

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND / OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS delivered by **Dr W.J. Smyth**, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, President, National University of Ireland, Maynooth on 10 April 2003, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, on **Sr Stanislaus Kennedy**

A Sheansailéir, agus a mhuintir na hOllscoile,

Dingle and other western jagged peninsulas lent, for many generations, an ambivalent attitude of detachments and linkage to the mainstream life of the remainder of this country. The fingers of land jutting out into the Atlantic and frequently isolated by hills and mountainous topography have helped preserve older values: integrity of the Irish language, and a way of life that was also somewhat, but temporarily, detached from that of the mainland. It was into such a community that Sr Stanislaus Kennedy was born.

Yet the perceived isolation of south-western Ireland was more apparent than real. Valentia, after all, was the European landfall of the Atlantic telephone cable which linked the Old World with the New : the very symbol of modern connectiveness. Fittingly also, the American home of Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the modern telephone, was staffed by a young woman from Dingle. Returning home to marry, that young transatlantic migrant was to become the mother of the future Sr Stanislaus.

The fourth daughter of a small farmer, Treasa grew up in the Gaeltacht community of Lispole on the Dingle peninsula and it was from there in 1958 at the age of eighteen that she set out for the Milltown novitiate of the Order of the Sisters of Charity. In the Ireland of the day such a pathway, to a life in religion, would not have been exceptional. Ireland of the pre-1960 era was a society that in many ways had changed little since the second half of the nineteenth century. To be sure, political Independence had been achieved, but the national economic structure and the societal and family values had remained remarkably constant. Emigration had siphoned off discord for generations. Social Change had been externalised and tradition preserved.

Treasa Kennedy was one of one hundred young women who entered the Novitiate that year. Her declared motivation was to seek a way of life that allowed her to work with the poor. Social conscience took precedence over religious fervour : in time, reflection on the conditions of the human spirit did stimulate a sense of transcendence. Her life's work has been witness to the belief in the need to improve, with justice, the lot of the poor in acknowledgement of a fundamental equality of persons as a wider design.

In the tradition of religious life of the time Treasa Kennedy was given the name of a saint (a male) and thereafter she has been known as Sr Stanislaus, or more familiarly, Sr Stan. Indeed, one might reflect that, notwithstanding her elegant femininity, the name Stan as depicted in populist culture with all its connotations of blunt, direct confrontation of problems was in fact a very appropriate description of the work patterns of a woman known for her directness, persistence, and a cultivated inability to comprehend the answer "no".

Sr Stanislaus managed at an early stage, to persuade her religious superiors that she should be sent to UCD to study for a degree in Social Science, rather than be groomed for a teaching post. It was the academic entrée to a life which was to include also a postgraduate degree from the University of

Manchester. However, her lasting experience of education in the field of social work really emerged from “Praxis”, and specifically from her contact with Peter Birch, Bishop of Ossory an inspired agent of social change.

Following her profession in 1963 Sr Stanislaus was assigned to Kilkenny, home of Bishop Birch. She was to remain there for twenty years during which time she occupied many roles.

In the 1960's, Sr Stanislaus Kennedy founded and directed the Kilkenny Social Services. In 1970 she co-founded the School of Social Education, Kilkenny, providing the first professional courses for residential child care workers in Ireland. She was a founder member of:

The National Federation of Youth Clubs

The National Association of Child Care Workers

The Campaign for the Care of the Deprived Children

and in 1974 the Government appointed Sr Stanislaus first chair of the National Committee to Combat Poverty now Combat Poverty Agency. The European Commission appointed Sr Stanislaus co-ordinator of the European rural poverty projects within the European Union in 1985.

Indeed it was in her role as a member of the National Federation of Youth Clubs that she made history in 1969 when she became the first woman to address the annual congress of the GAA on the theme of provision for youth in Ireland.

In 1983, and following the untimely death of Bishop Birch, Sr Stanislaus left Kilkenny for Dublin where she took up a research fellow position in her Alma Mater, UCD, and commenced the next phase of her life – working with homeless women in Dublin. She lived for a year with homeless women in a dilapidated building in Eustace Street – raising their consciousness and sense of self-worth by introducing them to Grace O’Shaughnessy, Evan Boland and other icons of contemporary Dublin. In the process she herself learned much. Out of that direct experience she founded Focus Point, now Focus Ireland with the mission of finding accommodation and a renewed sense of self-esteem for homeless women. She successfully sought to break the cycle of homelessness moving far beyond the traditional, but limited, charitable practice of providing food, shelter and money, *without* personal support to those in need. Focus Ireland now employs more than one hundred people, several hundred volunteers and has extended beyond Dublin to include Sligo, Waterford, Limerick and Cork. It is now the largest voluntary organisation working with the homeless population in Ireland.

Sr Stanislaus has in the course of her work found time also to publish ten books – some of which have been best sellers. They have ranged in title and content from the pragmatic and empirical analyses contained in *One Million Poor* (1981) and *Focus on Residential Child Care in Ireland* (1996) through to the spiritual focus of *Gardening The Soul* (2000). Her publication list reflects well the twin foci of a life lived with those on the edge, but yet always connected to a wider purpose.

In recognition of her very many contributions and leadership roles in Ireland and Europe Sr Stanislaus Kennedy was appointed to the Council of State in 1997 by President McAleese.

Sr Stanislaus remains Life President of Focus Ireland, but she has moved from daily involvement with that organisation and in 2000 she founded The Sanctuary, a holistic spirituality Centre in the centre of

Dublin. In 2001 she established Social Innovations Ireland Ltd to bring together imaginative and innovative responses to the emerging new social needs of twenty-first century Ireland.

Chancellor, I present to you for recognition by the National University of Ireland, a woman of immense reputation; a servant of the underprivileged people of modern Ireland.

Praehonorabilis Cancellarie, totaque Universitas, praesento vobis, hanc meam filiam quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneam esse quae admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo totique Academiae.