



Response of Senator David Norris to the Submission from the Irish Roman Catholic Hierarchy to the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation.

January 1996

First I would like to acknowledge clearly the very remarkable work done both in historic and contemporary times in Ireland and abroad by Roman Catholic priests, nuns and members of religious orders. That this work especially when carried out by those who consciously identify in Latin America or Asia with the oppressed and the marginalized is conducted under a cloud of indifference or inhibition from Rome is a source of continuing regret. In our own country there is little doubt that in the past many vital social services in health, education and welfare would have been quite impossible to sustain for the majority of our people without the selfless efforts of many ordinary decent members of religious orders. However, their nobility and sacrifice would be betrayed if it were to be used to place the institutional Church in the position of immunity from criticism.

The situation of the Church in Ireland has indeed altered considerably over the last quarter of a century, which has seen the removal from the constitution of the acknowledgement of the special position of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, the demonstration by the Irish people of a determined capacity to think for themselves despite instruction from the Vatican, a catastrophic decline in religious vocation (at least in the form interpreted by Rome) a substantial decline in attendance at Mass and the exposure of a staggering collection of sexual scandals within the Church reaching from the top to the bottom of institutionalized religion.

It is within this context that I wish to view the submission from the Hierarchy to the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation. I may comment in passing that although the special position of the Roman Catholic Church has been removed from the constitution it is clearly not been entirely elided from the minds of Irish bureaucracy witness the elaborate and deferential arrangements made for this morning's proceedings. I may also include here my observation that it seems clear that the Forum itself has largely outlived its usefulness and fulfilled its principal function which was to attempt to introduce Sinn Féin into the main stream of normal political



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life which it has done, and currently to provide an arena in which Sinn Féin may be allowed to mark time pending a demonstration of genuine commitment to the democratic process which will permit them to be included in full scale political all party talks. Apart from this capacity to allow Sinn Féin to remain in suspended animation, few would lose much sleep if the Forum closed its doors tomorrow.

The reason special significance attaches to this submission lies not merely in the polarized character of society on this island in religious terms but also significantly in the political dimension and international diplomatic ambition of the Roman Catholic Church as expressed through the political wing of that Church centred in Rome. This has historically been recognised by many in the Protestant community as witnessed by slogans such as "Home Rule Equals Rome Rule". This of course is a simplification but behind it lies a worrying degree of truth. In the recent divorce referendum for example the Vatican sought to intervene directly in a clearly political manner and one which was recognised as such by the international wire services who reported this intervention. This has also got to be placed in the context of claim by a former Papal Nuncio that acting upon Vatican instructions he had orchestrated the defeat of the government in a previous referendum. It may be noted indeed that instead of rendering unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto Christ that which is Christ's the Roman Catholic Church attempts to be both Christ and Caesar, State and Church at once through maintaining the fiction that the tiny Vatican state is in fact an international power and seeking representation as such on international bodies and at international conferences such as the World Earth Summit at Rio, the Cairo Conference on Population and the recent Womens Conference in Beijing. At all of these the Vatican has made political allies with the most extreme political wing of Islam in an attempt to restrict the personal and human rights of citizens in the sphere of human sexuality. That Ireland is a classic focus for this phenomenon was certainly understood by the late James Joyce who described the island as one where "Christ and Caesar are hand in glove". Here one may usefully question the unnecessary practice of permitting the Papal Nuncio to act automatically as doyen of the diplomatic corps. Perhaps this could be altered by rotating he position on the basis of seniority. In any case there is to many believing Christians something ambiguous or indeed inappropriate in any Christian denomination appointing ambassadors to secular states. One wonders indeed what the founder of the



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Christian religion would make of such appointments.

I shall therefore approach this document in the light of my experience as someone who has for many years campaigned for human rights and dignity for a minority in this island whose well being and very existence has been historically threatened by the Roman Catholic Church. I refer of course specifically to the gay community.

