

On this is day of gratitude and gladness, welcome. All of you come here today are links in that chain of goodness going back 90 years to that very first Fete held in an unknown venue in Dublin in 1927. From that tiny mustard seed a great tree has grown. The congregation was barely standing, like a toddler taking those first scary steps. “Are they mad?” people could say of those first women living in a farmhouse in Co Clare. Yes, in a way they were mad – responding to a call, fired by a vision that would lead them to the ends of the earth to share the word, to tell of the God who made the heavens and earth with a people who had not heard. They were surely possessed of a Divine recklessness, ready to give all and not count the cost. Their two great mentors, Fr John Blowick and Mother M Patrick, who were themselves fired by the vision of Christ’s mission, inspired and nurtured the little group, trusting in the providence of God who would, as the psalm says, guide them along the right path.

Those early days, launching out into unknown waters, were quite a struggle. So when Sr Joseph Conception, one of the Sisters of Charity sent to help the fledgling group, saw that the cupboard was pretty bare, so to speak, she, after talking to the sisters, contacted her friend in Dublin. What could they do to help this embryonic missionary group, some of whom were already in China? Miss Nancy Hogg, had no hesitation. This remarkable woman, an employee in Dame St Post Office, put in motion a plan to raise money. Forming a little committee of her friends she shared her dream – they would hold a Fete, a sale of goods, tell all their friends and as many people as they could, and raise money for the mission. Home-made goods, local produce, artifacts – whatever they could get would be on offer. They would also have tea and buns for the shoppers. Enthused by the do-ability of the plan (after all everyone then could knit, sew, make jam or bake buns), the little coterie set to work. Folk were stirred and responsive – this was a first for most of them. Finally, after weeks of hard work, planning, organizing, collecting, all was ready. It remained only to get the Archbishop’s go-ahead. A minor detail, really; how could he possibly refuse; the missions were dear to him and surely he would be delighted at this initiative in his own patch. But, the congregation was not in his diocese; permission refused. And so, as the seanacai said, “Things rested so.”

Except of course they didn’t. Miss Hogg and her small, splendid committee had a conflagration and decided to have a private sale. They would spread the word without publicity to achieve their goal. “We will work so quietly,” she said, “that no one will be offended.” And so it was, and so they succeeded, and so they raised the good sum of £130 for the mission.

This was the beginning not just of the Sale of Work, which became an annual event, but the beginning of the involvement of the laity in sharing in the Columban Sister’s mission. Like a picture that gradually emerges from the photograph’s negative - (in the pre-digital era) - we see the growing participation of the laity as the Sale developed, as friendships between sisters and helpers deepened, as venues got larger and takings increased – surely remarkable. Long before Vatican II spelt out the fundamental role of the laity in the missionary work of the Church, these good men and women, your predecessors, and now indisputably yourselves, found in themselves and in others that eagerness to spread the faith, especially to people who had not heard the word of God. This is the Spirit, vibrant, energizing, and guiding. The same Spirit alive in each one here today.

What great memories we have of the Sales down through the years! The buzz in the Mansion House, in the Rotunda, in Crumlin! Men to the fore getting the stalls set up, women getting the foods prepared, the goods shared out, money bags to the ready. Then the meeting with friends, with

families, our own and yours, who faithfully came, some from long distances, some local, to browse and buy and share a meal or a cuppa; the tempting array of foods; footwear and make-up to suit the most modern miss; clothes for a song, knitwear that enticed dotting grannies to buy for their cherubs; books for the avid readers, folk out in their numbers ready to bargain and haggle with yourselves; the excitement at the Wheel of Fortune; the ticket sellers encouraging the parting of pounds. And all the time your presence, so graciously given even though it was often at a cost. All the time this generosity and givingness, done with such grace and laughter.

What was happening was far more than a Sale of Work. It was, in fact and in faith, a making of inroads to the Kingdom. There are people today walking in neighbourhoods you will never see, in countries you have never been, speaking languages unknown to you, people who love the Lord Jesus and his Mother because you, and those who went before you, gave time and energy to help the mission. In truth, not our mission but God's mission. Today's parable catches it perfectly. The people, puzzled, I'm sure, ask, 'When did we see you, hungry, thirsty, naked?', and so on. They were compassionate, doing what they could for the other, not realizing the blessedness that was theirs. You too are Kingdom people, missionaries whose lives, 'hidden in Christ', as St Paul says, reflect something of God's presence on this earth. Your work, your sacrifices, your dedication on behalf of the mission is a lamp that will never go out.

The lovely Nancy Hogg wrote, early in her outreach, "I like to think I have a little corner in the mission." Hers was no small corner but a vital role in the development of this congregation, in the spreading of the gospel to people Asia and later to other peoples. And you, who knowingly or unknowingly shared her dream, have also a huge place in the mission and an everlasting place in the hearts of the Columban Sisters. Whenever our story is told, you will be there, our co-missionaries, our partners in this great enterprise, our friends.

The Sale of Work is at an end now, but the mission, God's mission, never ends. So we go forward, with gratitude and quiet confidence, the energy and the joy of the Holy Spirit overflowing in us as we follow the Lord wherever he leads us, listening to his word, healed by his compassion, uplifted by his love and ready to serve those we meet along the road. This is our mission.

To end this little talk there are no more fitting words, I think than those we heard in today's first reading, St Paul's greetings to his beloved Philippians. So with all our sisters, I say them now to you:

*'I thank my God whenever I think of you; and every time I pray for all of you, I pray with joy, remembering how you have helped to spread the Good News from the day you first heard of it right up to the present. I am quite certain that the One who began this work in you will see that it is finished when the day of Christ Jesus comes'* (Phil 3:1-6).

Sr. Redempta Twomey, SSC  
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