

Irish Jesuits International: 80 Years

Joe Munnelly, an advocate working with Irish Jesuits International, reports on a recent missionary conference.

To mark the incredible occasion of 80 years of missionary work, Irish Jesuits International (IJI) hosted a conference reflecting on that work, past and present. Contributors included President Michael D. Higgins; Nicola Brennan, the Irish ambassador to Tanzania; and international speakers.

Irish missionaries have made massive contributions globally. They helped shape the Church of Hong Kong, caring for refugees from the Second World War. They built up education in modern-day Zambia, nurturing future leaders. They spread the Gospel and alleviated hardship, transforming the lives of vulnerable communities.

President Michael D. Higgins noted that 'Irish Jesuits International has stood in compassionate solidarity with countless marginalised and disadvantaged communities across the globe, bringing a message of hope and mutual respect inspired by the enduring

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values of Ignatian tradition. This, as I know, placed them on occasion as targets of state and non-state violence.'

John Guiney SJ, director of IJI, explained that the conference was 'a time to celebrate and remember the almost 300 Jesuits who left these shores to make a difference and also an occasion to remember our past and to reflect on our future'.

In his address at the conference, Guiney spoke of the importance of world solidarity and highlighted the ecclesial shift to a Global South leadership in our Church. With the centre of Christianity shifting significantly to the Global South (Africa, Asia, Latin America), 'We now recognise that mission is no longer "from the West to the East" but increasingly from everywhere to everywhere.' Guiney called for a shift from a focus on economic progress: 'The full well-being of individuals and communities needs to be integral to our work ensuring they can live in their cultures with dignity, freedom, and justice.'

Ambassador Brennan's keynote address reflected on how mission paved the way for Irish international development, building on the history of struggle for Irish independence, the history of poverty, hunger and emigration in Ireland, and the history of Irish resilience: 'In each country I have



Students before classes at a primary school in the village of El Arr in northern Sudan

worked in, I have been consistently inspired by the Irish missionaries I have met. In fact, it was missionaries that initially inspired me to work in development and the developing world. I think the story of Irish missionaries helped me to relate to the outside world – to see beyond Ireland. As Mary McAleese said in her address, “Missionaries helped us to be citizens of the world.”

As well as reflecting on the past and looking to the future, missionary Tony O’Riordan SJ spoke of what was central to being men and women for others and how mission, whether 80 years ago or today, differs from many NGOs in calling and accompaniment. O’Riordan stressed that stories and human connection are central to IJI’s work. These encounters shaped his own journey as a missionary and humanitarian: ‘They witnessed to

me, accompanied me, and made me a better person and missionary,’ he explains. ‘While I hope I contributed to their growth, I know I returned enriched and perhaps a better human being and disciple.’

Today IJI seeks to continue the long and impactful legacy of so many men and women who bravely left home to make a difference often in difficult and demanding places. This year’s anniversary is also a time for deeper commitment to building greater solidarity, uplifting and empowering communities working to rise above adversity, strengthening partnerships for lasting positive change where people are at the heart of everything.

To read the conference keynote speeches in full and for more information on how you can make a difference, visit: www.iji.ie or call 01 836 6509.