

**THE CHURCH AND CONFLICT –  
HOW TO BECOME A PART OF THE SOLUTION.  
LESSONS LEARNED FROM NORTHERN IRELAND”**

**ADDRESS BY  
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**INTRODUCTION**

Your Excellency Bishop Schwarz, my brother Bishops, Members of the Justice and Peace Commissions of Europe, distinguished guests;

Recently I came across a poem by a young Church of Ireland Rector working here in Belfast. In it he reflects on his sense of a new common understanding emerging among the peoples of the world and he writes: ‘Friends from another land, have taught me much... to grow, through prayer and praise, to better days’.

I also welcome all of you, most cordially, my friends from other lands. Many of you have taught me much about the Church and conflict. Your courageous testimony and heroic example in the face of conflict and oppression have inspired us here in Ireland to grow and progress hopefully to better days.

In spite of the weather, the presence here of so many friends from other lands is a great encouragement for all of us who work, in the name of Jesus Christ, for better days in Ireland.

I want to thank you most sincerely for your decision to come here to Belfast for this General Assembly. As the stories you have heard and the people you have met over these few days will testify, this is an important city for those who wish learn about the urgent challenge of reconciliation and the things that make for peace. Belfast is a city of contrasts, of people of humour and generosity, of welcome and warmth. Yet it is a city which bears within its terraced streets and fine public buildings, a legacy of violence and pain which continues to dim its dreams and its possibility of becoming one of the most vibrant and welcoming cities of Europe. Your decision to be with us, motivated by your Christian vision of justice and peace, gives us fresh heart to make that dream a reality.

## **THE POSITIVE ROLE OF THE CHURCHES**

This is where my reflection on ‘The Church and Conflict – Lessons learned from Northern Ireland’ begins. With the simple conviction that in Jesus Christ we can make all things new.

## **THE BASIS OF TRUE PEACE**

All things are made through, and in, the Word of God. They are a real reflection of God. We are called to see our own intrinsic goodness and to recognise that same goodness and lovableness in all other human beings as well. If we see all of creation as a gift of God and a reflection of God, then it is our privilege, and our duty, to preserve the harmony and right order, which comes from God. When we begin to appreciate that in all things we are sustained by the love of God in creation, this realisation makes for peace. And I think the Churches can become part of the solution by proclaiming that message loud and clear.

As the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* puts it: “Before being God’s gift to man and a human project in conformity with the divine plan, peace is in the first place a basic attribute of God” (488). Nevertheless, peace always remains a human project and those who commit themselves to that project as peacemakers are called ‘blessed’ by the Lord.

However, nowadays people are too often encouraged to see themselves as essentially consumers and producers and in competition with one another. In fact, nowadays many people need opponents, if not enemies, for their own sense of identity. Conflict and confrontation characterise so much of life that, as a result, hostility, anger and envy of others often intensify. However, it seems to me that those who see themselves as children of God and brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ have to reject such attitudes and their destructive consequences for real peacemakers promote partnership not conflict, genuine peacemakers support friendship not confrontation. Authentic peacemakers build peace not war.

One of the common mistakes made by people outside of Northern Ireland, including many British and Irish politicians, is to believe that the conflict here is essentially a conflict of religion, of competing Christian traditions resolutely intolerant of one another and vying for dominance. This is a convenient but inaccurate presentation.

As with all conflicts across the world, the situation in Northern Ireland is the result of a complex mixture of history and politics, of culture and identity, of tensions over land and resources, of fear of those who are different and ultimately, of the need for each of us to belong.

This is why your decision to come to Northern Ireland is so important. Far from being the main protagonists of the conflict in Northern Ireland, the main Christian traditions here, represented in part by our esteemed panel, have played a critical part in building the culture of peace and tolerance which is slowly taking root in our land. In the words of one Unionist politician recently;

...without the Churches, for all their faults... the period of the Troubles would have been much worse. Although the 'two communities' are now highly segregated in terms of where they live, work or go to school, on the whole there is probably still more civility between them than there would have been without the presence of the Churches.

