

Irish Jesuit Missions

IRISH MEN BEHIND THE MISSIONS: FR. JAMES HURLEY SJ



Fifty years in Hong Kong: an Irish Jesuit's tale.

Fr. James Hurley SJ reached the grand old age of 90 this month! Jimmy, as he is affectionately called, has a lifetime of 72 years of service as a missionary with the Society of Jesus. Across the decades, he has met and befriended remarkable men, been inspired by their dynamism and sense of mission and entered wholeheartedly and courageously into the lives of people living in poverty in Hong Kong. He went into the Jesuit organisation on the Feast of St. Stanislaus, November 13th 1944, his ordination taking place on the Feast of St Ignatius July 31st 1958.

Here he shares some of the stories of his mission with humour, grace and insight with the Irish Jesuit Missions.

James was the youngest child born into a family of two boys and two girls at Ardmore, County Waterford in 1926. As a child he spent a lot of time in Church activities and enjoyed assisting at Mass. He was influenced by his brother Fr. Michael Hurley SJ who was a theologian, widely known as the 'father of Irish ecumenism' for his promotion of Christian unity. James studied in Mount Melleray from 1939 - 1944 and at the time, Mellary had a thriving farm producing an abundance of food. But when Foot and Mouth disease struck in 1941, the students were not allowed home for the Easter vacation. They organised a protest demanding "We want a vac!"

And so James, from his youth, prepared for a life of student protest, mobilisation and critical engagement that was to continue for most of his lifetime.

Involvement with students

It was 1952. Four years had been spent in Milltown for study and pastoral work in preparation for the Far Eastern missionary life to come. At last, it was time to set sail by boat for Hong Kong! The long voyage took about 30 days and James was grateful for the companionship of a priest and three fellow seminarians on board.

Ten years passed in Hong Kong before James began working with students as the acting Head of Foreign Languages Department at a post-secondary College. He also became Chaplain to the Hong Kong Federation of Post Secondary Students from 1965 to 1972. Students at that time were against colonialism and many forms of injustice and were concerned with, for example, the colonial status of Hong Kong and the fact that Chinese wasn't a recognised official language. Two of them wrote an article 'From Hope to Despair', an all-round and penetrating analysis of the College that was not well received by the authorities. Twelve students were subsequently expelled - one of whom was a Buddhist monk - and thus began the student movement in Hong Kong with which James was closely associated.

It was an era of student mobilisation and protest: similar movements were gathering momentum on the US campuses regarding the attainment of civil rights and the ending of the Vietnam War.

James, Jack and the Bishop

Jack Clancy, a close friend and Maryknoll missionary, was very involved with the anti-Vietnam War movement and was not in favour with Bishop Francis Hsu who had been born in Shanghai and was then Bishop of Hong Kong. When James' name was mentioned in the public press in relation to the student movement, the Bishop was quite angry and requested a meeting with him. James recalls his trepidation at that very formal meeting with Bishop Hsu and others while he explained himself and his actions. He was exonerated and the two men became very good friends despite the dramatic beginning to their relationship.

But there remained misunderstanding between Jack and the Bishop. James helped to build a relationship between them by asking the students if they would like Jack Clancy as their Chaplain. The vote was a resounding YES! Armed with that mandate, James went to the Bishop and brought both men together. Jack was appointed Chaplain.

It was the early 1970s and James felt that the time was ripe for a European priest to pass the reins on to a Chinese priest. Three seminarians were encouraged to become involved with the student movement and one, Stephen Tam, was selected. Then the Bishop put Jack Clancy and

another in place to assist Stephen – who meanwhile had become a priest - in covering James' former workload.

James' and Jack's relationship continues and to this day, they are very close friends. Jack is now married and a very prominent lawyer practising in Hong Kong. Unfortunately and much to his great sorrow, James sheds a quiet tear as he recalls Bishop Hsu's untimely death as a result of a heart attack suffered in his 50's.

On Sabbatical in the Philippines

“Speak out, speak strongly, criticise while remaining loyal!”, was a message that resounded for James while on Sabbatical at the East Asia Pastoral Institute in Manila in 1972. Bishop Cisco Claver gave a course there in September of that year: it was the beginning of Martial Law in the Philippines.

James remembers Cisco as being very casual, he played basketball with the students to win. He was an utterly fearless, exceptionally dynamic man with a sharp, penetrating intellect with whom James became well acquainted. While spending Christmas at Cisco's residence and office, he would often drive with the Bishop in his jeep through the mountains. He laughs when he recalls the occasion they visited a convent while the Bishop stayed at the wheel: “Bring your driver in for a cuppa tea”, said the Reverend Mother!

Ed Delatorre (Edicio de Latore) an SVD priest, was politically active in Manila and on the run at the time while James was there. He took the opportunity to hear Ed speak at a meeting held in secrecy (Ed still lives in Manila although contact with him has been lost).