The introduction to the submission speaks in general terms about the formative nature of religious communities "communicating a sense of belonging". The experience for gay people in this country is quite the reverse. The Church is a deliberate instrument of exclusion. I am now in the sad position of regularly attending the funerals of friends and colleagues who have died from complications of the Aids virus. The vast majority of them come from a Roman Catholic background. The vast majority of them also refuse to permit any participation by the Church to which they formerly belonged. The rejection, the exclusion, the deliberate adoption of policies which unquestionably assisted in the spread of the infection by the Roman Catholic authorities created such pain that even in the final act of their lives these people utterly rejected the religious tradition from which they sprang. This is fact. It is not polemic. It is something which every moral decent member of the Church has an absolute obligation to ponder.

The introduction also affirms "it is possible for those in power in a given society to make use of religion to legitimate their own agenda and to reinforce their position". This is undoubtedly true. Nevertheless the corollary is also true that "it is possible for those in religion to make use of power to legitimate their own agenda and to enforce their position. It is in my view demonstrably true that this proposition lies behind the current moral difficulties of the Roman Catholic Church identifying as it does so clearly at the top with the powerful rather than the powerless to whom Christ himself was committed. Finally reference is made to the prophetic role of religion challenging believers in society at large to recognise and resist injustice " calling for a sense of responsibility for the weakest, preaching the obligation to welcome the strange". Perhaps members of the Hierarchy would be kind enough to make it clear in what sense they have ever acted out that laudable aim in terms of a response to the realities of the gay community. Throughout the document high sounding moral



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phrases are employed without any sense that they should be applied equally to the motives and practices of the Hierarchy itself.

When one gets into the main body of the argument the same is found to be true. Despite quotations from Irish writers, Anglican Bishops and Jewish Rabbis sprinkled in to give a sense of inclusiveness and legitimacy it is clear that the Hierarchy believes itself to have been always on the side of the angels. There is an astonishing irony in the tone of general chiding involved in dealing with the question of censorship. One would never imagine that the Church authorities were to the fore in fomenting attacks on James Joyces 'Ulysses' or on the plays of Yeats, as for example in the case of Cardinal Logue who publically condemned the "Countess Kathleen" without ever having read the text or attended a performance. It is difficult to see a fresh and decent start emerging from such a morass of moral evasion.

Section 2.1 Aspects of Change speaks of changes which unfortunately "brought a certain insensitivity towards the marginalised". In the case of the community which I represent not only does this insensitivity remain but the marginalization has been principally at the instigation of those who now hypocritically wring their hands over the situation. The paragraph continues "even people of good will often have no real understanding of what life is like for those battling to keep health, self-esteem, relationships and family lives intact in the face of quite exceptional difficultlies". I question whether any member of the Hierarchy including those in the past who have secretly produced families can claim to have had this kind of understanding. If they have had understanding of human lived reality in terms of sexual relationships, contraception, martial breakdown, ~~personnel~~ difficultlies, etc, ^{personal} then despite this insight they have consistenly acted in total contradiction and denial of that knowledge. Bishop Casey, Father Michael Cleary and many other cases clearly demonstrate this to be true. Moreover in the case of the recent divorce referendum it was astonishing to witness a senior Bishop speak of the withholding of the sacraments including the last rites from divorced people. This contrast with the sympathy expressed by members of the Hierarchy not for the lay victims of sexual assault but for the clerical perpretrators of such assaults against whom no such sanctions were applied.

