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Clonard Gardens,
Belfast, BT13 2RL

St. Patrick's Parochial House
Abbey Street,
Armagh, BT61 7DZ

Mr. John Hume MP MEP,
Leader of the SDLP.

Dear John,

We, the undersigned priests, (Rev. Alec Reid C.Ss.R., Clonard Monastery, Belfast and Rev. Raymond Murray, St. Patrick's Parochial House, Armagh) are writing to ask you and the SDLP for a considered response to the enclosed proposal which sets out a democratic strategy for political, social and economic justice in Ireland.

(Father Reid is writing as the priest who invited Mr. Gerry Adams and yourself to initiate and conduct the SDLP/Sinn Fein talks last year and also as the Belfast-based secretary/representative of the international Redemptorist Secretariate for Justice and Peace.

Father Murray is writing as a pastor who, for nineteen years, was chaplain at Armagh Prison and who, out of his pastoral commitment to the search for justice, peace and reconciliation, has continually spoken and written about the human and civil rights which are at issue in the present conflict. He is now Administrator at St. Patrick's Cathedral, Armagh)

As we trust you will see, this proposal is based on the dialogue which has already taken place between Mr. Adams and yourself and between the SDLP and Sinn Fein and also on your own proposals for a common, nationalist strategy for peace as they are found in your public statements. It is also based on long, personal experience of the present phase of the Irish conflict and on wide consultation with people who, from their own knowledge and experience of this conflict, were in a position to give sound advice. It may be said, therefore, that the proposal has emerged from the heart of the conflict and that its principles were mined at its very pit-face.

We believe, therefore, that the proposed strategy, which is characterised by the sole use of political and diplomatic forces, is in keeping with the principles of democracy as they are understood and practised throughout the world and, for that reason, is also in keeping with the traditional aims of nationalism and republicanism in Ireland.

It goes without saying that there is now an urgent need to develop the kind of strategy represented by this proposal and, by doing so, to create the conditions for democratic justice, equality and peace.

We believe that such a need is always graced, through the Providence of God, with an opportunity that is sufficient to meet and to overcome it, provided our commitment to justice gives us eyes that are clear enough to see the opportunity and hands that are strong enough to grasp it.

We also believe that the signs of such an opportunity are now in the political air around us. They can be seen, for example, in the ardent, indeed anguishing, desire of the common people of Ireland to find a strategy for justice and peace which, as democrats, they could join and support and also in their general approval for any political dialogue which promises to find such a strategy.

You yourself, however, have given what for us are some of the clearest signals that we are now at a moment of sacred opportunity. Here, we are thinking, in particular, of the proposals for a common, nationalist strategy for peace which you have set out publicly on several occasions but especially during the SDLP/Sinn Fein talks last year. These proposals, in our view, are a clear sign of the present opportunity because, taken with similar proposals from An Taoiseach, Mr. Charles Haughey T.D. and the leader of the Sinn Fein Party, Mr. Gerry Adams M.P., they indicate that an agreement on a common strategy between the main nationalist/republican parties but, particularly, between the SDLP, the Sinn Fein Party and the Dublin Government is a feasible proposition and, indeed, an available gate-way to peace at the present time.

The letter you wrote to Mr. Gerry Adams M.P. on the 17th of March, 1988, at the beginning of the SDLP/Sinn Fein talks, gives the gist of your proposals because it outlines your understanding of the crucial political realities which, for you, must define the objectives of any common, nationalist strategy for peace. This letter also outlines your views on the agency or 'machinery' which would organise the strategy and effectively pursue its objectives.

We shall now quote what we see as the relevant points in your letter.

"There is a political alternative and in our view the political road is the only one that will ensure that there is lasting peace in Ireland. For the SDLP, Ireland is first and foremost its people, the territory is secondary since without people the territory isn't much different from any other piece of

earth. The tragedy is that the people of Ireland are deeply divided and have been deeply divided for centuries on some very fundamental matters. But it is the Irish people who have the right to self-determination. It is the Irish people who have the inalienable right to sovereignty.

Unfortunately, the Irish people are divided on how to exercise the right to self-determination. The Irish people are divided on how to exercise the right to sovereignty. It is the search for agreement among the Irish people on how to exercise these rights that is the real search for peace and stability in Ireland."

