

Mission Responsible

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Story by Lauren Byrne

It isn't easy getting face time with Séamus Finn. It's not that he didn't want to be interviewed for *Irish America*; in e-mail exchanges he was friendly and willing. Pinning him down to a time and place was the problem. This member of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a missionary order of 5,000 priests and brothers in 60 countries, reckons he travels on average 125,000 miles a year, which means he's rarely in any one place for very long. Earlier this year, however, a public policy conference at Harvard Law School created an opening. We could meet, he said, at the end of the day's session and before he made a dash for a brief visit to his 94-year-old mother who lives north of Boston, after which he was heading to Indonesia. I imagined it would be easy to spot him in the crowd emerging from the conference room that afternoon: he'd be the one in black suit, white dog collar, eyes glazed with travel fatigue. In the end it was he who approached me, sporting an open-necked shirt, tweed jacket, and the broad smile of a man who clearly enjoys his life.

It's his several roles that keep Reverend Finn on the move. He is director of the Oblate Order's Justice, Peace & Integrity of Creation offices in Washington, and their representative at the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR) and at the International Interfaith Investment Group (3IG), two of the world's leading faith-based investor organizations. His past accomplishments include his involvement with the shaping of the McBride Principles, developed to ensure fair labor practices in Ireland, and he's the sort of person journalists turn to when they need background on the Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka, just one of many places he has an insider's knowledge of.

“Some people have compared me to the tinkers back home,” Finn smilingly told me, revealing his origins, now obscured by his American accent, in the reference to Ireland's subculture of traveling people. Born in Kanturk, Ireland, he moved with his family to Lowell, Mass., when he was 14 years old. He conveys the magnitude of this cultural shift by pointing out that the number of pupils at the Lowell High School where he was

enrolled was twice the size of the entire population of Kanturk. His father, an auto mechanic, never really adjusted to life in the depressed former cotton manufacturing town, he says. His mother and the females in the family of seven proved more adaptable. Recalling memories of when he entered the priesthood, Finn smiles at the thought of the t-shirt with the words “Join the Oblates and see the world” that his father jokingly gave him, not knowing then the full extent of his son's life of nonstop travel, only that as a missionary priest Séamus would see more of the world than his brother, Dan, a diocesan priest who has spent all his life in the Boston area.

In the 1970s, in an effort to end South Africa's apartheid regime and concerned about the growing production of armaments by U.S. companies for the Vietnam War, Tim Smith, a Methodist minister, got together with a number of other faith-based investors to form the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility. Today the New York-based ICCR is a coalition of 275 religious institutional investors representing over \$100 billion in investments, which they have leveraged, Smith, its former director, has been quoted as saying, to “protect the environment, end sweatshops, guarantee equal employment, improve healthcare access for the poor and elderly, and build a more peaceful world.”

For the past twenty years Finn, who has a doctorate in social justice from Boston University, has engaged with governments on behalf of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate on public policy issues and with corporations on a wide range of human rights and environmental issues. A past president of the board of ICCR, Finn currently serves on the executive committee of the more recently formed 3IG, which represents a post-9/11 coming together of the major world religions to participate in what is known as “socially responsible investing.” It's the obverse of the get-rich-quick approach – one that espouses ideas like keeping workers healthy and therefore productive, and keeping the environment cleaner and therefore more sustainable – and one to which religious organizations bring a special perspective, Finn argues. “There is a capricious, greed-driven side to



human nature, and it's clear that for some people the accumulation of wealth is the number one priority they have in terms of the meaning of their lives, and one has to be honest about that. And sometimes shareholders are not any different. They're looking for the greatest return – that's a feature of the system. The faith perspective says, Hold on a minute. Human beings are created in God's image and likeness." He elaborates further, "Our perspective is from biblical and Catholic social teaching and what our understanding of what the mission of the church is. We're not interested in making money so that we'll have it in five years to pay someone's college tuition or because we want to buy a bigger house. I'm not saying those are bad, but we feel that we have a vocation to look at the longer view."

While the Oblates may not be personally invested in a particular mining company in Bolivia with environmental issues, say, or a flower farm in Kenya whose employees are being exposed to pesticides, their mission centers close to such places make them accessible to Finn, and the information he gathers can be shared with ICCR or 3IG investors who do have a financial stake in these concerns. With bases all over the world, the Oblates have an unusually wide-lensed view of multinational corporations. "We have colleagues in Indonesia, Latin America, and in sixteen countries in Africa, and they wonder are they getting a fair shake; are any of these companies really interested in anything but making as much profit as they can."

One of Finn's frequent destinations is indeed Bolivia, where he has been participating in ongoing discussions between community leaders and mine owners about improved safety conditions for workers and the need to develop cleaner technologies to protect the surrounding environment. With the benefit of twenty years' experience he knows that bringing about such changes is a "long, slow process." But not an impossible one. After all, he says, "Reinvention is part of the story of capitalism."

There is no radical agenda, no whiff of revolutionary ardor, about the methods of ICCR or 3IG. Divesting from a company that is engaging in poor practices is only ever a last resort. Instead, ICCR investors prefer to stay involved, leveraging their combined financial clout to induce change. Finn explains, "We want to simply say that there are a number of things that should be included in the balance and some have to do with human rights. How do you treat your workers? How did you make this money? Was it fairly made or did you steal it? We want companies to count the environmental costs, the social costs, in their budgeting. Then I think you have a holistic system."

The increased transparency of Nike's operations and the promise of a sustainability report from Wal-Mart by summer of 2007 were some of the breakthroughs for ICCR that Finn pointed to when asked for some examples of past successes. "We've been asking Wal-Mart for the past eight or nine years. We've been saying we don't think your business model is sustainable. It might demonstrate some short-term money but it's not viable in the long run. You're creating hostility, you're creating enemies!"

When I checked on the status of the sustainability report at the end of the summer, Finn responded that it was still in draft form. At that point Wal-Mart had just released a reduced profits forecast. Was this proof, I asked, that they should have heeded ICCR's warnings? Séamus's circuitous response revealed that the world lost a fine politician when he chose the priesthood: "I think it is fair to say that these [reduced profits] should be attributed to a number of different causes; competition; China issues, etc. which would, I believe, fall under a sustainability report."

In July this year the SEC sent ICCR and other investor groups scurrying into action when it announced that it was considering imposing restrictions on shareholders' rights to sponsor advisory resolutions, the main tool investors use to draw attention to their concerns. If the past offers any clues, then chances are high that ICCR in collaboration with other interested bodies will succeed in skewering the proposal. In 1998 more than 300 socially responsible and other groups successfully joined forces to oppose a similar SEC plan to end the shareholder resolution process.

On the last occasion I contacted Séamus it was to get his response to the SEC proposal. He only had time to direct me to the topic on ICCR's Web page. He was heading out the door to the airport, he said. ■