

Mission possible – Knock talk

Good afternoon/evening everyone.

Many of you will have heard of the Hollywood film series “Mission Impossible” where Ethan Hunt, an agent for the Impossible Missions Force attempts to intercept an enemy power and prevent impending global disaster. Across the 7 – and nearly 8 films produced – we learn that the mission was never impossible. I am here to talk to you today about “mission *possible*” and how each one of us has been called to accept the Gospel invitation to be missionaries and witnesses to Christ.

Marie Martin

Let me begin with a story. Marie Helena Martin was born in Glenageary in Co Dublin in 1892. She was the eldest of 12 siblings of successful timber and shipping merchants.

During the first World War, when she was 22 years old, Marie trained at the Richmond Hospital in Dublin as a Voluntary Aid Detachment preparing to nurse wounded soldiers. A year later she was sent to Malta to work in St. George’s Military Hospital and then to France to care for the wounded during the horrific Battle of the Somme. When she was 25 years old, she informed her boyfriend that marriage was not for her and trained as a midwife at the National Maternity Hospital at Holles Street in Dublin. Newly qualified, Marie sailed for Nigeria in West Africa in 1921 to work as a lay volunteer. It was during her time in Nigeria that she understood the need for a congregation of religious sisters who would be specifically qualified as medical professionals.

However, due to restrictions under canon law at the time under ‘Propaganda Fide’, which oversaw missionary work and its related activities, members of religious congregations were prohibited from practising medicine. This, however, did not deter Marie. She lobbied at various levels of the Catholic hierarchy until in 1936 her lobbying paid off and the Holy See lifted the prohibition against Religious Sisters serving as doctors or midwives. Her next challenge would be to find a diocese that would accept a recently formed and very small religious congregation. As it happened the newly named Apostolic Delegate in Africa, based in Kenya gave his support for the young congregation to be established in Calabar in Nigeria. So Marie travelled back to Nigeria. But she became very seriously ill on her arrival was

hospitalised. But on the 4th April 1937, after very many obstacles, Marie was finally able to profess as a religious sister with the newly formed religious congregation - while still in her hospital bed. Most of us know Marie as Mother Mary Martin, founder of the Medical Missionaries of Mary.

Today, there are still over 400 Medical Missionaries, who come from 19 different nationalities and who continue to work across Africa, South America, Ireland and the US responding to where they are needed most.

Mother Mary Martin's story is not unique. There have been countless Irish women across history who responded to the Lord's call as proclaimed in Isaiah 6:8: "Whom shall I send?" and who responded, "Here I am ... send me!"

Daring to Hope:

Last year a group of 6 religious and lay women gathered to develop a photographic exhibition to reflect on the multifaceted social history of the work of Irish religious sisters. 'Here I am, send me'. And they were sent to some of the most remote locations, across the continents – to Papua New Guinea, to Japan, China, Trinidad and many, many other locations across the world. They often worked within a context of extreme poverty, war, discrimination, strict religious and social mores, political unrest and grave injustices. The exhibition is titled: *'Daring to Hope: Irish Religious Sisters Embracing the Unknown* and focuses over a 100-year period beginning in 1923 until 2023. It begins to share the story of women who 'dared to hope' and who 'embraced the unknown' in their response to what Pope Francis today terms the 'cry of the poor,' despite the obstacles and limitations put before them or the towering social issues they encountered. It tells of women who heard and responded to the 'cry of the earth' long before *Laudato Si* was written and popularised. The exhibition is currently being hosted here at Knock until tomorrow. It will be taken across Ireland so check out the website daringtohope.ie to find out if it is in your locality.

Our own story

Every one of us has a story. And to each has been asked, 'whom shall I send?' I am the eldest of 7 children and my amazing parents are here with me today at Knock. I have never told them before how very grateful I am for their sound moral and ethical foundation, grounded in

Gospel principles, that has prepared the way for my own calling – ‘here I am ... send me’. But I had no idea what this meant. In 1993, when I finished university in Liverpool, I hadn’t a notion where I would go next. But I didn’t have to wait too long before my offer was taken up. Before I graduated, right on cue, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur offered me an opportunity to move to Boston, Massachusetts in the US to work as a Notre Dame Mission Volunteer. I was to go for 12 months and ended up staying for 5 years, working first at the Archdiocese of Boston and then the US Catholic Conference of Bishops in Washington DC, supporting the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees. After an encounter with Fr Kevin Doherty a Spiritan priest who just happened to be passing by the Bishop’s Conference, I moved to Dublin to undertake a master’s degree in development studies – and this is where I met my husband and where the call to mission grew stronger. Over the last 25 years, we have lived and worked in various countries across sub-Saharan Africa. During this time, I was called back to study once again and completed a doctorate in International Development. I was also called to motherhood, and we have 2 very fine young men. When we returned to Ireland from Uganda in 2018, the call once again – whom shall I send? This time, I responded: “I am tired Lord”. But there it was – Justice, Peace and Ecology Coordinator with the Association of Leaders of Missionaries and Religious of Ireland (AMRI). ‘Here I am Lord’. With its members, other organisations, groups and individuals, AMRI collaborate on various initiatives that respond to the challenges facing our world today. And there are many. And the mission seems impossible. But I am always energised by the words of the late Nelson Mandela, who was the first elected president of a fully democratic South Africa, who stated that “it always seems impossible until it's done.” I expect that during much of his life he had given up on any hope of a free South Africa.

Hope is a curious concept and one that at times of crisis, seems so distant and obscure. It can be difficult to sustain hope when you are bombarded daily with news of nearly 40,000 people massacred in Gaza in just 10 months. Of an escalating war between Russia and Ukraine. And these are just 3 of the 56 global conflicts involving 92 countries around the world **as observed by the Global Peace Index**. And according to the latest UN figures, nearly 300 million people in 72 countries will need humanitarian assistance and protection this year. This is without the climate crisis that Pope Francis warns we are at a “point of no return”. We are already seeing

these realities being played out in real-time. And the world's most vulnerable populations are at greatest risk.

Yet, "all is not lost" as Pope Francis tells us in *Laudato Si* (LS205) and he invites us in *Fratelli Tutti*, to 'renewed hope' (FT55) which is 'deeply rooted in every human heart'(ibid). What the *Daring to Hope* story outlined in the exhibition demonstrates is the capacity for hope and the bravery to embrace the unknown, trusting in God's plan for each of us. If anyone has read Pope Francis' book 'Let us Dream', he reminds us that as Christians our first duty is to serve others, especially the poor and the marginalized, just as Jesus did. He offers hope for building a better world for everyone, by putting the poorest and the planet at the centre of what we think and do. He reminds us how ordinary people who take action *together*, despite their differences, can discover unforeseen possibilities. In *Laudato Si*, he calls us to "move forward in a bold cultural revolution" towards an integral ecology. By this, he means understanding that everything is interconnected – that "peace, justice and the preservation of creation are three absolutely interconnected themes" (LS92). So, Pope Francis says, "Despite [the] dark clouds, which may not be ignored" he offers us in *Fratelli Tutti* (FT54), "new paths of hope" (ibid).

I'll leave with you today a quote from a poem by Amanda Gorman, that reminds me when the dark clouds interfere with my mission, to continue to hope and to take action. She says "when the day comes, we step out of the shade, aflame and unafraid, the new dawn blooms as we free it. For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it. If only we're brave enough to be it".

I'll end where I began. In *Mission Impossible*, Ethan Hunt is instructed: "Your mission, should you choose to accept it"... "whom shall I send?" Will you be brave enough to answer, 'Here I am...send me?'"