

Focus Ireland – an initiative of the Religious Sisters of Charity (Ireland)

- opens 28 new homes for homeless, disabled and vulnerable people.

“I have come so that all may have life and have it to the full.” (John 10:10)

I witnessed the promise of bringing *‘life in its fullness’* today (22 June 2017) as the Religious Sisters of Charity (Ireland) launched the opening of 28 new homes for disabled, homeless and vulnerable people, in Harold’s Cross, Dublin, on land gifted by the sisters some 15 years’ ago. I’m happy to say the positive news of this new development was given an airing on the RTE news. The journey from gifted land to 28 new homes has not been easy. Objections, obstacles and hurdles had to be overcome along the way, but thankfully, today is a proud day for **Focus Ireland** as challenges were faced head-on and the dream was realised.

Great credit is due to the RSC sisters, lauded for their vision and zeal in pursuing their goal to highlight the critical situation of homelessness in Ireland and to pursue an action to build affordable accommodation. Patricia (my sister, who was with me) and I met some of the residents who are now in their newly built homes. The joy for them is palpable.



Anne (left) and Zohre (right) new owners, with Housing Project Manager for Focus Ireland

Special mention and thanks to Sr Stanislaus Kennedy for her tireless work since 1985. This work of lobbying, campaigning, highlighting the plight of those ‘on the margins’ has been on-going! She is the first to say that she has not been alone, supported by her congregation and many more – both volunteers and staff.

Combined with the opening of the 28 new homes was Annual Report from **Focus Ireland**, in which some of its work of prevention of homelessness is detailed, along with its provision towards housing individuals and families. In 2017, this work has reached crisis point.



As Sister Stanislaus Kennedy, (*photo with Kay Mulhall*) President and Founder of **Focus Ireland**, said in her address to over 100 invited guests, it is incumbent on government to set out the actions to be taken over the next three years to prevent family homelessness which is on the rise in Ireland.

Newly-appointed Minister for Housing, Eoghan Murphy, acknowledged the great work done by **Focus Ireland** and the Religious Sisters of Charity and other charities as he gave a commitment to continue the work begun by Minister Simon Coveney TD, in tackling homelessness.

Sister Stan said **Focus Ireland** has supported over 13,000 people who were made homeless or at risk of it in 2016. If she thought 2015 was a bad year, then 2016 became much worse. The same year Ireland marked the centenary of the nation as it spent money on commemorations and celebrations!

Some stark statistics in the Report included the numbers of families becoming homeless every month. 20 in 2014 rose to 40 in 2015 and 75 in 2016. This figure is rising.

As Sister Stan said in her rhetorical question to the invited guests:
What is this saying to us today in Ireland where houses are being bought up by 'vulture funds' and hotel 'hubs' are housing families in one room with no facilities to cook, no space or privacy for parents, no place for children to do their homework, where landlords can charge rents that go on rising year by year and banks can repossess homes – all factors pushing people out of homes?

IN 2016 **Focus Ireland** increased its housing stock by 135 new units and is on its way to doubling the housing stock by 2020. Where there is no government action to take charge of this crisis, it appears to be left to Religious and Charities to step into the breach.

As Sister Stan went on to say, when Mother Mary Aikenhead (founder of RSC) began her ministry to the sick and poorest in Ireland over 200 years ago, she faced many objections also, not least when she purchased land outside Dublin ('in the country' now Harold's Cross) to build provision for a nursing unit. (now St Mary's Hospice). Two-hundred years ago, it was a poor Ireland. Today a richer and more prosperous Ireland is living with the scandal of homelessness. It would seem that Religious of Charity and others, including Peter McVerry Foundation are 'filling these gaps' where the State is failing.

She praised the commitment and dedication of **Focus Ireland** staff as she made a passionate plea to all present (and to the Nation) to *"treat people who are homeless with the same respect as others in our society. Then we can all stand together as one – and live in an equal society and an inclusive nation."*

I was glad to represent Brigidines as we lend our support and solidarity to the project, and are constant donors to **Focus Ireland** over the years.

The closing message of our Congregational Forum, May 2016, invites us to "encourage each other to take action in small and large ways so that *'all may have life and have it more abundantly'*" (p15)

Kay Mulhall, csb

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