

Charlie Bird.

Last year I wrote an article for the Far East magazine recalling my coverage of the story of Fr. Niall O'Brien, the Irish Columban missionary who was facing a trumped up murder charge in the Philippines just over thirty years ago.

The trial of the 'Negros Nine' was the first major international story I covered as an RTE reporter and was my first introduction to the work of Irish missionaries.

Like many institutions in Ireland over the past few decades the Catholic Church has had its difficulties – but none of that should take away from the excellent work, which the missionaries continue to do while working abroad.

Earlier this year I was asked by World Missions Ireland if I would like to go back to the Philippines and look at the work which the missionaries are doing today.

I agreed to do so, but said I would like to produce a video of how I saw their work today.

So in June of this year I travelled to both South Korea and the Philippines and filmed the video that is now going to be shown in Churches around the Country on Mission Sunday.

The first thing that I would like to say is that this is my own view of the projects that I visited.

Indeed I was brought to many places, but I am totally responsible for the selection of the material that is included in the video.

The one thing that struck me forcefully when I covered the story of 'Negros Nine' all those years ago was the commitment of the Irish Missionaries in the Philippines to the cause of 'social justice' and to be seen to be standing side by side with the oppressed sugar workers on the Island of Negros.

This time around I saw a different group of missionaries doing much the same type of work.

On the Island of Cebu I met Sister Evelyn Flanagan a Presentation nun from Galway working on a project with the 'Sea Gypsies'.

The 'Badjao' tribe or sea gypsies are among the most oppressed ethnic group in South East Asia and there in the middle of them was this remarkable nun from Galway. The co-founder of the project was a Redemptorist Priest from Dublin, Fr. Frank Connon who died in the Philippines a number of years ago.

I met 'Frankie' as I called him on my first visit to Negros thirty years ago. He was a remarkable yet unassuming person. So to see Sister Evelyn continuing on this fantastic project was something very special.

Back in Manila I filmed another project this time being run by two Columban Sisters from Korea in a cemetery in the heart of the Capital.

And no visit to the Philippines would be complete without visiting Fr.Shay Cullen's project in Olongapo City.

His organisation, PREDA, set up over thirty years ago helps amongst others, sex workers and abuse victims.

In the Korean capitol Seoul, I filmed another incredible project this time run by Sister Miriam Cousins from Moate in County Westmeath.

Sister Miriam has set up one of the only projects of its kind in South Korea working with people with Aids who have been shunned by their families.

One evening in the Seoul City Centre I watched a group of Columban Priests say mass for the parents of the victims of the South Korean ferry disaster.

The parents of the three hundred school children who drowned have been seeking answers to what happened for almost a year.

Fr.Donal O Keefe from Cork who assisted in the celebration of the mass said they were 'standing with the people'.

Perhaps one of the most unusual things I filmed in Korea was on the Island of Jeju where an Irish Columban missionary Fr. Pat Cunningham was taking part in a protest against the building of a military naval base.

Going back for almost eight years priests and nuns from all over the globe, including Irish missionaries, have been joining the local people in their daily protest against the building of the naval base.

Each day the local police move the human chain of protesters, including Fr.Cunningham, bodily, from the protest line.

I suppose there are some people who would ask are these type of actions really missionary work.

But Fr.Cunningham and the other Irish missionaries who've been involved in the protest over the years say the building of the naval base is helping to fuel the arms race in the area between China and the United States and it is right that they stand with the local people in their 'peaceful protest'.

So in a way the role of the Irish missionaries is changing and adapting to what is happening in the world today.

But for me, one thing that hasn't changed since my first visit to the Philippines, is the commitment of missionary priests and nuns to be seen to stand with the people, wherever they are working.

I met many people as a result of my visit to the two countries and it is probably unfair to pick people out.

But three individuals struck a particular cord with me. Sister Evelyn Flanagan, Sister Miriam Cousins and Sister Nora Wiseman. They are incredible people doing incredible work.

If people in Ireland had the opportunity like I had, to meet them, they too would surely be proud of them.

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