

“Reconciliation in Northern Ireland: The Future: The Contribution of the Christian Churches”

A paper delivered by the Most Reverend Dr. R.H.A. Eames, Archbishop of Armagh, at a Social Studies Conference in Clongowes Wood College, Naas.

The key issues for the Christian Churches in Northern Ireland today are:

1. To present the Christian message of love, compassion and understanding in a community divided and polarised along lines which are so often given religious labels.
2. To be identified with the real needs of ordinary people yet not to lose the will or ability to speak with courage about the needs of the whole community, irrespective of the divisions.
3. To speak to the community with an integrity based on a clear understanding of Christian principles which transcend loyalties and instincts so often dictated by events.
4. To find ways of influencing so many caught up in the spiral of violence who have no real contact with the Churches.

The impact of words written over a century ago by the famous Irish historian, Lecky, should cause us all to search our hearts today.

“If the characteristic mark of a healthy Christianity be to unite its members by a bond of fraternity and love, there is no country in the world in which Christianity has more completely failed than in Ireland.”

Written at a time when such adverse comments on the state of religion were rare, these words have a singular significance when applied to Northern Ireland today. The divisions of which we speak may have political, social, cultural or historic identities — at the end of the day the religious aspect of the problems cannot be denied. But the problems of Northern Ireland cannot be simply described in terms of a religious conflict. So much more comes into the complex picture. But the designation of so much of those problems in terms of religious communities is a constant reminder of the religious dimension.

Today in Northern Ireland we see communities struggling to find a lasting identity for themselves, people surrounded by all the tapestry of outward

and visible religion but confronted with so much that appears to deny Christianity, alienated from each other by Creed and political aspiration, torn asunder by violence and sectarianism and wandering through an abyss of myth and half-truth in which the clamouring voices of extremism so often appear to be the only voices listened to.

NOT A PLEASANT PICTURE

It is not a pleasant picture. But it is the reality of the situation today.

Anyone who takes reconciliation seriously could hardly imagine a more urgent and demanding scenario in which to plead their case. Unfortunately, experience of recent years has taught us that there could be few less inviting circumstances in which to seek the path of reconciliation. Many voices have called for reconciliation: many have prayed for it: too few appear to have faced up to the cost involved and too few seem to really want to pay that cost.

Reconciliation, like so many words which fall from our lips in a polarised and violent society, is in the eyes of the beholder. One man's reconciliation is another's weakness. One man's reconciliation is another's triumph. One man's reconciliation is another's betrayal.

Reconciliation between communities is one thing. Reconciliation within the Churches is too often something different. The unpalatable truth is this: the Christian Churches in Northern Ireland so often talk about reconciliation for the community but appear to the outside world to fail in any worthwhile effort to gain complete understanding among themselves.

What is meant by reconciliation? Is it uniformity? Is it conformity? Is it mutual acceptance of difference? Is it absorption of a

minority by a majority? Is it something that is completely devoid of tension — or does tension itself have to remain an ingredient to ensure acceptability of differing aspirations? Is co-existence? Is it based on a recognition that people are different and that they will never completely unite or agree?

Frequently, discussions of Northern Ireland and its problems have been unreal and unhelpful simply because they have not commenced from a recognition of what reconciliation really means. It is not that we have to arrive at a mutually accepted singular definition — but that at least in any discussion we are all talking about the same thing.

REAL ISSUES

These are not mere academic talking-points. These are real issues. I do not find much evidence in speeches, statements, pleas for peace or articles in Northern Ireland that sufficient time is given to looking at the word ‘reconciliation’ itself.

When we talk about peace in the community do we mean by this cessation of violence alone? When we talk about political settlements or political proposals are we talking about the real issues that divide ordinary people? Are we confusing several things while searching for an ill-defined solution? Is there too much anxiety to find fault with those who disagree with us without sufficient consideration of what is needed to put our own house in order? Does reconciliation mean that the “other side” must be reconciled to “my side” with nothing given or expected in return?

There are two main communities in Northern Ireland. Each has a general identity and the basis of that identity is to be found in the uneasy alliance of a particular political/religious identity: Protestantism and British Unionism; Roman Catholicism

and basic Nationalism. I use the word 'basic' in each case because it is not always recognised that there are different strands in Unionism and different strands in Nationalism — some are distinct and some overlap. The distinction between these strands depends more and more on how people believe those distinctive aspirations can be realised. Also, there are distinct strands in Protestantism and in Roman Catholicism. Each has its traditionalists. Each has its liberals. Each has its ecumenists.

There are, therefore, two aspects or perceptions to the work of the Churches in the field of reconciliation:

(a) The work of the Churches in reaching agreement and an understanding of each other, and,

(b) The witness of the Churches to the community at large.