When Martial Law was declared by Marcos, it was discussed by the Filipino Bishops who used to meet bi-annually. Should they issue a statement? The laity was waiting for guidance...the clergy were for and against. Some Jesuits were close to Marcos while others like John Doherty - a sociologist and a Jesuit at the time - were highly critical of Martial Law and it was he who wrote its first analysis. It was 1975 before it was issued as a statement.

But in 1972, the Bishops decided to say nothing. “We bishops have no conscience“, Cisco subsequently declared.

The inspiration of remarkable men

Bishop Perez left a deep impression on James when he announced: “You students are the prophets of the 20th Century!”. He compared them to Amos in the Old Testament. Amos was called by God to preach social justice and was rusticated i.e. sent to live in the remote countryside. It was an enlightening moment for James! He was inspired to write a paper on the

concept of ‘prophecy’ and intends to expand on his ideas in his retirement. ‘Prophecy’ in today’s Church carries great meaning for him.

James recalls Fr Dan Berrigan SJ, a social activist and now in his 90s, who suffered the same fate i.e. rustication, in the US. But eventually Dan was fully accepted and loved by all.

Pope Francis is tending towards the same social activism, James adds, although in the past was not obviously political when based in Bueno Aires, Argentina. Michael Campbell Johnson, an elderly Jesuit in the UK, was in charge of the Social Apostolate based in Rome at the time. Seemingly, he was sent to Francis (then Fr. Jorge Mario Bergoglio SJ) to hold discussions with him. Long conversations ensued but Michael deemed them ‘inconclusive’. Bergoglio then travelled to Europe to research his doctorate and spent a short time in Milltown Park, Dublin. On his return to Argentina, he was ‘rusticated’ to Cordoba. He led a simple life there, supporting the priests working in the slums and when he came back to Bueno Aires in 1998 as Archbishop, he was a different man.

An unanswered question often comes into James’ thoughts. One day he was in conversation with a priest based in Japan who had been a staff member in the Vatican financial department. A just, living wage was being strongly recommended at the time by the Church and when James enquired as to how the Vatican was implementing it amongst lay staff, there was silence. The priest replied that concessions, such as petrol allowances, were given to staff. James hesitatingly concludes that the Vatican was not practising what it preached on the issue. However, he is of the opinion that the Vatican would benefit from opening up and prays for Pope Francis’ efforts in trying to bring change about.

Blessed Franz jägerstätter the Austrian has also been a lifelong inspirational figure. He was a conscientious objector who refused to take up arms during World War 2 and was subsequently executed as a result. He was later declared a martyr and beatified by the Church.

James recalls another inspirational man, the Very Rev. Pedro Arrupe SJ, and the story Pedro would tell about assisting at Mass when he was Father General of the Society of Jesus. Pedro liked to pray in the small simple rooms of St Ignatius and one day, a visiting American Jesuit prepared to say Mass there for his group of American visitors. The sacristan was absent so Pedro performed the duties required. One of the group remarked afterwards to Pedro: “That Mass was a bit strange, but valid.” When he realised to whom he was speaking, he shot off!

On the factory floor

After the Sabbatical and not wishing to take up a full time position, the Hong Kong students wanted James to become Asian Chaplain to the Secretariat of Pax Romano, which he did. In addition, he was invited to become Master of Novices in Hong Kong. Although it was quite a

change, he accepted but eventually when the student number dropped, it was time once again to take another direction.

James quotes Canon John Hayes (founder of Muntir na Tíre in 1937), who was told by his ordaining Bishop on the occasion of his ordination, that he would: “Prefer to see you drunk with your people rather than sober without them”. James has tried to be with his people experiencing their realities throughout his ministry. And so it was that he became a factory worker in Hong Kong.

It was a clothes factory where James cut cloth endlessly for four mind-numbing months. It wasn't easy getting a job there, as a foreigner. Although offered a supervisory role, he refused wanting to experience life as an ordinary worker. He prayed daily for social justice and read Karl Marx' Communist Manifesto, sitting on the factory floor. Although read previously, the difference of his understanding from the factory floor was immense. He carries a great respect for Marx and treasures pictures taken at his graveside.



Fr. James Hurley SJ at the grave of Karl Marx, Highgate, London.

James laughs when he recalls the first time he meet the owner of the factory where he was employed. They recognised each other immediately. He was a graduate of a Hong Kong Jesuit college! They were both fixed to the floor. Here was the priest talking to the student who was the boss talking to the worker! Who was to make the first move... suddenly, a voice called out to the boss: “You're wanted on the phone”. Thank God! James breathed a sigh of relief.

He spent four months in two different factories and although he got used to it, standing continuously was hard. Having said that, conditions were better then; hours were nine to five and there was no overtime. James got to know his co-workers well and often had discussions

with them. Two young workers would remind him; “You’re a priest; you are free to come and go”.

