



# MAN WITH A MISSION

A former member of the *Reality* team, Fr Gerry Reynolds reflects on the journey that has brought him to his current station - promoting unity between churches

by Sue Leonard

Father Gerry Reynolds is a happy man. Always interested in ecumenism, he feels that he's in the place God intended for him. For the past 25 years he has lived in Clonard Monastery in Belfast where his work involves building bridges between the Christian churches. Along with Father Alex Reid he commands enormous respect. But what roads did he travel to reach his present situation and who influenced him on the way?

Born in Limerick, Fr Reynolds always wanted to be a priest. "In those days people would encourage you," he says. "They'd say, 'Good lad; that's a good thing to do.' My dad died when I was

six, but my mother had a big influence on my life, as did the local parish. Two of my uncles were Redemptorist priests."

Attracted by the Redemptorists' missionary work, Gerry Reynolds was professed in 1953. He studied for a BA in Galway, then returned to the seminary to finish his theology studies. "I was ordained in 1960, and completed my preparation for ministry in 1961 or 62."

Following this, he spent some time working at Redemptorist Publications. "I was looking after the promoters and managing the financial side," he says. "I wasn't involved in the editorial,

though I did at one time edit a few issues of *Reality*. I was then sent to work in the Catholic Communications Centre and I became involved in the Religious Press Association and in the Legion of Mary."

#### DIFFICULT TIMES

In 1975 Fr Reynolds was appointed leader of the Redemptorist community in Limerick. "It was a difficult time," he says, "a time of transition in community life. After the Vatican Council, all the religious orders had to rethink their meaning and reshape their constitutions and statutes. It was a time of questioning the meaning of the priesthood as well.

"I think I was a failure as a leader of the community," he admits. "After three years I wasn't reappointed, and that was a great blow to my self esteem. They were painful, difficult years, but looking back that time was formative for me. I'm now able to cope with failure."

His next position, as a member of the Redemptorist community in Esker, Athenry, was much happier and he recalls, "I began to feel young again." There are two events, in particular, that he remembers. The first was his excitement on hearing that Pope John Paul II had been elected; the second was the papal visit to Ireland in 1979. "That was an extraordinary moment; the Bishop of Rome coming to Ireland. It was almost like St Patrick coming back."

#### REACHING OUT

In 1983 he was asked to go to Clonard Monastery, Belfast. He was delighted when he was encouraged to reach out to the other Christian churches because his belief in ecumenism had grown over the years. "When I was ordained, Pope John XXIII was reaching out to all the churches. One of the things he set for Vatican II was the restoration of the unity of Christians. Being ordained at that time marked my life in that way."

Fr Reynolds was also influenced by Charles de Foucauld, the French priest and mystic, who died in the Sahara in 1916. "He lived among the Touareg people and believed he'd been called to be the universal brother at the heart of the Christian vocation. A group of priests in France, inspired by his experience, began a fraternity called Jesus Caritas Fraternity. That has been a big influence in my life.

"Jesus Caritas holds that the heart of faith is the love of God revealed to us in Jesus, and the witnessing to him in our lives. Contact with Jesus Caritas has led me into the heart of the Redemptorist way of life."

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#### A BIG CHALLENGE

But there was one big challenge to be confronted in Belfast. "When I arrived, I asked Father Reid, 'What can we do to stop the killing and the violence?' And he said, 'The only hope is dialogue with one another, because dialogue opens the space for the Spirit of God to work.'

"People used to say, 'there'll never be peace here.' But we worked out of a great hope. It was based on God's wish for the Christian church to be truly united, so that in every place we can celebrate the Eucharist together. One church, in many churches.

"We now have a project here called Unity Pilgrims. The pilgrims are fully part of the Catholic Church; they go to Sunday Mass but they also go to Presbyterian, Methodist or Church of Ireland churches.

"The people have changed since peace has come," he says.

"But there's always work to be done. Every generation is like a continent to be won for Christ. The missionary task remains."

As he considers his life and work to date, Fr Reynolds adds, "I'm so grateful. I can sense the hand of God guiding me and helping me along the way.

"Brother Francis, a Redemptorist, once told me that God calls us in significant ways at different times in our lives. In youth it's to obedience; to listen and respond to his call. In middle age he calls us to fidelity; to stay the course and to begin again. And in the latter stages he calls us to abandonment; 'here I am, Lord, use me; go with the flow.' I'm in that third stage now." ■

#### Happy days...

"Each day here in Clonard we have morning and evening prayer in the church. In my time off I go for walks or visit friends. I love to read poetry; particularly Kavanagh, Seamus Heaney, or Manley Hopkins. And I love the old psalms too."

