

INTERVIEW with Columban Sister Mary Rosarii McTigue
“The Story of My Mission in Hallim, Jeju Island, South Korea”



WebEditor: Rosarii, it is good to get this opportunity to talk through your Hallim Mission Story. A sub-title could be The Double Foxford – Hallim Connection but that will unfold eventually! It is really a tale of two parts so let's begin in the Foxford of your early years.

Rosarii: Yes, indeed, for Foxford, Co. Mayo is the place of my birth and where I began my education in a school run by the Irish Sisters of Charity. Hallim, South Korea, was where I spent thirty-six years of my Columban missionary life! As a teenager, I took part in all school and parish activities then, following my graduation I took employment near home.

WebEditor: And then you entered religious life, but not in Foxford.

Rosarii: My great desire was to become a missionary Sister because I was impressed by what I had heard of the work of the Missionary Sisters of St. Columban in China and their devoted service to the sick and suffering people there. So, in 1947 I applied and was accepted for admission to their Congregation located then in Cahiracon, Ennis, Co. Clare. I entered the novitiate that year and made First Profession of Vows in 1950. After that I was assigned to Dublin for four years further study. By 1954 I was wondering where I would be assigned in mission...

WebEditor: With first stop China...

Rosarii: No, I was in for a big surprise! You see, in June 1954 our Superior General, Mother M. Vianney Shackleton, received a letter from Columban Fr. Harold Henry in Mokpo, South Korea, in which he requested her to send a community of Sisters to his parish. The Korean War was just over and there were hundreds of people, young and old who were poor, hungry and in

need of medical care. Fr. Henry was moved to compassion by the plight of his people and believed that if he could find a community of Sisters to come to Mokpo, their presence and service to the poor and suffering would bring new hope to all. He planned that, if Mother Mary Vianney agreed to send Sisters, he would help them to set up a hospital to care for the needy of his parish and even further afield.

WebEditor: And Mother Vianney acceded to the request!

Rosarii: Of course! She would assign four Sisters to cross another boundary of culture and language and, in the name of the Gospel, serve the neediest of the people amongst whom they would live. It would be a difficult mission but she believed that those she would assign would respond well to whatever challenges awaited them in the Land of the Morning Calm. I was one of the four chosen for this new mission.

WebEditor: And how long did you have to prepare for departure?

Rosarii: Within seven months I and my companions, Sisters M. Martha Keenan, Enda Staunton and Dorothy Pirkl, arrived in Mokpo having travelled by boat from Ireland via US. It was January 20, 1955 and our initiation began right away. Within a short period we had gained a grasp of major aspects of Korean culture – faith, language, housing, dress and everyday customs. Above all, we had witnessed the plight of the poorest in the area and beyond and understood clearly why Father Henry had called for Sisters to care for his people.

WebEditor: When you recall that early initiation, Rosarii, what are the most vivid memories that stay with you?

Rosarii: Post-war Mokpo was a very needy place indeed. Illness stalked amongst the poorest and there was little material or medical aid available to alleviate their suffering. Thankfully we had travelled to Korea via the United States where, due to the generosity of the American people, we received basic medical supplies. These, together with what we had brought from Ireland, enabled us to begin service to the sick soon after arrival.

WebEditor: You mentioned earlier that whoever Mother Vianney would assign to this new mission would respond well to whatever challenges awaited them. How exactly did this fledgling group cope?

Rosarii: This new mission was a very challenging one, but we were young, zealous and well able to meet each day's demands as they arose. Within a few years we were running a small hospital, one equipped with facilities for radiography, surgery and in-patient care. I had fallen in love with Korea and its people in Mokpo and was hoping to spend my life amongst them. Then came a letter from Mother Mary Gemma, the Superior General of the Congregation, which altered that dream!

I was to return to Ireland to prepare for a new mission, one still in Korea, but entirely different from the mission in Mokpo. And, upon arrival in Ireland, I soon learned where and what my new mission was to be.

WebEditor: You had travelled back home not knowing what new challenge you were being called to face? That journey must have been quite agonizing for you.

Rosarii: Indeed. I left Korea in 1961, and soon after my return to Ireland, Mother Mary Gemma explained the reason for my recall. She had been requested to send a community of Sisters to undertake a whole new venture on the island of Cheju, Korea.

Columban Father, P.J. McGlinchey, parish priest of Hallim on the island was as anxious about the plight of the poor in his parish, especially of women, as was Fr. Henry in Mokpo. Fr. McGlinchey was involved in Socio-Economic-Betterment projects in his parish, the aim of the projects being to combat poverty and raise the people's standard of living. He believed that if there were Sisters who would open and direct a woollen factory in the parish, it would offer employment with a just wage to its workers who would be mainly women, and thus lead to a reasonable standard of living for their families.

WebEditor: So a total reorientation was called for from you and the other Sisters who would be involved!

Rosarii: This was a daring vision and a tall order for anyone who would respond to Fr. McGlinchey's need. Those of us undertaking the project would have responsibility for directing the project from the time the wool arrived at the mill, through the various steps of weaving and on to the sale of textiles and garments in shops both nearby and far afield. Father McGlinchey would provide the wool and attend to finances until such time as the venture would become self-supporting.

WebEditor: A whole new road had to be travelled.

Rosarii: Yes, it did. The undertaking of such a mission would require specialised training, and the Congregation had no means of providing this; however, resolute Fr. McGlinchey, once he knew that Mother Gemma was willing to send a community to Hallim, was not to be deflected from his purpose. Within days of my return home, he came to Magheramore. By that time Mother Mary Gemma had appointed three Sisters: Brid Kenny, Elizabeth Taaffe and me to Hallim. We were ready to make preparations for our mission and anxious to begin.

WebEditor: Where did you get the particular training and preparation needed?

Rosarii: Fr. McGlinchey was from Donegal, a county in Ireland widely renowned for its hand woven textiles and hand-knit garments. He had friends in his home town ready to train and help us towards our future mission. Thus we found ourselves staying with the Loreto Sisters in Letterkenny and going daily to different hand weaving plants where we watched the different processes of handling wool, getting it ready for weaving and then being in awe as various colours and patterns emerged from the looms. Would we ever reach such a standard of perfection?

From Donegal we went to Dublin, where, at the weaving industry run by the Irish Christian Brothers in Artane we took part in various aspects of the weaving process – sorting the wool, carding and spinning it, preparing it for shuttles, etc.

Having finished in Dublin, we went to the Avoca Handweavers plant in Avoca Village, Co. Wicklow where, as in Donegal and Dublin, we were welcomed warmly and gained further knowledge regarding the processing of wool towards the finished products. Lastly, we went to Foxford in my home county Mayo where the Sisters of Charity administered a large woollen mills industry.

WebEditor: Fascinating! Your preparation for the new venture in Hallim brought you all over Ireland and finally back to your hometown. And to renewed contact with the Irish Sisters of Charity! That must have been a precious time for you, Rosarii.

Rosarii: Yes! It was wonderful that Foxford should provide the culmination of our training. The Sisters of Charity, some of whose companions had prepared our first Sisters for mission in China, took us to their hearts. Day after day they guided us along the many steps of hand weaving until they were sure that, between us, we had knowledge of design, colour, administration and sales promotion sufficient for establishing our woollen mill in faraway Hallim, Jeju Island.

WebEditor: We have travelled a great deal so far, Rosarii, so for now we will leave our viewers to enjoy and digest the detail of the story so far.

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