(a) Agreement and understanding among the Churches:

The ecumenical movement in Ireland has been spasmodic and hesitant if one views it only from an official level. Specifically-organised activities and programmes among the Irish Churches geared to bring the Churches closer together have met with partial success. Joint worship, joint approaches to social problems, joint statements on matters of community concern are now much more common-place than even 20 years ago. Church leaders are prepared to attempt much more together than was the case even a short time ago. The Ballymascanlon Inter-Church Conference and the process it initiated began with a fanfare of trumpets, but because too much was expected of it, too little has been achieved in the estimation of a community which has expectations heightened by a longing for dramatic developments. The Ballymascanlon Conferences

have been invaluable in helping the Churches to examine secularism, unemployment, world-need and common matters of concern in Christian teaching and witness. They have been invaluable in fostering friendship among the decision-makers. But even the most ardent Ballymascanlon advocate would admit they have yet to do much in tackling the really divisive issues between the communities of which the Churches are a part. I, for one, am convinced that the Ballymascanlon *process* is more important than the individual Conferences. The process of fostering understanding does not depend on the success or failure of one Conference. The process of greater understanding is slow and at times painful. It is still too soon to judge the success or failure of Ballymascanlon.

What critics of Ballymascanlon are inclined to forget is that there are numerous "Mini-Ballymascanlons" taking place all over Ireland. Groups of Church members, both clergy and lay, are meeting regularly for prayer and Bible-study. These unheralded meetings, unpublicised and often comprised of small numbers, frequently meet in areas of community strife and division. Such groups I have known which meet in places where there is community tension, are experiences of immense value. Of course, they are fragile plants — but thank God for what they are doing.

NOT SOLE PREROGATIVE OF N. IRELAND

Doctrinal differences between the Churches are not the sole prerogative of Churches in Northern Ireland. The Christian Church throughout the world faces such differences and difficulties. Christians differ on such fundamental issues as the nature of the Church itself. This deep theological issue spawns problems which concern the

nature of the Ministry, Church authority, recognition of each others forms of Ministry, inter-Church marriage and even causes differing emphasis on questions of sacramental life. Unfortunately, in the highly-charged atmosphere of Northern Ireland, such deep theological issues tend to become secularised in a peculiar way. They become politicised and consequently divisive. If mixed marriages are the most quoted focus of such differences, other less well-known manifestations of denominational understandings of the nature of the Church are no less obvious.

What is becoming very clear is that where official Church activities appear to be slow and ponderous, individuals and unofficial groupings are apparently making much greater progress. Individual initiatives at greater understanding among Christians appear at times to have more success than officially organised ventures. Several ad hoc groups of Protestants and Roman Catholics have produced excellent discussion papers in the past few years.

The violence and community divisions in Northern Ireland have compelled much heart-searching for the Churches in their attitudes to one another. Traditional enmities continue to exist and vary in intensity from one community event to another. But there has been a growing consciousness of a *Christian* rather than *denominational* attitude to terrorism, murder and strife. We have a long, long way to go yet until we can all speak unequivocally about the divisive issues in the community. But there are signs that we who call ourselves Christians are beginning to regard violence and terror as a direct challenge to Christianity as opposed to something directed at or by sectional interests.

(b) Witness of the Churches to the community at large:

Notwithstanding all that has happened since 1969, the role of the Churches in Northern Ireland has continued to be one of some significance and importance. Northern Ireland is a small, closely-knit community. Family ties run deep. Growing secularism has yet to completely diminish the local influence of Church life. The voice of the Church on many public issues is still sought and expected. Not unnaturally amidst the horrors of the violence and strife that voice has been too often seen and heard as one of condemnation alone. However, one detects that of recent years there has been an encouraging new emphasis on both critical and constructive comment on public issues — and on issues not just related to *one* part of a divided community. Surely this ingredient must be encouraged and extended. But if it is to be a process of value, it must contain an *objectivity* and *integrity* which transcend sectional or denominational interest. All too often in the past the Church's voice has been a reaction to events rather than that clear prophetic call society so desperately needs. Also, too often in the past the integrity of a truly Christian voice rather than the re-statement of a denominational stance has been too little heard.

NO HALF WAY

In the tensions and divisions of Northern Ireland today interpretation of a position or attitude is at times just as important as the stance itself. The Churches are frequent victims of that peculiar religious/political syndrome which envelopes the Province. Historically, Protestantism is equated with Unionism and Roman Catholicism with Republicanism. Not unnaturally the main Churches are frequently perceived to be part of that separation. Given the

aspirations of their people, such a perception is natural and understandable. But there have been times when this situation has mitigated against that degree of integrity so essential to an objective Christian attitude or comment on public issues. One example of this difficulty has been high-lighted by the sectarian strife which lies so close to the surface in Northern Ireland today. The Christian attitude must be that all taking of human life is morally wrong. Every effort must be made to avoid even the suggestion that murder can be explained away when it is committed by one side of the sectarian divide but utterly condemned when it is attributed to another. There can be no half-way house in this process.