While it is not a religious conflict – it is a sectarian conflict in the sense of sectarianism understood as hostility or suspicion directed against those who belong to a different religious denomination

However, there are those who would wish the Christian Churches, with their greater understanding of the peace that is not of this world, to provide a stronger and more enthusiastic leadership in the search for peace and reconciliation. They urge the followers of Christ to resist the temptation to be held captive by fear, ignorance or sectarianism. We are often reminded of the Call of God to the ministry of reconciliation. To the making of peace, to the seeking of the unity willed by Christ so that the world might believe. We ignore this call at our peril.

I believe that Northern Ireland, despite all the set backs and problems which remain, is fundamentally a story of hope. It is also, I believe, a story from which other parts of the world, indeed even the so-called 'international war on terrorism' can learn.

## THE SCOURGE OF VIOLENCE

Perhaps the first lesson to be learnt from Northern Ireland is that violence is a scourge! It can never be the basis of peace. Violence may sometimes achieve domination over others or their community but it cannot win that community's participation or consent. As the *Compendium* puts it: "Peace and violence cannot dwell together. Where there is violence God cannot be present".

As you will have witnessed so powerfully from your visits to different groups, working with the victims of violence, the use of violence, whether by the state or by paramilitary organisations, leaves an indelible mark on the memory and emotions of those whom it affects and sometimes of those who perpetrate it.

As the experience of Northern Ireland suggests, once the first act of violence is perpetrated, whether in defence or in aggression, the original reason for the use of violence is quickly lost sight of in the deadly cycle of violence, hatred, revenge and misunderstanding which almost inevitably follows. This is why promises of short wars or rapid revolutions are rarely realised.

A Presbyterian working party on Non-Violent action in the 1970's listed the following causes of violence:

- *Violence arises from fear and anxiety;*
- *Violence is intensified by the example of violence.*

Our culture, including the media, finds it easier to focus on violent behaviour than on its opposite. But we need to support the proponents of peace and the examples in our world of non-violent alternatives to conflict. As the fall of the Berlin Wall and of the Iron Curtain remind us, bloodless revolutions are possible;

- *Violence arises from social injustice.*

Until genuine inequalities in the social, economic and political realm are addressed, peace will always be vulnerable to the righteous claim of every human being to be treated with justice. That includes the right to be treated with respect and parity of esteem. This is a basic biblical principle and a key lesson in the search for peace.

- *Violence arises from people's sense that they have no effective say in their own destiny.*

One of the key lessons learnt in Northern Ireland is that strategies which promote the ability of people to participate in the political process, to articulate and organise around their legitimate concerns, are critical in building a culture of non-violence. In this regard I would just like to say that I welcome all recent initiatives directed at supporting the ability of the loyalist community to develop its social and political capacity. A confident unionism and a confident nationalism, are not mutually exclusive possibilities. What is of continuing concern, however, is the failure of certain paramilitary organisations to state clearly that they have accepted the principle of majority consent in the Good Friday Agreement and that, whatever happens in coming months in the political negotiations, they accept that the use of violence for political ends can never be justified. The failure to provide such reassurances is a matter of deep concern for many people at this time. This brings me to the final cause of violence identified by the Presbyterian Working Group on non-violence:

- *The need for agreed, fair and accountable systems of law and order, based on the principles of human rights.*

No society can achieve a stable peace without an effective system of law and order. Law and order is essential to the common good; it prevents any individual or group acting beyond the limits of their legitimate rights and affirms our interdependence as citizens of a shared political entity. The transition to a more equitable, balanced and accountable system of law and order here in Northern Ireland has been a slow but immensely significant and positive process. Some believe that much more needs to be done to ensure complete confidence in such a system. What is beyond question is that a lot has been done. However, commitment to the fair, impartial and accountable administration of law and order is an inseparable part of the administration of Government.

It is accepted that the tolerance of subversive or criminal activity is incompatible with responsibility for the administration of law and order. On the other hand, where reasonable assurances have been given that there is a commitment to support just and representative institutions of law and order, and where this is confirmed by all reasonable means, it is difficult to justify the absence of a system of devolved Government, especially of a system which does not have responsibility for the administration of policing and justice within its remit.

