

GRASSROOTS

(A column for priests and religious working in disadvantaged areas)

In their recent study of voluntary organisations, The Voluntary Sector and the State, Pauline Faughnan and Patricia Kelleher highlighted the significant involvement of members of religious orders and diocesan priests in voluntary organisations. Of the organisations surveyed, 43 per cent were founded or initiated by a priest or religious. In spite of their declining numbers, it is clear that religious still play an important role in voluntary and local community activity.

Religious orders in Ireland are often connected through their schools and other activities with a wide social mix, and therefore are potentially a powerful lobby. The Council for Major Religious Superiors is a body that the government of the day may not be particularly fond of, but they cannot ignore it.

However, in the case of religious working in disadvantaged communities, while they are often effective in their own areas, they are not very well networked, and this probably diminishes the impact they might have on establishment attitudes and state policy, whether through the CMRS or in other ways.

In May 1993 a small number of religious working in disadvantaged areas met in the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice to discuss their role in the local community. One theme that emerged was that while these religious maybe quite effective locally in helping out with problems, they do not, with some significant exceptions, challenge the defects in the wider systems which give rise to these problems. For instance there has been little or no coordinated protest by these religious about the process through which the vast local authority housing 'ghettos' in which they live have been created. There was also a concern expressed that through their work religious could even be bolstering up systems, of both Church and State, that none of them really believe in.

The hope is that by meeting in this way religious living in disadvantaged areas will clarify their own role, and support one another in speaking out on issues of common concern.

A further meeting of this group is scheduled for Saturday, 16 October, 10.30-1.00. For further information ring Bill Toner S.J. at 874-0814, or Peter McVerry S.J. at 874-0002.