The Real Search for Peace

In view of this analysis of the conflict and of the democratic way to set about resolving it, you pose the following questions to Mr. Adams and his party.

1. "Would you then agree that the best way forward would be to attempt to create a conference table, convened by an Irish Government, at which all parties in the North with an electoral mandate would attend. The purpose of such a conference would be to try to reach agreement on the exercise of self-determination in Ireland and on how the people of our diverse traditions can live together in peace, harmony and agreement. It would be understood that if this conference were to happen that the IRA would have ceased its campaign. It would also be understood in advance that if such a conference were to reach agreement, it would be endorsed by the British Government.

2. In the event of the representatives of the unionist people refusing to participate in such a conference, would you join the Irish Government and other nationalist participants in preparing a peaceful and comprehensive approach to achieving agreement on self-determination in Ireland?"

The main points of your letter to Mr. Adams are developed at length in the documents which the SDLP gave to Sinn Fein during their talks with them. We have selected the following quotations from these documents because, as we read them, they give your own and the SDLP's position on a common, democratic strategy for justice and peace.

The Real Search for Peace

"We are accepting the Sinn Fein statement that it is the Irish people as a whole who have the right to self-determination and that the Irish people should be defined as those people domiciled on the island of Ireland.

The problem is that the Irish people are divided on how that right should be exercised. The real search for peace, justice and stability in Ireland is the search for such agreement. In the SDLP view, this has always been the case and has never been faced up to in any serious way by nationalists or republicans in Ireland. This is the real challenge facing all of us. It cannot be pursued by "armed struggle".

The real question is how do we end the British presence in Ireland in a manner which leaves behind a stable and peaceful Ireland?"

The Unionist Dimension

"The SDLP can fully understand why Sinn Fein say that "the unionists have no right to maintain partition and the union in opposition to a nationalist majority." It is purely academic, however, to argue that the unionist people have no right to a veto on Irish unity or on the exercise of self-determination or that British policy confers such a right on them. The harsh reality is that whether or not they have the academic right to a veto on Irish unity, they have it as a matter of fact based on numbers, geography and history.

The unionists, then, have a natural veto since they live on this island and since their agreement is essential if unity is to be achieved."

The British Dimension

The SDLP believe that "Britain has no interest of her own in remaining in Ireland, that she has no strategic, military or economic interests and that if the Irish people reached agreements among themselves on, for example, Irish unity that Britain would facilitate it, legislate for it and leave the Irish to govern themselves."

"In the SDLP view, this belief is given expression in Article 1 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. In this article, the British Government formally state for the first time in an international agreement that, given the existence of the required consent to change, they would be prepared to facilitate and support legislation to give effect "to the establishment of a united Ireland." It is axiomatic, therefore, that it is exclusively a matter for the Irish people of the two traditions, without interference from Britain and without British interests standing in the way, to agree on the terms on which they can unitedly share this island."

The Goals of SDLP Policy

"There is, therefore, nothing to stop British Governments becoming pro-Irish unity in their policies. Our task is to persuade them to go in that direction and to use all their considerable influence and resources to persuade the unionist people that their best interests are served by a new Ireland; a new Ireland in which unionist interests are accommodated to their own satisfaction and in which there is a new relationship with Britain.

These are the goals of SDLP policy. They are goals which we believe can only be achieved by political means and which have to be achieved by political means if the outcome is to be a stable and peaceful Ireland. It goes without saying that, if a new Ireland is to be built politically, it should be as painless as possible for the people who have suffered so much. It must also involve the progressive breaking down of all barriers which have grown up between people in post-partition Ireland."

SDLP PROPOSALS

"To the ends outlined above, we would make the following proposals to any party interested in achieving these same ends:

1. Concerted political action, nationally and internationally, to persuade the British Government to adopt, as a matter of policy, a commitment to and action towards progressively breaking down the barriers between both parts of Ireland that have developed since partition and to using all its influences and resources to persuade the unionist people that their best interest lies in a new Ireland which accommodates their interests to their satisfaction and which has a new relationship with Britain.
2. Concerted action to persuade the unionist people to join together with us in building a new Ireland.
3. In the interim, concerted political effort, nationally and internationally, to alleviate the social and economic problems which affect all our people."