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It is further more astonishing to read once more of Bishops of the Roman Catholic



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Church headlining "The Need For Dialogue". How can one take seriously any such protestations of interest in dialogue in the light of the Church's own history of the rigorous suppression of debate and dialogue, the censorship of ideas and books, the silencing of intellectuals within the Church, and the destruction of the careers of its most distinguished theologians. One could instance the cases of Father Charles Curran, Edmund Schillebeeckx, Father Bernard Haring, Father John MacNeill, Archbishop Hunthausen, Doctor Hans Kung - the list is seemingly endless. When confronted by this the Church retreats into glorifying its position as a spiritual dictatorship and promoting its undemocratic nature as a virtue. This has serious implications especially when one considers that the Roman Catholic Church sees itself not only as a spiritual institution whose impact is confined to its members but as a world wide political force centred at the Vatican with Secretaries of State, Ambassadors, etc. Moreover the Vatican also consistently seeks to extend the rule of its beliefs into the political sphere and to govern the lives even of those who yield no deference to its authority. The Vatican's view of dialogue was demonstrated to me very clearly by the visual impact of television pictures when during a visit to the United States of America a very dignified woman Sr. Theresa Kane in a position of considerable eminence in a religious community attempted to engage the Pope in dialogue. He merely sat on his episcopal throne assumed a sour expression and made a gesture with his hands which could be clearly interpreted as meaning "sit down and shut up you are only a woman I am the Pope". If this is the treatment meted out to those within the Church what can those of us outside its confines expect in the way of dialogue.

Section 111.i deals with Ecumenism. Here we are told that "Catholic teaching speaks of social sin expressed through structures and attitudes which contribute to conflict and injustice. These sinful structures and attitudes can range from the vocabulary of prejudice and stereotyping, to polemical historical interpretations....". I am interested to read this. Does this mean that the Irish Hierarchy or Catholic teaching accept for example that by his infamous "Halloween Pastoral" which openly called for discrimination against gay people Cardinal Ratzinger acting with the authority and knowledge of the Pope is guilty of this sin. Reference is made also to the obligation to "repent of" the sinful structures. "All Christians are called to re-examine together their painful past". Splendid words if they are not empty, valueless



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and merely a tissue of verbiage calculated to present a benign image. Let us see some action. I today invite the Roman Catholic Church to investigate its own past with some small degree of honesty. Here it will see if it examines even the documents in the Vatican's own archives that for many centuries ~~the~~ campaign of intimidation of torture and of mass murder was conducted against persons accused of homosexual behaviour. It is no historical accident that the term witch hunt associated with the parallel persecution of religious heresy is a term still frequently used to describe attitudes towards gay people fostered by the Churches. Members of the Hierarchy with even a small knowledge of Church history will unquestionably be aware of the fact that during the Medieval period accusations of homosexuality activity sometimes accurate sometimes inaccurate and frequently motivated by a desire to discredit political opponents (a practice continued by the Vatican's Islamic allies to this day) were used to secure the annihilation of political opponents while simultaneously the history of the papacy makes it clear that many of the Popes and ~~there~~ golden circle of privileged Cardinals indulge themselves in monstrous orgies of incest rape and murder. So let us examine the painful past - but let it not be just the pain of the laity that is exposed and presided over once more by self-righteous clerics. Let us see a little pain a little remorse and a little honesty from leaders of the Church so that we can in truth move forward. With regard to this section (3.3) on Human Rights there is as previously a lot of high falutin' blather and self-congratulatory quotation. There is however one solid if rather tired proposal and that is for a Bill of Rights. I have a very specific question to ask the members of the Irish Roman Catholic Hierarchy. That is will they in the light of their professions of humanity and respect for human and civil rights oppose or support the inclusion of a sexual orientation clause in the framing of this Bill of Rights. This rather than any evasive invocation of generalised principle is the nub of the question for citizens like myself.

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In regard to the section on the Church and society the notion of common good is invoked and we are given a definition of this concept according to Roman Catholic principle "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily" this we are told requires three elements (a) respect for the person (b) the social well being and development of the group and (c) peace. Once more it is impossible to disagree with



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- this but where is the practice? My experience as a gay man in this country living in close contact with "Roman Catholic Ethos" is that the practice of the Church is in direct contradiction of these high sounding principles.