## **CURRENT SITUATION**

Speaking about peace in Northern Ireland is like speaking about a glass that is half empty or half full, depending on your point of view. The peace we enjoy here at present has been described as an ‘unstable sort of peace’ but it is real peace, and we should be grateful. Looking at the glass that is half empty, we could think of the amount of organised paramilitary crime that still exists, the hold the paramilitary groups still have on some communities, and we could conclude that the absence of war is not the same as peace. The cancer of bigotry and sectarianism still exists, a huge amount of work still needs to be done to heal old wounds and bring the parts of our divided community closer together. We could think of the devolved administration that has been suspended and the dangerous political vacuum that now exists, and the apathy, even cynicism, about politics generally.

Looking at the glass that is half full, we think of the number of organisations working hard to bring our fragmented society together and to restore dignity to those on the margins of society.

People are now under a lot less stress regarding the security situation. The ceasefires, the Belfast Agreement and the decommissioning of IRA arms, have made a huge difference. People feel a lot more secure, a lot more at ease. The latest IMC Report confirms that the glass is more than half full.

All of this has created the climate where, hopefully, more progress can take place. People can begin to talk to each other and work together and discuss with each other the future ahead as a shared future in a way that would not have been possible ten years ago.

Recently I attended a meeting of the Irish Inter-Church Committee. This is a Committee which represents the main Christian churches in Ireland. There we heard a most heartening analysis and presentation from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister on the way forward. Even though the devolved administration is suspended some people are at work to chart the way forward which they describe as a ‘shared future’. How encouraging it was to hear that ‘shared future’ described as follows:

***“The establishment, over time, of a normal, civic society, in which all individuals are considered as equals, where differences are resolved through dialogue in the public sphere and where all people are treated impartially. It is also a society where there is equality, respect for diversity and recognition of our inter-dependence”.***

The speaker went on identify the key challenges that lay ahead and they were:

- Relationships (in other words, building up good community relationships)
- Dealing with the legacy of conflict and violence,
- Working towards reconciliation in a divided society
- Eliminating violence and poverty

I must say that I found this most encouraging but I repeat, politicians, civil servants, diplomats, cannot do this on their own. It will only happen if we all become like St. Francis, channels of peace and instruments of this shared future. It will only happen if we are all inspired to banish hatred from our own lives and to bring love, to replace injury with pardon and to build up trust by dispelling doubts and fears.

## **A FRAGILE PEACE**

The conflict here, like most recent conflicts elsewhere, has shown once more to everyone just how fragile peace is. Peace is a human project as well as being a gift of God. Preservation and consolidation of peace requires an act of commitment on the part of all. Peace can be ensured only by opening up new prospects of dialogue and encounter, new channels of forgiveness and reconciliation. The Rev Ruth Patterson, Director of Restoration Ministries has eloquently described her concept of reconciliation. “For me reconciliation has something to do with giving us back to each other or perhaps recognising for the first time the gift that we are to each other. To do this we need to cultivate a generosity of spirit, especially in listening, in building relationships across the many divides in our society, in going on our own inner journey of reconciliation, and in not despising the small gestures and actions that, taken and anointed by the Spirit, could turn this island upside down”.

The healing and reconciliation process that is called for everywhere is multi-faceted. Political and legal processes can definitely go a long distance. But there is, however, a growing awareness that these legal and political means can only do so much. In themselves they are not adequate to the task of healing and reconciling. Of course they can examine what happened in the past but they cannot heal memories. The law can punish the wrongdoers but it cannot bring about actual forgiveness. Social conditions can certainly facilitate reconciliation but they cannot guarantee it.

There is another dimension required and it is the spiritual dimension. Here Christians certainly have something unique to offer. The Good News, brought by Jesus Christ is, in itself, a story of healing and reconciliation. It is the story of the reconciling of the human family with God and of people among themselves. Jesus proclaimed, in deed and in word, the healing compassion of the Father. While it is God who initiates and brings about our reconciliation and brings our reconciliation to completion, God also gives us the privilege of sharing in the work. God makes us co-workers in the task of uniting all peoples as we journey towards the fullness of the Kingdom. It is for us to find the best way of sharing in the task.