A Conference Convened by an Irish Government

It is against the background of these views that the SDLP asked whether Sinn Fein would attend a conference attended only by elected representatives of the people of Ireland and convened by an Irish Government. This conference table is proposed in order to create the machinery whereby agreement on the exercise of the right to self-determination and as to how the people of Ireland could live together in peace, justice and agreement might be achieved.

In the event of representatives of the unionist people initially refusing to participate in such a conference, we asked whether Sinn Fein would join with an Irish Government and other parties in preparing a peaceful and comprehensive approach to achieving self-determination in Ireland."

"We believe that agreement to such a proposal would be overwhelmingly received by the Irish people and would release enormous constructive energies within Ireland as well as massive international goodwill and support. We also believe that it would have a powerful response within Britain itself and within considerable sections of the unionist people. We do not underestimate the difficulties in achieving our objectives but believe that, for the first time, we would be concentrating all our energies on the real Irish problem and would make consistent and steady progress.

The SDLP believe that, politically, the positions of Sinn Fein and ourselves are not unduly removed from one another and are bridgeable. In particular, each of us have stated our commitment to protecting and preserving the ethos of Ireland's two great traditions."

"The art of politics must be to respond to and try to reach beyond the many complex relationships which history - however warped its impact - has bequeathed us and which are part of the political reality of this island."

Given your deep understanding and long experience of the present conflict, the determination of your commitment to ending it in a peace based on justice for both nationalist and unionist, and, above all, your authority and influence as the leader of the SDLP, it would be difficult, we believe, to exaggerate the peace-making potential of the proposals set out in your letter to Mr. Adams and developed in subsequent SDLP documents. For that reason, we have used them as an authoritative and crucial guide-line for the strategy proposed under cover of this letter. You will see, therefore, we trust, that, in terms of principles, objectives and methods, this proposal is in keeping with your own strategy as you and the SDLP outlined it in the above quotations.

Here we would also like to quote what the present Taoiseach, Mr. Charles Haughey T.D., said about finding a way forward to peace during his address, this year, to the Fianna Fail Ard-Fheis. Having stressed that "we must find a way forward", he went on to say:-

"If violence were to cease, the possibility would open up, as it did in the New Ireland Forum, for a broad consensus among nationalists on how to achieve political stability, based on justice. Our efforts, supported by a large majority of Irish people everywhere, could then be constructively directed to persuading our unionist countrymen that their future lay with us in a partnership of equals and in convincing the British Government that the future of Ireland could and should be left to all the Irish people to decide for themselves"

We believe that this statement, due to the authority behind it, has a significance all its own for the realisation of a common, nationalist strategy for justice and peace. Under the public and authoritative stamp of the present head of the Irish Government, it proposes such a strategy, outlines the objectives that, in his view, should define it and points a way forward to peace that, in principle, corresponds to your own. For these reasons, we have used this statement of An Taoiseach as the nucleus of the enclosed proposal.

When you speak of a conference convened by an Irish Government and Mr. Haughey refers to the New Ireland Forum, you are both, we believe, indicating that the best means of developing a common, nationalist strategy would be an Irish Peace Convention. Organised to represent not only the common but also the vocational interests of the Irish people, such a Convention could focus what Mr. Haughey referred to in his Ard-Fheis address as the greatest resource we possess, namely, "the talent and energy, the ingenuity and vision of the Irish people themselves." For these reasons, an Irish Peace Convention is central to the enclosed proposal.

The signs of the present opportunity are visible, we believe, not only in your own statements but also in those of other political leaders like An Taoiseach, Mr. Charles Haughey T.D. and the President of Sinn Fein, Mr. Gerry Adams M.P.

Their statements and your own indicate, in our opinion, that thinking among Nationalist leaders on how to develop a common democratic strategy for justice, peace and reconciliation is, at least, beginning to converge and to point in the same direction. For example. An Taoiseach, Mr. Haughey, and you and Mr. Adams, as the leaders who represent the nationalist people of Northern Ireland, would all appear to accept that the exercise of self-determination and of democratic freedom by all the people of Ireland in their two main traditions, not only in a political but also in a social and economic sense, is the crucial principle which must be at the heart of any strategy that would be capable of creating real peace, the peace, that is, which is based on justice.

