism.

There is a lovely Irish saying that "Two shortens the journey". We are a people who believe in community, who work hard at community, who are known to care. We know that life's ups and downs are easier to face when we are supported and encouraged. For many, faith is an important element of their lives' coping frameworks. Whatever the internal debates and worries experienced by the Church there is still a sizeable community of believers needing nurturing, guidance and company on this journey to and through Ireland's future whatever it brings. Ireland owes a huge debt to the many within the Churches who invested so unselfishly in the education and wellbeing of successive generations and who helped chart the path to today's peace, today's prosperity. These things are new; they have stirred a huge fresh momentum that is ringing the changes and bringing us all to new personal and communal frontiers.

### **Find the spaces**

In a way we have reached a type of zero-hour again, a moment when our next steps can radically alter the trajectory of our history. It is a time for people who are not afraid of frontiers, for people who have courage to face even the most unmapped of roads, for people who have a clear set of values for the journey and an unshakeable belief in the vision that is our destination. That pretty much sums up the Jesuits. I wish you well as you look beyond this day, as you chart your path, choose your companions and do the work of hands, heart, mind and soul that will bring many blessings to this new Ireland of many miracles and many new frontiers of hope.