Section IV.ii Morality and Law makes a claim for itself for freedom of political expression etc, etc. We are told that this is not a claim to political authority rather a claim to participate in the life of the community. Furthermore we are told "if this were not accepted, it would amount to denying the members of the Church, or of other religious groups, the right to participate on an equal basis". Quite. But is this not exactly the right that is denied within the Church. Women and gays once again witness the Church claiming for itself rights which it simultaneously seeks to deny to others.

Section V is entitled "To Be At Home". This consists of two short paragraphs the final sentence of which is instructive. It states "None should be made to feel that they are tolerated only at the price of hiding their identity - a price summed up in the telling phrase coined by Jews who felt obliged to keep their convictions private, "*incognito ergo sum*". This again highlights the moral ambivalence at the core of the document. Once again a web of fine sounding phrases is spun over an abyss of hypocrisy, evasion and distance from truth. It is facile to invoke the pain of the Jews forced to hide their identity without acknowledging (a) the source of this intimidation in the Christian Churches and principally that which produced this document and (b) without any acknowledgement at all that a directly parallel situation existed and continues to exist for many gay people, and that the attitude of the Church clearly consistently and unambiguously spelt out in document after document that is issued from the Vatican continues this conspiracy of silence and suffering. The authors of this document can surely not be ignorant of the fact that homosexual behaviour was described at the behest of ecclesiastic authority as "that horrible crime which must not be mentioned among christians". Is there at any stage an intention on the part of the Church authorities to investigate ^{their} ~~there~~ own part in this regard and to make the first tentative moves towards an apology to those human being whose lives have been in the past and continue to be so adversely affected ^{by} the prejudice articulated from Rome.

When we reach Section V.iv we encounter the nub of the situation in practical t

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terms. It is also interesting to notice that when dealing with this subject the tone alters from one of well intentioned waffle to a really keen and focused practical reality "it is essential that the Catholic community be fully represented at this level when many major policy decisions are made". Extensive quotations are then utilised to demonstrate discrimination in employment. Over twenty years ago I was a member of the Southern Ireland Civil Rights Association. We fought to end discrimination against Roman Catholics in the North of Ireland in tandem with our sister organisation the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association. This discrimination was most keenly felt in the areas of employment and housing. I can demonstrate my credentials in this area. It is therefore morally repugnant to me to read the submission of the Roman Catholic Bishops on the question of Fair Employment in Northern Ireland for Roman Catholics when that Church has consistently and internationally opposed efforts to secure the gay community against discrimination in precisely those areas of employment and housing. I cite in particular the notorious "Halloween Pastoral" of Cardinal Ratzinger once more in which there was a clear call and moral justification for discrimination against gay people as individuals in these precise areas of employment and housing. I summon also as witness to this fact the activities of John Cardinal O'Connor in New York so sensitive to the plight of Republican prisoners in the North of Ireland so sensitive to discrimination in employment and housing against Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland yet the man who led a campaign to frustrate efforts to secure anti discrimination legislation for the gay community in New York in precisely those areas of employment and housing. How can one take the protestations of the Roman Catholic Hierarchy in these areas seriously in the light of these facts - indeed how can one take them as anything other than self interested and politically motivated special pleading devoid of any real respect for the principle involved where members of their own flock are not affected.

In conclusion I am forced to reject this document in its entirety not because I disagree with some of the abstract principles which are invoked but because it is demonstrable that the Roman Catholic Church until it changes its stance with regard to gay people and women can have no moral basis whatever for presuming to speak on behalf of the oppressed. Even the inclusion in the end note of a reference to a



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publication entitled "Love is for Life" from the Irish Episcopal Conference reinforces this view. I remember that document very well indeed. Not only did it condemn gay people to precisely the kind of oppression that their Lordships now pose as rejecting as inhuman but it also targeted leaders of the gay community and maligned them as sinister figures dressing up evil motives in the garb of civil rights. How could it be possible in such circumstances for anyone like myself to accept the bona fides of those responsible for so much oppression and pain not only in this country but wherever they possess the political power to implement their policies of oppression and repression.