Missionary Disciples in a Changing Mission

A reflection for Religious and Missionaries in Ireland

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

We gather today at a moment of profound transition not only for the Church in Ireland but also society. The landscape around us is shifting—culturally, socially, spiritually. And yet, in the midst of this change, the call to be **missionary disciples** remains as urgent, as beautiful, and as life-giving as ever.

I am very grateful to the AMRI Board and executive - particularly to Gerard and Toni who I have been most in touch with, for the invitation to come and share here today. It has challenged me to reflect a little bit more deeply myself on this call today to missionary discipleship.

In this simple sharing today, under the title ***Missionary Disciples in a Changing Mission*** I will consider the two dimensions of the title: firstly exploring the call to missionary discipleship and how our understanding of this call is constantly evolving through time.

The second part of the title is really intriguing ' In a Changing Mission'. Is it a 'changing mission' or is mission by its very nature always changing in response to various criteria or influencing factors?

By way of structure, I will order this input in three parts offering some questions for table discussion before a closing plenary:

- Part I – The Call to Missionary Discipleship: Seeds Scattered, Roots Deepened: Ireland's Missionaries at Home and Abroad
- Part II – A changing mission: new contexts, new questions: an ever-evolving mission ?
- Part III – Missionary Discipleship in Ireland Today

My hope from today is that our reflections and sharing together will help all of us to be more profoundly convinced that God's mission has need of us regardless of the stage we are at on our missionary journey, regardless of our age or particular fragility, regardless of what we may see as obstacles blocking us from fully living mission.

Part I – The Call to Missionary Discipleship: Seeds Scattered, Roots Deepened: Ireland's Mission at Home and Abroad

The word 'Missionary' conjures up the image of the 'foreign' missionaries – those who went out from Ireland to proclaim the Gospel… Ireland has a rich history of mission in this sense, and missionaries have always enjoyed a privileged place in the hearts of the Irish people and benefited greatly from their generosity and support.

Ireland's overseas missionary story unfolds in distinct "waves,": beginning right after the evangelization of Ireland with the **first wave** was that of the *peregrini*, the "Monks on the Move" of the 6th–8th centuries—Columba, Gall, Aidan, Columbanus and many others—who travelled as missionary wanderers across Britain and continental Europe. Their monasteries at Iona, Lindisfarne, Luxeuil, Salzburg and Bobbio preserved Christian faith and learning in a fractured post-Roman world and shaped culture, scholarship and civic life. Their legacy still surfaces unexpectedly: when we launched our SMA–OLA Triple Jubilee last year in Ouidah in the Republic of Benin in West Africa, the major seminary's name—**St Gall's**—quietly revealed the enduring imprint of Gall, companion of Columbanus and disciple of Comgall of Bangor. The early Irish missionary imagination continues to echo across continents.

For our purposes today, another **wave is perhaps more pertinent:** — the 19th and 20th Century wave which gave birth to the modern missionary congregations and societies - including many of our Institutes. These missionaries carried this same spirit into a globalising world. Men and women, lay and ordained, travelled to Africa, Asia, Latin America, Oceania and beyond, founding schools, hospitals, parishes and social centres; educating future political and ecclesial leaders; providing healthcare and social services; and increasingly engaging in human-rights work, peacebuilding and development. Their influence extended far beyond ecclesial boundaries: Irish missionaries were often the first sustained Irish presence in many countries, and their long-term relationships with local communities helped lay the groundwork for Ireland's diplomatic ties, international partnerships and humanitarian networks. Organisations such as Concern and Trócaire emerged directly from missionary responses to famine, conflict and injustice, becoming vehicles of global solidarity that still carry Irish compassion into the world.

In recent years that face of mission has changed. Across continents today, congregations, dioceses, lay movements and vibrant Christian communities continue to grow from the seeds planted by Irish missionaries. Many now flourish with their own vocations, leadership and missionary dynamism—they are, in a real sense, the spiritual children and grandchildren of Irish missionary witness. And within our own congregations, what began as small Irish foundations or, as is the case in my own Congregation, a small Irish presence within French Foundations, has become richly international missionary families. Sisters, Brothers, priests and lay collaborators from Africa, Asia, Latin America, Oceania and Europe now share the same charism, the same mission, the same hope. The Gospel seed planted by Irish hands has taken root in many soils and returns to Ireland with new life. This returning to Ireland with new life is key and I will return to this later.