Life with the Sisters and Brothers of Charity

While working at the factory, James lived with the Missionary Sisters and Brothers of Charity, founded by Mother Teresa. They were a cheerful group of young men, one of whom was an Australian, Brother Andrew, and a former Jesuit. Andrew, who later became General of the Brothers, also worked there and shared a room with him, sleeping on the floor, living in poverty and depending on charity. James recalls the evening when there was nothing to eat for dinner but tea and bread. Then there was a knock on the door. Two big chickens were handed in! The community dined in style the following evening.

James went on a ‘Discernment’ retreat in a Silesian retreat house. It afforded him a period of reflective time based on St. Ignatius’ observations of one’s feelings: to understand God’s will for us in our lives. He recalled the advice of the famous Fr. Tommy Ryan SJ given to him as a seminarian, “Stay in touch with poor people”. He decided on his next step: to work with people living in poverty at Christ the Worker Parish.

Three parishes in almost 30 years

James went on to serve in his new parish of Christ the Worker for 11 years, being Parish Priest for eight of them. It was a very happy, active period in James’ life. He began a Faith and Justice group and a Labour group amongst the communities in the parish. He was a founding member of the Hong Kong Amnesty International group there, informal at first and then having sought government approval, on a formal basis. The founder of Amnesty, Peter Benenson, became a friend and colleague. Amnesty is thriving in Hong Kong, as it is all around the world, to this day.

It is usual for a Jesuit to spend five to 10 years in one place before relocating. A Sabbatical taken in Dublin was followed by over a decade at St. Vincent’s Parish in a poor area of Hong Kong. It was the happiest period in James’ life. There a basic Christian community and Legion of Mary movement was flourishing. He worked towards collaboration with the Lutheran and Anglican communities, with the pastors sometimes giving homilies at each other’s churches. Nearby was the famous temple of Wong Tai Sin where thousands would gather regularly, especially for the Chinese New Year celebrations.



Temple of Wong Tai Sin, Hong Hong.

Interfaith relationships were built up and a new one with the neighbouring Buddhist monks was in the making, when James was requested to move to the Star of the Sea Parish. He was very regretful to leave at this point as so much progress was being made.

There were two other Jesuits along with James at the new parish. It was before the Hong Kong changeover of 1997 and no one knew what to expect. The transfer of the sovereignty of Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to China - referred to as “the Handover” internationally or “the Return” in China - took place on 1st July 1997 and marked the end of British rule in Hong Kong. Having spent over five years there, he returned to the Jesuit Parish of St. Ignatius Church at Wah Yan College.

Leaps of faith: Johnny’s and A Wong’s stories

It was common knowledge that James was in touch with families that were in financial need. Friends and colleagues often donated money to be used where required.

One day a woman called to ask for help for her son Johnny. He was the eldest of a family of five and on remand in prison for shooting another man; his brother awaited trial in another courtroom for rape and robbery. Johnny was found guilty of Triad membership and manslaughter. He received a sentence of 15 years and was freed after 12, during which time James visited him regularly and was very impressed by his intelligence. Thus began a long friendship that is still enjoyed by both.

Later on Fr. James married Johnny to Jovita and the couple went on to parent a son and daughter, now both young adults. Johnny’s children’s educational expenses being very large, James contacted a wealthy friend who then supported the son’s second and third level education. He has done very well in his exams and has a choice between Oxford and Cambridge Universities for the 2015 academic year. Johnny’s daughter got top marks in her University Finals and her intention is to work with prisoners. Another of James’ friends, who is a graduate

of the Jesuit school in Hong Kong and a well-known lawyer practising there, is also highly supportive of the family.

Johnny himself works as a lorry driver and takes care of his widowed father. His prison record goes against him unfortunately when he applies for a job, and he has been unable to progress in a career.

And then there was A Wong. He worked as a cook in the school where James lived. He was a gambler and although he borrowed from the teaching staff, no one reported him. He owed a great deal of money to the Triad and was constantly under pressure from them. His wife had divorced him, for legal reasons. He lost his job and was at rock bottom when he attempted suicide.

But James had faith in A Wong and knew him well. He helped the man to pay his debts and stop gambling. A Wong rebuilt his life and although they remain legally divorced, is still with his wife.

Homeward bound

In 2012, James travelled to Ireland thinking it would be his last time to visit his homeland. However, upon returning to Hong Kong, his health began to fail and when he was offered the chance to live permanently in Ireland, he decided to return. That was in October 2014 and he is now, he says, adjusting himself to a new life situation. Living a quiet life in Dublin is very different from the bustling, thronged streets of Hong Kong with its seven and a half million people!

James is looking for an appropriate apostolate to continue his life of Jesuit service in the country of his birth. He would like to direct “retreats in daily life” as he has done over the last two years. This is a month long program of daily prayer, reflection and spiritual direction that is conducted in the course of a person’s ordinary responsibilities. It has become the most common way of making a retreat based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius.

He would like to become involved with Amnesty International Ireland and continue the human rights activities that have characterised James’s lived experience and lifelong ministry in the service of people living in poverty.

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