

OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

PROFESSOR ORLA FEELY, Vice-President for Research Innovation and Impact , University College Dublin on 2 December 2014 in the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*, on **FR PETER McVERRY, SJ**

A Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle

Today we recognise the selfless work and unwavering commitment of a man who has changed lives and challenged attitudes for over four decades now, Fr Peter McVerry.

Fr McVerry grew up in Newry, where he attended Abbey Christian Brothers' Grammar School. From there he proceeded to attend Clongowes Wood College, University College Dublin and the Jesuit School of Theology. A gifted scholar, he was headed for a doctorate in chemistry when another path beckoned. I hope that our colleagues in chemistry are magnanimous in this loss.

In 1974, Fr McVerry and two fellow Jesuits moved into a flat in Summerhill in Dublin's north inner city. This ministry was to transform him. In his book "The Meaning is in the Shadows" he describes the deprivation he encountered; shocking him out of what had to that point been a privileged and comfortable life. He writes:

"The people of Summerhill changed me, they turned me upside down and inside out. They shattered my illusions and my complacency. They opened my eyes to what is happening in Irish society and to which I had been blind for so long."

He spoke most movingly about the effect of these social conditions on the children and young people living in Summerhill, and how his experiences called in question long-held beliefs around crime and punishment, and about right and wrong.

He writes

“I thought my job was to instil into these young people a respect for society and for the laws of society; now I saw that I was wasting my breath, unless I could first instil into society a respect for these kids.”

In 1979 Fr McVerry opened a hostel for homeless boys aged between 12 and 16, but almost immediately saw the need to extend this to older age groups. In 1983 he founded the Arrupe Society, to provide housing and support to homeless youths. This later became the Peter McVerry Trust, committed to reducing homelessness and the harm caused by drug misuse and social disadvantage. It focuses its efforts on those with particularly complex needs – the most marginal and overlooked in our society.

The Peter McVerry Trust has established eleven homeless hostels, over 100 apartments, a residential drug detox centre and two drug stabilisation services. In 2013 it supported almost 3,600 vulnerable youths, and provided over 2,000 residential placements along with 75,000 meals.

These are extraordinary achievements to emanate from the leadership of one man and his early experiences in that flat in Summerhill. Through boom and through bust, in an ever-changing Dublin, the calls on the services of the Peter McVerry Trust have persisted, and the Trust has responded.

Throughout all of this activity, Fr McVerry has remained a tireless campaigner, instantly identifiable with his cause. He has lived in the heart of the communities he has served. Fired by knowledge and passion, he is a forceful and respected authority, and he continues to challenge the affluent and the powerful and to turn around opinions with the strength of his case. His ministry to vulnerable youths resonates in particular with the young, with the Trust a popular cause among student societies in their charitable activities.

Fr Peter McVerry provides homes for the homeless, he provides help to those often portrayed as beyond help, and he provides a voice for those whose voice is not otherwise being heard. He challenges us, through boom and through bust, to look to the margins. We honour today this man, this work and the community he has served over his forty-year living ministry.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis hunc meum filium, quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse quie admittatur, *honoris causa*, ad gradum Doctoratus in utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.