



Fr Vincent Lockhart
National Director
of Missio
Scotland

MY FATHER was born during the First World War. He survived the Great Pandemic of 1918-20, lived through the Great Depression, the hungry 1930s and then fought in North Africa during the Second World War. He married and raised a family and saw the world change beyond anything he could have imagined when he was a wee boy playing in the backstreets of Clydebank.

One thing that was constant was his faith in the love of God. It gave him a vision of something greater than himself, sustained him in good times and in bad, in the midst of the drama of world events, in his twilight years, especially in his last moments on earth.

Nowadays, we are immediately aware of all that is going on everywhere: the pandemic, the wars, the famines, the crimes of the powerful and the heroism of the lowly. The images and reports flood our living rooms, our phones and iPads.

While all this exposure may distract us from the demands of our own life and we may at times respond with sympathy, and even donations, eventually the tragedies no longer have the power to touch us as they did a few weeks before.

It is not that we are heartless or unsympathetic, but how can I continue to remain meaningfully connected to those who are suffering in distant places? The answer, I think, is by being in God: by doing His will in the present moment, by carrying out the small actions in my life for God, with love, by prayerfully offering what suffering I may experience as an act of love for those near and far away. What happens then is that as I draw near to God, He then connects me in a deep and unseen way to these brothers and sisters because He is near to them.

Life, in many ways, is returning to normal for us in Scotland. We are getting back to Mass and praying with others again. We are no longer an online Church but we are connected spiritually to the rest of the Church with another invisible bond—when we are in God.

As Catholics we are part of something bigger than ourselves: that family which is the universal Church. That is something we can try to be conscious of in each moment of our day and our life. That spirit is what we hope to engender at Missio with this little newsletter.

God bless.

IN SEPTEMBER 2021, I travelled from Aberdeen to Lerwick in the Shetland Islands on the nightly ferry. It was calm and took about 12 hours. An hour or so out I spotted a whale about a mile away—a Minke I was told. As I was travelling to the islands I thought about hospitality, seascapes, skylines, history, archaeology, wild nature, the wind, peat smoke and the diverse Catholic community of islanders—Scots, English, Irish, Polish, French, Filipino, South American, Italian, Indian... the list goes on.

It reminded me of a story that Fr Ambrose, a parish priest and former missionary in Ghana shared with me about Fr Theophilus Verstraeten (right), a Belgian man who was the first resident priest in Shetland since the Reformation.

Fr Verstraeten had served for 12 years—10 of them in Shetland—in the 'Arctic Pole Mission.' From Shetland he ministered to Orkney and Caithness. The mission covered the North Atlantic up to the Faroes, Iceland and Greenland. Six young Belgian priests—led by Fr Stefan Djunkowski—cared for this area for 15 years. It included the fishing boats, the summer visitors and seasonal workers such as the many Irishwomen who came gut and clean the herrings in Lerwick. The priests spoke in English, Faroese, Danish and Icelandic. A bit of Norwegian and Irish might have come in handy. Regardless, it was all somewhat foreign to the new priests.

Disease and death

In May 1871, a Belgian fishing boat Le Mare anchored off Lerwick, sending out a signal that there was a disease on board. The town's medical officer spoke to Fr Verstraeten, explaining that the vessel needed to anchor further away from the town and be

Fr Verstraeten, the saviour of the Shetlands



quarantined. Medical supplies would be sent to them and a doctor would be provided if and when they signalled for one. Fr Verstraeten volunteered to go aboard the boat and explain the situation. The Le Mare moved to a further away anchorage and settled down for a period of self-isolation.

The disease on board was smallpox and everyone recovered, apart from, that is, Fr Verstraeten who saved the Shetland Islands from infection, but contracted the disease himself and died four days later, aged 39. The Le Mare carried his body in a sealed, lead coffin back to Oostende. He was buried beside his mother in the village cemetery of Bottelare, seven miles south of Ghent.

The town council expressed their gratitude in the following way, a copy of which is in the Catholic Church in Lerwick.

The statement read: "Before moving onto business,



the meeting deemed it due to the memory of the lamented Fr Verstraeten, late resident Catholic priest, to put on record that the same sense of loss of one during a residence of nearly 10 years among a community of strict Protestants had not only lived down all religious prejudice, but had personally won the respect and esteem of all classes by the unobtrusive discharge of his professional duties and his amiable disposition, and who latterly fella a sacrifice to his priestworthy endeavour to protect the community from the plague of smallpox.

"The chairman was requested to communicate this to the friends of the deceased and to convey to them their sympathy."

The Belgian Consul wrote: "It is impossible to describe the dejection which this sorrowful occurrence has caused in the town where they perceive it as a universal disaster."

A legacy of Faith

So how successful was this small band of men? Well, it's hard to measure success, but we can say that some 150 years on, there are now resident priests in Caithness, Orkney, Shetland, the Faroes and Greenland. Iceland has a bishop, more than 30 priests, two communities of sisters and thousands of Catholics.

Fr Verstraeten's will—made the year before he died—left any of the little money he had to help build a church in Lerwick and to help maintain a priest. He had asked to be buried in Scotland or England, but it was decided under the circumstances of his death that his body would be sent back to Belgium.

Plague, quarantine, sacrifice, sudden death far from home and a sealed coffin... it all sounds familiar to us. Most of us know people who have put their lives on the line over the past couple of years.

I knew I'd see the ruins of monasteries and chapels in Shetland. I hadn't expected to find the echoes of a modern foreign missionary.

At the other end of the British Isles in the 1870s, the first Mill Hill Missionaries were leaving London for India, Borneo, the USA and East Africa. Most of them never came back and died you in their 20s or 30s.

The pandemic and climate change, not to mention war and the threat of war, remind us that even in the prosperous and materialistic western world life is precarious, but also of our common humanity—brothers and sisters in Christ as we say at Mass.

Fr Theophilus Maria Verstraeten helped bring the Catholic Faith back to these islands. His prayers help us still, both in the Diocese of Aberdeen, but also in the far-off continents and islands of the world.

Fr John Doran MHM

Missio Scotland goes back to school!



Missio Scotland was delighted to be back in Scotland's Catholic primary schools in 2022 and delivering assemblies after the Covid-19 pandemic had prevented us from doing so for two years. Our Communications Officer, Gerard Gough, was thrilled to meet Missio Scotland Champions from the likes of Our Lady of Good Aid Cathedral Primary School.

Supporting the missions is now as easy as 1,2,3!

Text MISSIOSCOT to 70085 to donate £3

To find out more about ways to donate to Missio Scotland visit: www.missioscotland.com/donate

Texts cost the donation amount plus one standard rate message. CHARITY NUMBER: SC014858

You can also donate to us by scanning this QR code on your phone

