

NINE MONTHS IN DUBLIN

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In August 2003, I left Sydney and DePaul House to attend the Religious Formation Ministry Programme based in Rathgar, Dublin, Ireland. This programme is commonly known as the Loreto House programme. I was asked to do this course to prepare me for formation work.

The course itself has been in existence since the early 1980s. Originally most of the participants were from Ireland itself. Now most of the participants would come from overseas. In my group there were 29 of us from 17 different countries. I was the only participant from Australia or the South Pacific. It is not an academic based course but rather an experiential, process oriented course. This meant we participated in a constant series of workshops and on going inputs by experts in their fields. While the course was demanding, we did not have to write many papers for assessment. Some of us were able to decide to do the course to gain a graduate diploma from The University of Wales, Lampeter. This required extra work and a higher standard of work than was expected from the programme itself. Even though, I had to spend extra hours in an already full programme, I am glad I challenged myself to do the extra work.

The programme normally consisted of classes from 9.00 to 4.30 Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. For a large amount of the programme Wednesdays were set aside for our pastoral placements. At times we also had weekend work. Unfortunately, on one of the weekends that we had work coincided with the final of the World Cup that was on mid-morning Dublin time.

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The major emphasis of the programme is on the individual who is called to minister. Much time and effort is given to examining a person's life journey. As part of the course each participant was asked to have a counsellor whom we saw each week. This was done through various workshops on human sexuality, trauma, violence against women, masculinity, grief and loss, and family of origin. While we were presented with some theological input from people such as Donal Dorr and Diarmuid O'Murchu, the time and space given for personal reflection was of great significance for most participants. We were challenged to look at God, the church and ourselves in different ways.

An element of the programme that is usually not given great emphasis in many formation programmes is the development of the creative spirit of a person. Loreto House provides many such opportunities for such development through Tai Chi, sacred dance, modelling with clay, dream work and reflecting with colour. I had done very little in this kind of formation up to my time in Dublin. With the encouragement of my mentor (a member of the Loreto House Team) I discovered Biodanza and attended two weekend workshops in Dublin before I left. Other than the dream work, which I found was very culturally based, I gained much from such experiences.

Large amounts of time and energy were given to developing skills in listening, spiritual direction and group work. For most of the programme we had one and a half hours of group process every Monday afternoon. For many in our group this group process remained one of the most challenging elements as the group had no agenda other than the agenda of the people in the group itself. Previously, I had experienced an intensive workshop on group in Rockhampton with John Chalmers from Banyo Seminary. This enabled me to learn more from the experience as I was not completely at sea in the process. At the end of programme, I also realised that my learning was also restricted by the willingness or unwillingness of the group to explore the relating that was happening in the group.

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One of the elements of the programme that I found very enriching was the pastoral placement. I was fortunate enough to have my placement at Mountjoy prison that is only a few minutes walk from where I was staying in Phibsborough. Each Tuesday evening, a group of five seminarians from Maynooth Seminary and I each visited an individual prisoner in his cell. During the months I went to Mountjoy, I visited two different prisoners: the first prisoner was transferred to another prison at his own request to pursue better educational opportunities. Visiting Mountjoy along with research opened a door to me that enabled me to see and understand a different side to life in Ireland. This happened even though both of the prisoners that I visited were not Irish Nationals. Each week we followed up our pastoral placements at Loreto House with reflection and discussion on personal issues that arose from our placement and a social analysis of our placement. My research and social analysis led me to see that in Dublin there is a very close link between poverty, illegal drug use and criminal behaviour that leads to imprisonment. A proper campaign against criminality and illegal drug use needs to seek out and remove the root causes of poverty. (For a further examination of this subject see my paper “An Outsider’s Look at Mountjoy Prison”)

The shortest and final term was the time when we focused mainly in issues of formation. We participated in workshops which included the future of religious life and ordained ministry, inculturation, cross cultural issues, psychological assessment as well as a final workshop on formational processes. The final term included an eight day directed retreat at Manressa, the Jesuit Retreat House, just north of the City centre and the coast.

Of value to me was the time away from Loreto House. On Fridays, a few of us gathered for a couple of pints of Guinness and on many Saturdays some of us went to the movies followed by tea at Bewley’s café. I also got to appreciate the beauty of the parks especially the Botanical Gardens about fifteen minutes walk from Phibsborough. It was wonderful to see the change of seasons and especially the first sign

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of spring through the daffodils appearing out of the ground. I made use of the holiday breaks to see more of Ireland and to see Paris and some of Italy for the first time. It was especially good to travel to the West and North of Ireland with my parents during the Easter break.

Of particular significance to me as a Vincentian was my stay with the Irish Vincentians at St Paul's, Raheny for first two weeks of my stay and the whole of my course at St Peter's, Phibsborough. I was very conscious of the origins of our Australian Province from the generosity and missionary spirit of the Irish Province. This was bought home to me by their ongoing concern and support of the young Vice-Province of Nigeria, the second province to which they have given birth. During my stay at Phibsborough the Parish there celebrated one hundred and fifty years of the Vincentian presence there. Of interest to us in Australia was the work of one of the Vincentians from Phibsborough. During his time as chaplain to Mountjoy prison he successfully petitioned the British Government to remove the chains from the prisoners as they were marched to docks to be transported to Van Diemen's Land. Also of note was my time with Fr Diarmuid O'Hegarty whose uncle, Edward Archer worked and died in our Province. Unfortunately, Diarmuid died a month before I left Ireland.

Since I returned to Australia, many people asked me if I enjoyed my time in Ireland. I have hesitated when answering. While there were aspects of the course that I did enjoy, as a whole I did not enjoy the Loreto House course. Rather I found the course challenging, intensive and at times difficult. The most difficult times came when I challenged a couple of the presenters. Even though my words and actions disrupted what was planned, I am glad that I did what I did. I have come away with a stronger sense of who I am and especially who I am as an Australian. I am grateful to be an Australian with our world view and openness to so much of what is happening in the world. I find our multiculturalism a wonderful gift that gives us what may be a unique gift in the world.

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Some of my difficulties with the course occurred because I expected a lot from the course and myself. I decided to make the most of the experience that the course offered. I did not take the safe option especially when volunteering for some things. I was fortunate to have two good previous experiences of a year off to study in 1987 and 1995. I wanted to build on what I already had learnt. I believe I did that. So even though the course in Ireland was not entirely enjoyable it was certainly worthwhile. I'm glad I had the opportunity to do it.
