NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Irish religious do whatever it takes

Arthur Jones | Nov. 11, 2011

Charity Sr. Stanislaus Kennedy (Photos by Margie Jones)

DUBLIN, IRELAND -- Catholic Ireland has its woes (see story [1]), yet the life of the church goes on -- particularly where the religious are concerned.

Pragmatic nuns, brothers and priests simply do whatever it takes.

Charity Sr. Stanislaus Kennedy began her religious life begging in the streets. Supplicants with bowls on street corners, Kennedy and her sisters went door-to-door.

She hated it. As a young novice, begging companion to an elderly nun, she had no choice. It was an era when some women?s congregations raised money for the poor that way.

There were, however, lessons to be learned from her elderly companion, said Kennedy, now known throughout Dublin as ?Sr. Stan.?

?When the money was enough to purchase children?s clothes for some poor families, we went only to Dublin?s finest stores.? The elderly nun ?bought only the best quality clothes, beautiful clothes -- I?d nothing like them as a child.

?Then she brought the families in, one by one. I saw the respect she had for the poor. She?d say, ?We must give to the poor what the rich can buy with money.? It marked me for life,? Kennedy said.

Later, for 19 years, Kennedy worked with Kilkenny Bishop Peter Birch. ?He wanted the church as a big, caring community with social services for those on the margins: the itinerants, the poor, the disadvantaged, the mentally ill, families struggling with their children,? Kennedy said. ?Kilkenny Social Services became the model for social services in Ireland.?

Birch died in 1983. The new bishop, a canon lawyer, told Kennedy, ?You won?t be here next year.? The media headlined, ?Bishop sacks Sr. Stan.?

She wasn?t done. Back in Dublin, as a senior research fellow at University College Dublin, she knew what

others denied: Homeless women existed. With eight research assistants, Kennedy went to work. They identified 500 homeless women. The Sisters of Charity gave Kennedy $5,000 for rent. She and eight previously homeless women shared a house so she could better understand their world. She founded Focus Point (now Focus Ireland), a safe-haven drop-in center for homeless women, and ?shamed the state? into providing other services.

Kennedy looked again at the marginalized of Dublin and identified other people falling through the safety net: migrants. Always the academic, she began with research and once again built up fledgling services -- this time with an added gift: ?The Sanctuary.?

Dublin is a busy, noisy, crowded city, and tucked away on Stanhope Street, The Sanctuary is an oasis. It provides a place for migrants and others to sit, to reflect in quiet meditation, but, typically, that wasn?t sufficient for Kennedy.

Now schoolchildren attend mindfulness and meditation sessions -- Kennedy wants to impact education. For adults there are workshops and programs. Money isn?t a barrier: The poor are always welcomed.

There are more than 135 religious congregations in Ireland, with some 10,000 members. Sr. Peggy Collins, south central provincial leader for the Sisters of Mercy, provides this snapshot of her province?s activities: A quarter of the province?s 640 mostly retired sisters (it?s mandatory at 65 in Ireland) are in full-time unpaid work. The 130 younger sisters still in the work force are primarily teaching and nursing.

Overall, the range of volunteer activities for Ireland?s religious is wide indeed. The Good Shepherd Sisters and Our Lady of Charity Sisters in 1989 established Ruhama, a support group for women caught up in prostitution and trafficking. The Franciscan and Mercy orders collaborated to open in 1999 Limerick?s Bedford Row Family Project, a center for ex-prisoners and their families. They volunteer at Dublin?s Pavee Point Travellers? Resource Centre, set up to assist the country?s 30,000 or so ?travelers? (once known as ?tinkers? or ?gypsies?), and at Limerick?s Doras Luimni, an open-door, drop-in resource center for migrants.

The Mercy Law Resource Centre in Dublin fills a gap for the homeless -- legal representation for those seeking housing, or for folks in danger of being evicted and made homeless.

Rose Wall, a young laywoman, is the attorney who last year took over from Mercy Sr. Michele O?Kelly, a solicitor and barrister who cofounded the center in 2009 with Mercy Sr. Caitriona O?Hara. While Wall pursues cases all the way to the Irish High Court if necessary, O?Hara handles the administration and recruits ?befrienders? (volunteer companion-advocates).

Wall explained the bulk of the work is writing letters to state and local agencies on the homeless? behalf, or negotiating face-to-face. For court cases, she can call on the services of barristers.

O?Hara said the legal service?s initial problem always is gaining the homeless people?s trust -- made easier by visiting their hostels. But their most popular weekly legal clinic is held in a Dublin coffee shop.

Spiritan Fr. Tony Byrne was being hounded and sneered at by a registrar he?d

appointed where he worked. At first, Byrne said, he didn?t realize he was being bullied. Presentation Sr. Kathleen Maguire took in her stride the numerous slights inflicted on her by a new pastor.

Today they run the anti-bullying Awareness Education Services.

It grew out of their suicide prevention work, but their partnership began decades earlier in Pakistan, where the Presentations worked for more than two decades. There, Byrne and Maguire teamed up on development issues.

Byrne?s development and refugee work took him Biafra in Africa to the Western Caribbean and to Asia. In time, their congregations called them back to Ireland permanently.

In 1998, they joined forces to establish a suicide prevention program. Byrne?s research revealed Ireland had Europe?s highest suicide rate. He took the issue to Ireland?s then Taoiseach (prime minister) Bertie Ahern and left with a promise of government seed money for a modest center in a disused chapel.

?We had people lined along the streets waiting to be seen, but it was along a canal, no place for potential suicides. We had to move,? Byrne said.

He and Maguire researched the issue and developed a program that they were able to teach to others, to religious congregations and those engaged in community awareness programs.

They?d learned one driver of suicide was bullying. They talked it over and realized how subtly bullied they had been. They came up with a program outline and opened a drop-in center from which they could refer people to existing services.

?We identified three ways of confronting bullying,? Byrne said. ?The informal way is to note down what happens, when it happens, the witnesses, the body language, the words used, the principal effects on you, the victim. The formal way is through the courts -- if it is workplace the management is legally bound to take up the investigation. The third way is mediation.?

Byrne said bullies are in denial. ?They are cowards, and usually use a collaborator -- someone to stand and sneer as the bullying takes place.?

Once more this dynamic duo has reached a point where they are teaching others to take on the work.

Ireland?s religious today: Learn, then teach, and leave the rest to the future and to God.

[Arthur Jones, *NCR* book review editor, traveled to Ireland in September. His first report appeared in the Oct. 14 issue. His e-mail address is ajones@ncronline.org.]

Source URL (retrieved on *08/25/2016 - 15:47*): https://www.ncronline.org/news/global/irish-religious-do-whatever-it-takes

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