Given that this interpretation of the political times is correct, the opportunity to organise a common nationalist strategy for justice, peace and reconciliation based on the principle of Irish self-determination is now upon us and needs to be grasped. The proposal we are forwarding through this letter represents an attempt to do that, to take, so to speak, a political tide which is now beginning to rise and which, if taken, would lead to the fortune of peace.

Given that the need to follow such a lead was never more urgent, we have, we believe, a responsibility serious beyond words, not only to grasp the opportunity that is now opening before us, but also to foster it by seeking to create the kind of calm political environment that will nourish and sustain it. For that reason, we are appealing to everyone who is in a position to influence the course of political events over the coming weeks and months to do what they possibly can to facilitate the creation of such an environment.

A missionary who was asked, on one occasion, where he was prepared to go said that he was "prepared to go anywhere provided it was forward."

That, we believe, is the spirit which must inspire us now. We must move and be prepared to move anywhere provided it is forward. We are convinced that we can move forward to a peace that will be the fruit of justice for all the people of Ireland provided we have the will to do so because that is what really counts in the present enterprise - the will to decide, the will to take risks, the will to keep on keeping on, in the strength of our own abilities, the daring that wins through, and, above all, in the kindly, leading light that God will surely shed on our path.

We trust, therefore, that you will see and accept this proposal as a pastoral intervention springing from the pastoral role of the Church and officially sanctioned and supported by the Redemptorist Secretariate for Justice and Peace. We would also like you to see it as coming from the pastoral background of Father Murray with all its traumatic memories of prison suffering and its long record of work for human and civil rights.

We would ask you to accept it too as coming from Clonard Monastery, Belfast, where the community, of which Father Reid is a member, have a special pastoral involvement in the present "troubles" because they live and work on "the peace-line" that stark symbol of partitioned Ireland which sums up so much of the conflict we are trying to resolve because it divides the people of the Falls from the people of the Shankill in an area that is often called "the cock-pit of the conflict".

Since the purpose of this proposal is to facilitate and to foster dialogue between the parties and among the people on the nationalist/republican side of the present conflict which would lead to an agreement on a common, democratic strategy for justice, peace and reconciliation, we are also forwarding it to An Taoiseach, Mr. Charles Haughey T.D., and to the President of Sinn Fein, Mr. Gerry Adams M.P. under cover of letters similar to this.

We intend, in due course, to publish this proposal in the context of these covering and introductory letters with a view to initiating and developing a public debate on the whole question of a common strategy.

We trust that, in view of the urgency of this whole matter and of the dialogue on it which has already taken place, you will do your best to expedite your initial response which should be delivered to the head of the Redemptorist Congregation in Ireland, Very Rev. Raphael Gallagher C.Ss.R. c/o Clonard Monastery, Clonard Gardens, Belfast).

Here we would like respectfully to suggest that you would agree to give this initial response to Father Gallagher in verbal rather than written form at a meeting which would be attended by him and other representatives of the Redemptorist Secretariate for Justice and Peace and yourself and other representatives of the SDLP. We are making this suggestion because we believe that, as far as possible, any and all exchanges that may develop from this proposal should, in keeping with the very nature of political discussion, persuasion and agreement, take the form of face-to-face dialogue.

We shall conclude with the prayer that God will be with you in this whole enterprise, to guide, encourage and strengthen you, all the more because, as the leader of the SDLP, your role in it will be crucial to its success.

With kindest regards and prayerful good wishes, DIPLOMATIC STRATEGY

Yours sincerely,

Alec Reid C.Ss.R. FOR

Alec Reid C.Ss.R.,
Clonard Monastery,
Belfast.

Raymond Murray

Raymond Murray Adm.,
St. Patrick's Cathedral,
Armagh.

JUSTICE, PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

Feast of the Most Holy Redeemer,
October, 1989

A PASTORAL RESPONSE TO THE PRESENT CONFLICT