Today this understanding of 'missionary' - limiting mission to what happened beyond the shores of Ireland has evolved. Missionary Institutes have traversed moments that led to a kind of identity crisis. As the entire Church, since the Second Vatican Council is gradually awakening to her missionary calling, where does that leave 'missionaries' – those who Pope Saint John Paul II in his Encyclical Redemptoris Missio referred to as those with a 'Specific Missionary Vocation'.

"Missionaries are those who, sent by legitimate authority, go out, in faith and obedience, to those who are far from Christ, in order to proclaim the Gospel and to bring them to faith." "This specific missionary vocation… retains all its validity."[1] (RM 32)

For 'Missionary Institutes', the challenge today is to discern the radicality of this vocation when mission is no longer defined primarily by crossing geographic frontiers. Our understanding of mission is not diminishing; it is being stretched.

Layers of Understanding

Exploring the evolution of understanding of the 'Missionary Disciple' leads me to question is it that the reality of being a missionary has changed, or is it more accurate to acknowledge that our limited understanding has been stretched.

A recent homily on the Gospel of the Transfiguration - challenged me to examine in a new way to explore how I or even we all as Church understand mission and being missionary disciples.

The story in the Gospel of Matthew reads: ***After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun***

The homilist that day - Archbishop Fortunatus Nwachukwu of the Dicastery for Evangelization - took exception to the way the story was written: for him, it was not that the aspect of Jesus face had changed; Jesus the Son of God was, is and always will be the same… it was the capacity of his disciples to perceive that was changed in that moment … in that moment of deep prayer and communion with Jesus, they were able to perceive at a much deeper level the real meaning of who the person Jesus was for them and for the story of salvation

In a similar way, as we continue to grow in our understanding of how to be as Church together, how to respond as missionary disciples collaborating in bringing to life God's dream for all of God's creation, our comprehension of the concept, content and space of mission expands and explodes into life as a tapestry of engagement on all fronts, rooted in a deep personal relationship with the God revealed to us in and through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Missionary Discipleship in Today's Church: The Mission of Today

Missionary discipleship today is understood within the profound ecclesial renewal initiated by Vatican II and carried forward with remarkable missionary clarity by Pope Francis and continued now by Pope Leo XIV. Vatican II's vision of the Church as the People of God — charismatically gifted, synodal by nature, and called to holiness — remains the theological foundation of all contemporary mission. *Lumen Gentium* and *Ad Gentes* articulated a decisive shift: every baptised person is a missionary disciple, and the Church's mission belongs to the entire People of God. Although Yves Congar never used the expression himself, theologians often speak of his ecclesiology as introducing a "Copernican revolution": a decisive

[1] John Paul II. Redemptoris Missio: On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1990. §32.

reorientation away from a predominantly clerical and juridical centre toward a communion-based, charismatically enlivened understanding of the Church.

This is the horizon within which the Church's present missionary renewal takes shape – in the synodal way, deepening communion, fostering participation, mission focussed and as Pope Francis repeatedly emphasised with the key protagonist, the Spirit of God leading the way and gently pushing us to follow. Of course we are still struggling to put this Vatican II vision in to practice. But we are on the way and with the energy generated by synodality, we have taken a few further steps along the way.

Pope Francis Impact on Missionary Discipleship

At a recent SEDOS conference, it was claimed that the most influential missiologist of our time is Pope Francis. His encyclicals and apostolic exhortations form a unified missionary corpus — a Spirit-driven reconfiguration of the Church's evangelising identity in the 21st century.

Francis reshapes the Church's missionary imagination. He places missionary discipleship at the centre of ecclesial renewal. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he describes mission as the overflow of an encounter with Christ that "invites us to go forth" (EG 20).[2] Mission is not a programme but a style of life shaped by closeness, listening, and accompaniment — the pastoral conversion he calls for throughout *EG* and later deepens in *Gaudete et Exsultate*[3]and *Christus Vivit*.[4] Every baptised person is a missionary disciple (EG 120), called to embody the joy of the Gospel in concrete, Spirit-led action. Mission is no longer what we do or where we do it… we are mission.