The Churches also face the dilemma of how they should be seen to be speaking to a society in conflict. Are they merely to reflect the feelings of their people or is there a role for them in what can only be described as that of the "prophetic voice"? Are they to react to events or is there a moral duty to look into the future with courage and integrity? Undoubtedly, there are occasions when there is a duty to represent the genuine fear of their people. There are so many on both sides of the sectarian divide who do not see violence or confrontation as the way forward. These are the people who feel swept along by events over which they have little control. How is their voice to be heard if the Churches do not, through their public utterances, remind the world that there are those in Northern Ireland who are not extremists, who are not involved in violence and who are horrified by intimidation? They are people who have their aspirations but who earnestly seek stability and security in their daily lives and want to live at peace with their neighbours. They exist. In any situation of polarisation and tensions the

moderate is threatened. He or she does not find an easy vehicle from which their voice can be heard. I believe that all too often that moderate voice has been written off as some sign of weakness. It has been dismissed by the extremist and activist. But society has not recognised the moderate voice for the importance it deserves. So much of what a moderate Protestant or a moderate Roman Catholic stands for has got to be reflected in the voice of the Churches.

POLARISATION OF COMMUNITIES

Over the past few years in Northern Ireland we have seen a process in which polarisation of communities has produced degrees of extremism which have all but silenced the voices of moderation. History has shown that this is the lot of the moderate. He is regarded as the weakling in society because he seems less positive than the extremist. He appears unable to influence events because he is more concerned with long-term objectives rather than instant action.

He is regarded as some sort of traitor to a cause because he is prepared to look at both sides of an argument or see something of another person's point of view. He is regarded as irrelevant because he deals in charity and charity is in short supply at present. The middle ground is never easy to hold.

Yet the truth is that you do not need to be any less a Protestant, any less a Roman Catholic, any less a Unionist and any less a Nationalist to be a moderate.

A MODERATE STANCE

To adopt the moderate stance is no surrender of religious or political principle. To be a moderate is so often to be the true realist. Irish politics and Northern Ireland politics in particular, have not always been

a fertile ground for the development or encouragement of the moderate approach or the moderating influence. The loudest voice is not necessarily the most effective in the long term.

Yet the truth is this: basic Christianity is to be found in so much which is usually termed "the moderate approach". Too much of what is called religion in Northern Ireland today is party politics under another name. It has been said before but it cannot be repeated too often: Northern Ireland needs less of what passes for religion and more of what is genuine Christianity. Perhaps the Churches need to have their own Calvary: to face up to what real sacrifice means. True Christian discipleship involves sacrifice. It involves real hardship and misunderstanding. But the way of the Cross, as I understand it, is a path of love and suffering. It is also the path we who claim to be members of the Christian Church must be prepared to walk.

Because of the close connection the Churches in Northern Ireland enjoy with their people, they are inevitably identified with the needs and fears of those people. I recall many instances when the real presentations of the genuine fears of people have come from Church spokesmen alone. But there is all the difference in the world between identification and over-identification. Too often the integrity of the Christian voice has suffered because the voice of the Church has appeared to be over-identified with the feelings of one section of the community to the exclusion of everything else.

LABELS EASILY OBTAINED

Labels are easily obtained in Northern Ireland. The great historic and deeply significant words "Protestant" and "Roman Catholic" have so often

been used to give false identification which is a travesty of their real meaning. To take human life or threaten a community in the name of Protestantism is the ultimate blasphemy. It is a denial of what that word means. It is a denial of the Christianity it is supposed to represent. Some of the actions and words attributed to those who claim to represent Protestantism have made many of us ashamed and disgusted to be linked in any way with such claims.

Let me say something about Church life in Northern Ireland. I do not feel sufficient credit has been given to the stabilising and faithful local witness of Church life today in the Province. Nowhere in the world are clergy more identified with the needs and problems of their people than in Northern Ireland. I have had frequent visitors from overseas who have remarked on this fact. The clergy know their people: they are involved with them and they live among them. Frequently, figures of Church attendance bear no resemblance to the influence clergy have within a locality. I have seen many examples of the caring and compassionate leadership at the local level of parish clergy, ministers and priests. Many a situation of great tension and potential danger has been defused by the intervention of local clergy. Many a situation exasperated by violent rhetoric, marred by violence, has been brought to the local community leaders to deal with when outsiders have gone away. The clergy of Northern Ireland deserve far more recognition for their work than they receive.

