Columns
Religious Life



Sisters of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus are pictured at the Giant's Causeway in Ireland. From left: Srs. Shawn Lyons, M. Clare Millea and the author, Kathryn Press (Courtesy of Kathryn Press)



by Kathryn Press

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I'm not Irish, but I live in Ireland. According to the best of family records, not a single member of my family — on either side — has ever lived in Ireland. I've had the privilege of living here three times. Sept. 1, 2021, marks the fifth anniversary of my congregation's convent in Waterford City, Ireland, where I am now living.

Why did my community establish a convent in Ireland — "the Land of Saints and Scholars"? Surely another country, another U.S. city, needed sisters more, many might say. After all, Ireland is Catholic. While once known for its deeply religious roots, Ireland has seen a dramatic decrease in the practice of the Catholic faith in the last few decades.

Yet, this was not always the case. We know that the history of the church in the United States is a story intertwined with the story of the immigrant. In the early years, religious communities from all parts of Europe sent sisters to America and across the globe to serve the needs of the fledgling church.

My own religious community, the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, followed the Italian diaspora, sending missionaries to Brazil and the United States at the start of the 20th century. In the century prior, St. Theodore Guerin went from France to the woods of southern Indiana to serve the needs of the immigrant farming community in the Midwest. German Dominican nuns settled in New York and evolved from a contemplative community to an active congregation. Their efforts, though perhaps modest at the start, were driven by a bold desire to share the Gospel.

Regardless of country of origin, there was a time in U.S. Catholic history when many religious communities' novitiates were filled with Irish women. In the decade including and following the Potato Famine, approximately two million Irish immigrated to the United States. The vast majority were women. With them, they brought their faith. They raised Catholic families, built new parishes and schools. And, they entered religious life. From their humble beginnings, they have truly left a lasting legacy on the landscape of our church.

Then there's my own American Catholic history. Two of the pastors I knew while growing up were natives of Ireland. On more than one occasion, I caught myself listening to their brogues rather than to the content of their homilies. In college, I came to Ireland for a year as a study abroad student. Living in Ireland showed me

the world in a whole new light. It was the middle of the Irish economic boom called the Celtic Tiger and the euro had only just been introduced. To steep ourselves in history, we toured ancient, medieval and modern sites. It was a marvelous, life-changing year immersed in a new (for me) culture. No sooner did I leave than I wanted to return!

In the decade after college, I discerned a vocation to religious life and made peace with the idea that my globetrotting days were over. I said *slán* to the thought of returning to Ireland. But, ours is a God of surprises! You can imagine my excitement when my religious superiors invited me to come to Ireland in August 2015 to attend a retreat for young adults.

The visit to Ireland was a response to a deeper question: How could we give back to the Irish church for all they have given to us? As a province, we reflected on the Holy Spirit's whispers and the movements of our hearts. So many of us named priests and religious who came to the United States as missionaries to share the Gospel in every cornfield, city and suburb. They were our teachers, our pastors, our co-workers. We spoke gratefully of their service and dedication. All the while, the doubts were there too. We didn't have the numbers. We couldn't possibly open any new convents.

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Our name — Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus — describes exactly why we came to Ireland. An *apostle* is one who is sent. We are missionaries and everywhere we go we must bring the love of the heart of Jesus. Having spoken with Catholics in Ireland, we knew there was a need for witness to the faith and for evangelization. Like the early missionaries to the United States, including our own Italian missionary sisters, ours was a modest but also somewhat bold proposal: to share our charism of promoting the love of the Sacred Heart in ways that would rekindle the spark of his love in the hearts of those who had seemingly forgotten him. Yes, we would open a convent in Ireland. It was a small way to say *thank you* to the church that had given us so much.

Marking an anniversary prompts me to reflect with gratitude on the past and to look forward to the future with hope. On Sept. 1, 2016, Bishop Alphonsus Cullinan, of the Diocese of Waterford and Lismore, welcomed three Apostle sisters to Mount St. John

Convent. The country of *céad míle fáilte*, a hundred thousand welcomes, lives up to its name. We are so thankful for the warm welcome we have received in our diocese and across the country.

We know we do not plant or harvest in this vineyard alone. Each and every one of our ministries is a collaborative effort — with the secondary schools in running Youth Alpha for their students, with Holy Family Mission for the formation of youth, with Youth 2000 in speaking and hosting retreats, with Christ on the Street missionaries as we befriend the homeless. There are countless ways that we can and do share the love of the heart of Christ here in Ireland.

The Lord still calls missionaries and sends them out in his name, even to historically Catholic countries like Ireland, and to existential peripheries, and to your kitchen table, and to the water cooler in your office, and to the comments on your Instagram feed. What modest but bold proposal might the Holy Spirit be whispering to your heart? Pray for the grace to be open and then *go*.

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