This missionary dynamism is intrinsically synodal: a shared journey of the People of God in which charisms are recognised, ministries flourish, and communal discernment becomes habitual. Francis' image of the Church as a "field hospital" (EG 49) expresses the concrete shape of this discipleship — proximity, mercy, and the willingness to touch the wounds of humanity.

Fratelli Tutti extends this horizon by situating mission within the broader call to social friendship and universal fraternity. Missionary discipleship becomes a commitment to building a culture of encounter (FT 30), overcoming indifference (FT 73), and fostering a people capable of reconciliation and peace. In this sense, evangelisation and social transformation are

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[2] Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013. Accessed 10 September 2026. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

[3] Francis. *Gaudete et Exsultate: Apostolic Exhortation on the Call to Holiness in Today's World*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018. Accessed 7 September 2026. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html

[4] Francis. *Christus Vivit: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and to the Entire People of God*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019. Accessed 7 September 2026. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html

inseparable: the missionary disciple works for justice, dialogue, and the healing of the world's fractures.[5]

Finally, Francis' ecological magisterium (*Laudato Si'*, *Laudate Deum*)[6] integrates care for our common home into the Church's missionary identity.[7]Ecological and social conversion become essential dimensions of evangelisation, shaping a mission that is attentive to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.

Continuity with Pope Leo

Pope Leo XIV's *Magnifica Humanitas* (2026) is emerging as a major missionary text for our time. It offers a prophetic call to safeguard human dignity in an age marked by artificial intelligence, digital power, and new forms of dehumanisation. Leo XIV frames the present moment as a missionary choice:

"Humanity… is today facing a pivotal choice: either to construct a new Tower of Babel or to build the city in which God and humanity dwell together."

This sets evangelisation, our mission, within the work of building communion and resisting forces that fragment or homogenise.

- Part II – A changing mission: new contexts, new questions: an ever-evolving mission ?

Are we experiencing a "changing mission" or is mission, by its very nature, always changing? Manuel Ferreira helps us name this moment with clarity.[8] Drawing on Pope Francis, he reminds us that *"we are not living an era of change so much as a change of era."*[9] This distinction signals that the cultural, social, ecological, and religious mutations of our time are so profound that they require not simply adjustment, but **reconfiguration** — a renewed missionary imagination capable of reading the signs of the times with evangelical discernment.

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[5] Francis. Fratelli Tutti: Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020. Accessed 4 September 2026. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

[6] Francis. Laudato Si': Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015.Accessed 10 September 2026. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

[7] Francis. *Laudate Deum: Apostolic Exhortation to All People of Good Will on the Climate Crisis*. Vatican City: Dicastery for Communication, 2023. Accessed 14 September 2026. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html

[8] Manuel Ferreira is a Portugese Comboni Missionary. He served as the Superior General of the Comboni Missionary Fathers. His 2023 publication in Italian traces the evolution of models of mission and calls us to respond to the call to reconfigure mission today.
Ferreira, Manuel Augusto. Modelli di missione: La riconfigurazione della missione con papa Francesco. Preface by Card. José Tolentino de Mendonça. Padova: Messaggero di Sant'Antonio – Editrice, 2023. ISBN 978 88 250 5678 5 (print); 978 88 250 5679 2 (PDF); 978 88 250 5680 8 (EPUB).

[9] Pope Francis, Address at the Fifth National Conference of the Italian Church, Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence, 10 November 2015. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151110_firenze-convegno-chiesa-italiana.html

Ferreira's central insight is that the Church has **never had a single missionary paradigm**. Across history, mission has always been expressed through **multiple missionary models**, each shaped by the Spirit, by the personality of missionaries – which I interpret to include the charism and culture of the Missionary Institute, and by the contexts in which they lived. These models do not replace one another; they evolve, enrich, and correct each other. Mission is therefore inherently dynamic — but today's dynamism is of a different magnitude.