This is one of the most difficult periods in history to exercise the Ministry of the Church in Northern Ireland. The voice of reason, the voice of reconciliation and the voice of calm are sometimes very unpopular when a local community has been stirred up emotionally. Many

many clergy have shown immense personal courage and integrity in the example and leadership they have given. Thank God for them.

RETREAT INTO THE FAMILIAR

One of the effects of polarisation is that people retreat into the safety of the familiar. This fact helps to explain a reluctance to become involved in the uncharted seas of ecumenism. It helps to explain a reluctance to consider anything which falls outside the purely traditional in Church life. We must be patient with this situation and seek to understand its causes.

I always find it a sobering and extremely sad fact that virtually all of those involved in violence or the promotion of divisions have at one stage of their lives had some connection with a Church community. They will probably have been baptised in the name of Almighty God and many will have been brought up with at least some connection with their Church. What do their future actions say about the bold, or lack of it, that their Church has had on them?

It is equally sobering to be reminded that when a Church leader speaks out on violence his words will fall on many deaf ears. Those who are involved in terrorism may claim some religious/political label for their actions. But their involvement in the main Churches will be non-existent.

STAGE SET

The stage is set in Northern Ireland for the voice of sanity and Christian love. It is set for real leadership. It is simply not good enough, to say, as some do, that events must run their course and that proposals for reconciliation will come at some future date. It is not good enough to continue to turn down any proposal without at the same

time presenting a reasoned alternative.

Too many are being killed and too many are suffering for any to accept that time is on our side. There are many agencies involved, whether they want to admit it or not, in seeking the way forward. Governments are involved, local political parties are involved, leaders of industry and trade unions are involved. The Churches are involved as integral opinion-formers in the community. Each must re-examine their position and ask themselves in all honesty if they are doing enough with enough urgency to bring peace and reconciliation.

When we consider the role of the Churches in terms of leadership within the divided community, there are certain avenues in the way forward which I believe must be enunciated clearly and without fear:

(1) The Churches must call and go on calling for some dialogue between the political parties. Northern Ireland is sliding and drifting at the moment. It is sliding down a path punctuated by sectarian violence and hatred. Physical walls dividing communities may be essential to protect people — the fact that they are needed at all is a terrible judgment of a so-called Christian community. Northern Ireland is drifting at present because ordinary people feel not only alienated from each other, but because they feel alienated from the political process. Is the time not right for the leaders of political parties to talk together without surrender of party political principles on purely humanitarian grounds. Have they nothing they can say together to people who are frightened and threatened? Is there nothing more they can attempt together to pull society back from its present daily round of violence and death?

(2) The Churches must plead for a new sense of courage and

urgency in political leadership. It takes courage to do or say something which can be interpreted by some as compromise. But we must ask — do present happenings permit any of us the luxury to score party political points when violent death and injury occur almost daily?

It has been my personal sad privilege to be involved pastorally with 38 families which have lost a loved one through violence. When I pray with those people or when I seek to bring them Christian comfort, the last thing they want to talk about is party politics. My experience is shared by so many bishops and clergy. Too many ordinary, decent families are facing the real facts of life and death week by week for anyone to feel time is on the side of political dialogue.

In all humility, one is tempted to ask: is there a sufficient will to break through the impasse?

PAY THE COST

The Churches must be prepared to pay the cost of being misunderstood or misrepresented if the cause is right. The Churches must be prepared to be concerned with injustice or inequality — and not just when it appears to affect their own part of the community. The Churches must pray for the courage to take the Gospel of understanding, justice and compassion into the front-line of the divided community. They must be prepared to do or say something because it is right rather than giving constant consideration to whether it will please people. They must have as their primary purpose the role of living witnesses to the love and forgiveness of God for all people in Northern Ireland. It is when they lose sight of that priority that their voice and their influence becomes really muted.

It is a brave man or woman who can look into the future of Northern Ireland and make

emphatic pronouncements as to how that future will develop. So often plans for the future have a jaded look about them. People are weary of pronouncements. People are weary of political promises. People are weary of the apparently non-stop spiral of confrontation, brinkmanship and violence. There is the subtle but real danger of a society coming to accept an "acceptable level" of violence, division and hatred.

For these reasons the Christian Church must be the agency of hope. But it must be a degree of hope which is realistic, understandable and urgent. It must be a message that recognises the fears and hopes of ordinary people. Above all else it must be a message that transcends party politics and speaks of the way of Christ. Let us never forget that our first and primary task is to reconcile the people of Northern Ireland to God so that in that process they are reconciled to each other.

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