A recently published report entitled *The Irish Churches and Peace Education – An Overview and Evaluation* was prepared by two university Colleges. It concluded that there is a continuing obligation for the Churches to be involved in peacemaking and educating for peace. It also concluded that the Churches are in a unique position to facilitate the development of a culture of peace. It found the Churches have the capacity and influence to make a major contribution in the move from a culture of violence towards a shared future. The Report obviously believes that the Church can become part of the solution and indicates how that can happen.

We need to find new ways of giving common witness to the peace of Christ which can transform the world. One of the aspects of my work in enjoy and benefit from most is my close working relationship with the leaders of the main Christian Churches and so many others at who are working together at a local level. We need new opportunities to express our interdependence, to work together on areas of mutual interest and concern – education, the challenge of secularism, the values of family and marriage, the Gospel of life, these are all areas where the Christian Church could work more closely together.

In the words of Nelson Mandela, ‘there is no easy road to freedom. We know well that none of us acting alone can achieve success. We must, therefore, act together as a united people for national reconciliation, for nation building, for the birth of a new world.’ This is what Christ desires of us.

## **PROMOTING SOLIDARITY**

Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland are part of Europe. As the late lamented Pope John Paul II reminded the Council of European Bishops Conferences in 2000, “Europe is really not a closed or isolated territory. Europe has been built by expanding overseas and meeting other peoples, other cultures, other civilisations”. As the Apostolic Exhortation, published after the Second Synod on Europe stated: “Europe, all of Europe needs to be an open and a welcoming country”. Of course, one of the new phenomena of our times is the presence, on the island of Ireland, of so many immigrants from so many of your countries in our midst. I think of Poland, Lithuania, Portugal and Latvia in particular. We welcome them wholeheartedly. We appreciate their goodness, their many and diverse talents and their great willingness to work hard and to play their part in working for the common good of society. We, for our part, pledge to offer them pastoral care and to help them to get the justice, respect and protection to which they are entitled.

Their presence in our midst challenges us all to improve our ways of coping with diversity. That challenge may eventually prove providential in helping us deal with our traditional problems and divisions. We too must make our own, the firm conviction proposed in 1991 by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus* that the market place needs to be appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by the State so as to guarantee that the basic needs of the whole of society are satisfied.

## **THE POWER OF PRAYER**

Peace is a gift of God, a human project. But, first and foremost, peace is an attribute of God. Since we are made in the image and likeness of God we all desire to share in that peace, not just in the peace of eternity but we yearn to enjoy that peace here and now on this earth. So there goes up this constant litany of prayers and intercessions from the people of God to beg for this precious gift.

We have learned that here in Northern Ireland people have turned to ask the intercession of the saints, especially St. Francis to ask that they too may be made channels of peace. Here in Ireland the help of St. Oliver Plunkett has often been sought in the search for peace. During his ministry as Archbishop, St. Oliver worked tirelessly for peace. He finally paid the supreme price – when he was executed in Tyburn, London in 1681.

Another lesson which we have learned is that peace does indeed come dropping slow. Peace is in much patience as Thomas a Kempis said

St Oliver Plunkett endured all his trouble with great patience and proved himself an outstanding example of reconciliation by his forgiveness without exception of all and his pleading for forgiveness from all.

## **CONCLUSION**

The time for healing wounds has come. The time to bridge the chasms that divide us has come. The moment to build is upon us. I hope that the coming weeks and months will see all those who have power to do so, commit themselves totally to a shared and positive future, by putting in place a local power-sharing Assembly which has full community support for the institutions of law and order. I hope that all those who can make this happen will consider carefully their responsibility to the greater good and the benefits of local accountability. I believe that the majority of people in Northern Ireland want to see such a process evolve and to see it soon. Perhaps then, Northern Ireland will be able to take its rightful place among the most generous, welcoming and hopeful places of the world.

My hope is that the children of the next generation will never have to suffer the fear and the pain which their parents suffered. I hope that we will seize the opportunity which now exists to build a peace - OK maybe not a perfect peace but a solid peace. I sincerely hope that we will be equal to the challenge and the opportunity that presents itself now, for history will judge us severely if we don't.

I make my own the hope and prayer of Rev J B Armour of Ballymoney “that a race of Protestants will arise who will be happy to dwell in this land not under the protection of the Saxon nor by permission of the Celt but in virtue of the services they will render to a country they love and for whose welfare they pray”.

Thank you