Historical models of mission

Ferreira sketches a concise genealogy of missionary paradigms, tracing how the Church's evangelising impulse has taken diverse forms across history. From the apostolic itinerancy of the early Church, marked by mobility and the founding of communities, mission evolved into the contemplative witness of the desert monks and later the Benedictine model of cultural transformation through *ora et labora*. The mendicant movements renewed itinerant preaching through poverty and evangelical zeal, while the Jesuits advanced inculturation through linguistic immersion and intellectual engagement. The missionary institutes of the 19th and 20th centuries focused on language learning, catechumenates, the establishment of local Churches and holistic human development. After Vatican II, new models emerged centred on dialogue, justice, liberation, ecology, and interreligious encounter. Today, mission unfolds as a polyphony of approaches — proclamation, presence, dialogue, service, prophetic witness, care for creation, and synodal accompaniment — each responding to the complex contexts of a changing era.

Reconfiguration rather than replacement

Ferreira insists that the Church is not called to abandon older models but to **reconfigure** them. This reconfiguration is the fruit of conversion — personal, communal, and institutional. It means allowing the Spirit to reshape:

- our priorities,
- our languages,
- our structures,
- our relationships,
- and our missionary imagination.

How, as Church, as missionaries, do we approach this reconfiguration when perhaps we are feeling more overwhelmed by our fragilities than energized by our calling?

By way of teasing this out I would like to explore Pope Francis' four missionary principles outlined in (EG §§221–237) as a compass for mission today. These principles — often described as Francis' missionary hermeneutic — orient the Church's discernment in a change of era:

Time is greater than space reminds us that mission is a long-term process of accompaniment rather than the occupation of structures or positions; it encourages patience, gradual transformation, and fidelity to the slow work of the Spirit. This is a clear call to simply *'be'* or **'be with'** – as a witnessing presence

Unity prevails over conflict calls missionary communities to be artisans of reconciliation— integrating tensions, fostering dialogue, and building bridges in societies marked by

fragmentation. If our world needs anything right now, it is a cohort of people who refuse to give in to deeper divisions , who know how to foster communion.

Reality is more important than ideas anchors mission in the concrete lives of people, insisting that evangelisation begins with listening, presence, and the Incarnation rather than abstract theories or perfect pastoral plans.

The whole is greater than the part affirms the polyhedral richness of the Church and the world, encouraging intercultural collaboration, synodality, and a missionary style that honours diversity while seeking communion.

Together, these principles offer a way of seeing, discerning, and acting that is realistic, hopeful, and deeply aligned with the Gospel.

Cross-cutting themes: the spiritual architecture of mission today

Together with these principles, there are transversal themes that run across all missionary models and that Pope Francis consistently emphasises. These construct the spiritual architecture of mission today:

- **Joy** as the gateway to mission
- **A Church that goes out**
- **Inclusion over exclusion**
- **Holiness as the most beautiful face of mission**
- **A spirituality of presence and accompaniment**
- **Prophetic reading of context**
- **Interior purification of attitudes that suffocate mission**

These are not optional. They form the spiritual architecture of mission in a change of era.

- **Part III – Missionary Discipleship in Ireland Today**

To be a missionary disciple in Ireland today in a context where the concept of 'mission' has radically evolved, is to stand at the crossroads of a society undergoing profound transformation. Secularisation, post-Christian habits of mind, intercultural diversity, digital fragmentation, ecological anxiety, and institutional fatigue are not simply external pressures; they are **missionary criteria** shaping how we discern, how we serve, and how we embody the Gospel.

For missionary congregations, situating ourselves within Ireland today means recognising that mission is no longer defined by geographical distance but by **evangelical availability**. The frontier is not "out there"; it is here — in the hearts of people searching for meaning, in communities longing for connection, in parishes seeking renewal, in young people navigating fragmented identities, and in a society wrestling with its past while imagining its future.

Our charisms become gifts offered to this moment: a spirituality of encounter, intercultural presence, patient listening, and prophetic witness. We bring the capacity to accompany, to build bridges, to foster dialogue, to nurture faith, and to hold space for healing and reconciliation.

