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An Apostolate of the
Society of Jesus under the
Patronage of the Irish
Episcopal Conference

PIONEERING WITH A DIFFERENCE

The apostolic initiative of an Irish Jesuit, Fr James Cullen has given an unusual connotation to the word "Pioneer" in his native country. Just over a century ago he conceived the idea of a movement intended to carry his fellow Irish men and women out of widespread slavery to alcohol into the freedom of sobriety. To fire their imagination and get them on the move he could think of no better word than "Pioneer", one that was proving so successful at the time in fuelling the westward drive in North America. The word was also used in a contemporary translation of the New Testament where Jesus was described as "the pioneer and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12,2.) The movement, officially entitled the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association of the Sacred Heart (PTAA), has attracted hundreds of thousands of members in Ireland and overseas, especially in English-speaking Africa, since it was founded by Fr. Cullen and four lady associates at the Church of St. Francis Xavier in Dublin on December 28, 1898. The Irish Government honoured the event by issuing a centenary commemorative stamp featuring the Sacred Heart, the founder himself and the facade of St. Francis Xavier's.

Father Cullen was convinced that a movement based on scripture, rooted in devotion to the Sacred Heart and tempered by Ignatian discretion could effect a dramatic change in the undesirable drinking habits of his contemporaries. From his religious perspective unrestrained drinking with all its deplorable side effects was one of those demons that could only be exorcised by a widespread campaign of prayer and fasting cf Mark 9:28.

What was original in his approach was his starting point. He did not ask those with a personal drink problem to undertake the "prayer and fasting". In a truly Pauline spirit he appealed to the generosity of the members of the Body of Christ. Lifelong consecrated abstinence on the part of those spared the trauma of addiction would prove a "gentle violence" storming heaven in favour of people afflicted with it. Like St. Ignatius in the Meditation on the Kingdom of Christ in the Spiritual Exercises, he dared ask for both the *magis*, a readiness for more and greater things and the *agere contra*, a willingness to go against the grain. He knew the need for yet another Ignatian characteristic, *discreta caritas*, acting with a sensitive love, in all apostolic endeavour. To guard against any tendency towards indiscreet zeal in the Association, Fr. Cullen's successors as central directors have always taken care to point out that the Association looks to those prepared to go beyond the call of duty in what is technically a work of supererogation. They have been guided by the maxim that "the Christian religion condemns intemperance, commands temperance and commends total abstinence".

It was Sacred Heart Devotion that underpinned the magnanimous response to Fr. Cullen's challenging call. He was able to tap into the willing acceptance of self-sacrifice and reparation in the Devotion at the time. The prayer of offering which he himself composed encapsulates the spirituality of the Pioneers and is proposed for twice daily recitation as one of the three conditions of membership. The undoubted Ignatian resonance is apparent from the first line.

"For your greater glory and consolation, O Sacred Heart of Jesus, for your sake to give good example, to practise self-denial, to make reparation to you for the sins of intemperance and for the conversion of excessive drinkers, I will abstain for life from all intoxicating drinks. Amen"

The two other conditions of membership are total abstinence for life from all alcoholic drink, except when prescribed by a doctor in case of illness and the wearing of a little emblem of the Sacred Heart as a visible sign of one's commitment.

The spirituality of the movement, especially the focus on the Sacred Heart, has attracted men and women from every walk of life. The majority tend to be conscientious about the practise of their Catholic faith, valuing this much more than their option for total abstinence. It is hardly surprising that within the ranks have been many persons outstanding for holiness including several candidates for canonization. Among these are Venerable Matt Talbot, a one-time alcoholic; Venerable Edel Quinn, an indefatigable promoter of the Legion of Mary in East Africa; the Servant of God, Fr. John Sullivan, an Irish Jesuit of extraordinary asceticism, noted for his love of the sick and the Servant of God, Frank Duff, the founder of the Legion of Mary. Cardinal Dominic Ignatius Ekandem of Nigeria and the legendary Daniel Mannix, Archbishop of Melbourne were both members. Perhaps the most distinguished Churchman among the current membership is Cardinal Cahal B. Daly, former Primate of All Ireland and Archbishop Emeritus of Armagh.

When Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) first came to Ireland in 1946 the then Central Director of the Pioneers, Fr. Daniel Dargan S.J., welcomed it with open arms and offered a platform to AA members at Pioneer gatherings. The two movements complemented one another. The principal focus of AA was to help problem drinkers come to terms with their situation. The PTAA was primarily conceived as a prayer and prevention movement whose members, even if not personally affected by addiction, were willing to give a penitential expression to their concern for those who were.

The PTAA has been a major influence in Irish life all through the 20th century, raising awareness of the need for care in the use of alcohol and more recently, drugs. Youngsters, even from families where alcohol was not a problem have promised to abstain from alcohol for life as a penitential gesture in honour of the Sacred Heart. Hundreds of thousands have actually kept that promise through every decade of the century. In Ireland today 8 per cent of the population are Pioneers and a further 17 per cent abstain for other reasons. That this is now the case among a people disparagingly known at the beginning of the 20th century as the "drunken Irish" is nothing less than a moral miracle.

One remarkable feature of the Association is the spirit of volunteerism among the members. Indeed the voluntary organisations of Ireland, both religious and secular, could scarcely function without the Pioneer contribution. They are to be found as presidents, secretaries, treasurers and staunch members of credit unions, the Legion of Mary, sporting bodies especially the Gaelic Athletic Association (one of the largest amateur sporting associations left in our highly commercialised world), trade unions, the St. Vincent de Paul, parent teacher associations, etc. Fr. Cullen's hope, in founding the Pioneers, was not that the Association would take members away from other groupings to which they already belonged. On the contrary, it would help them become even better and more reliable workers in these organisations.

Prior to World War II the Pioneer phenomenon largely remained within the Irish ethnic group.

The first signs of significant growth elsewhere appeared in Africa where Irish missionaries found that people were as responsive to the Pioneer ideal as in their own homeland. Membership in Africa, now of the order of 300,000 is rising continually. Missionaries from other European nations, particularly Dutch and Belgian Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers) promote the apostolate enthusiastically in Uganda and Tanzania. At Enugu in June 1999 over 15,000 people attended the first nation-wide rally in Nigeria. More recently a very committed group in Bolivia has espoused the ideals. One area where the Association hopes to make some ground in the near future is among native Americans in South Dakota.

However, in the US mainstream, efforts at temperance promotion, with the notable exception of AA, have been bedevilled by the long shadow cast by the unfortunate experience of the Prohibition era. Part of the strength of AA is that all it asks of the public is goodwill. The PTAA, if it is to succeed, has to ask for something more.

The centenary year celebrations which coincided with the last year of the 20th century revealed an enormous amount of good will towards the Association. Practically the whole Irish hierarchy and several hundred priests concelebrated the Centenary Mass in Croke Park Dublin on May 30, 1999, where 35,000 people attended, including the President of Ireland, Mrs. Mary McAleese and the Prime Minister, Mr. Bertie Ahern, in spite of bitterly cold weather. It was highly appropriate that the principal speaker should be an African prelate, Cardinal Francis Arinze, President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue. He exhorted the attendance from all five continents to keep up the struggle, insisting that the work of the Pioneers would be as relevant in the 21st as it had ever been in the 20th century.

One Indian Bishop, the Jesuit Michael Minj of Gumla went home determined to stress more than ever the Sacred Heart dimension of the work. He will find that "in proportion as they give Him this pleasure (promoting the devotion) this divine Heart, source of blessings and graces, will shower them so abundantly on the works of their ministry that they will produce fruits far beyond their labours and expectations. And this, too, for their own personal salvation and perfection" (Vision of St. Margaret Mary, July 2, 1688).

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