Ireland's own missionary story illuminates this vocation. Earlier I spoke of the contribution of Irish missionaries in the past to many societies around the world.. with the benefit of our

expanded understanding of 'mission' we can also acknowledge the immense missionary contribution of religious life to the building up of Irish society — through education, healthcare, social care, youth formation, parish ministry, and community development — was itself a form of mission. It shaped the moral and civic fabric of the nation and opened Ireland to the world. At the same time, we acknowledge with honesty the grave failures and abuses that wounded lives and damaged trust. Holding both truths with integrity allows us to enter today's mission with humility, accountability, and renewed purpose.

Missionaries in Ireland

A further dimension of this unfolding is the presence of missionaries from other parts of the world. Just two weeks ago there was an article in the Irish Catholic interviewing a number of priests from other countries working here in Ireland. I was very struck by the perception of the majority that their role was temporary, to prop up the Irish Church until there are enough Irish vocations to sustain ministry. Whatever the motivation for bringing them to Ireland, my perception of that presence is for a more enriching experience, a missionary experience. Their arrival is not a sign of imbalance but of **reciprocity** — the global Church sharing gifts across borders. When given and received as grace rather than utility, intercultural mission enriches the Irish Church with new perspectives, new spiritualities, and new expressions of faith. Mission is mutual: we evangelise and are evangelised; we give and we receive.

In this moment, we are called to be missionaries **also within the Church** — helping parishes reimagine themselves. Bishop Router of Derry during his recent installation reminds us: ***Our task now is not simply to maintain what we have inherited but to become missionary disciples for our own time. That will require parishes to work more closely together, greater participation by lay people, investment in faith formation, new ways of reaching young people and a willingness to use modern means of communication to proclaim the Gospel.***

Jesus began his mission by meeting people, listening to them, walking with them, and inviting them to follow. Missionary discipleship in Ireland today begins the same way: with presence, encounter, dialogue, service, prophetic courage, care for creation, and a synodal way of walking together.

Mission is a polyphony. The Spirit is the composer and conductor; our charisms are the instruments; Ireland is the score. The music metaphor here highlights the importance of context. A score is not the music itself; it is the framework on which music is written — the staff lines, the key signature, the rhythm, the space where harmony becomes possible. So when we say Ireland is the score, we mean: Ireland's history, wounds, hopes, culture, and current ecclesial moment form the context in which mission must be composed today. Mission does not float above the realities of the country; it is written into them. The Spirit does not impose a melody from outside — the Spirit writes on the lived experience of the Irish people. Our charisms do not perform abstract solos; they must harmonise with the concrete Irish context: its pluralism, its fragility, its emerging intercultural richness, its search for trust and meaning.

This is a way of saying that mission is always incarnational, always contextual, always attentive to the place where it is lived and more and more in our time it is collaborative.

As missionary disciples, what we offer is not a programme but a way of being — a missionary identity reconfigured for a change of era, capable of announcing the Gospel with joy, living it with authenticity, and embodying it with hope.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would simply like to bring this together by referencing two recent messages from Pope Leo where he talks of Missionary Discipleship – first the Mission Sunday Message for this year, the 100th anniversary – the theme of which is 'One in Christ, United in Mission, which is the global mission context and secondly his recent address to the Diocese of Rome for its Pastoral Planning – mission within the home context.

In addressing the pastoral planning group for the Diocese of Rome, he explained that missionary discipleship begins with a personal encounter with Christ: like Mary Magdalene, each disciple is called by name and sent forth in joy to witness to the living Lord. From this encounter flows a pastoral vision centred on helping people meet Christ, building communities of co-responsibility, and reading the life of the city as the place where the Gospel seeks dialogue and presence. The Pope insists that mission today requires discernment, honesty, and the courage to ask "why?", so that pastoral choices arise from the Gospel and respond to real human needs.

In the Mission Sunday message, this same call is deepened: mission begins in union with Christ, the source of communion and the wellspring of all evangelizing fruitfulness . From this unity emerges a shared, synodal mission, where every baptized person cooperates harmoniously in proclaiming the Gospel and embracing diversity as a treasure. Mission is ultimately love made visible—the Church continuing Christ's own mission of love in the Spirit, especially toward those most in need .

Taken together, the two documents present a single, coherent call: missionary discipleship today means encountering Christ, living in communion, discerning together, and witnessing to God's faithful love in the concrete realities of our communities and our world.

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