

FORUM FOR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

FORTIETH PLENARY MEETING.

DUBLIN CASTLE ON FRIDAY 19 JANUARY 1996

Chairperson: Judge Catherine McGuinness

I hereby certify the following to be a true and accurate transcript of my shorthand notes of the above-named proceedings.

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DR. JOHN ALDERDICE: Thank you Madam Chairperson. Your Eminence, members of the Delegation, could I express on behalf of my own party our welcome to you to the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in Ireland. I personally have been familiar with the work of a number of members of your delegation, not least of course with yourself, your Eminence long before my involvement in politics, particularly through the Irish Council of Churches and the Forum of Human Rights and other organisations and I would want to pay my own tribute for the very important contribution that many of these individuals and collectively the Irish Catholic Bishops Conference have made.

In giving that welcome however I would note that your Church is ¹ one throughout the island, as is the Presbyterian Church, of which I am a member, the Methodist and Church of Ireland Churches who have will preceded you in presenting at the Forum, that the Forum itself is for Peace and Reconciliation in Ireland. And yet I note almost all the comments refer solely to Northern Ireland. This is important because you have mentioned ecumenism, pluralism and

human rights and emphasised your commitments to these matters. As a party and as individuals we are very committed to those principles too. But one's commitments to pluralism and human rights is never capable of being judged when one is in the minority asking for those rights and for that pluralism. A civilised society is not to be judged on the basis of how it treats its majorities but its minorities. Our commitments to pluralism can only be judged when we are in the majority on the basis of how we deal with the minority. None of us, Unionists, Nationalists, Alliance, Protestants, Catholics or other, find it appealing that our great efforts and commitments to these matters are put to the test of statistics and found wanting. When it came to fair employment and policing and so on, we find ourselves having to face people in Northern Ireland who said, "well we do not discriminate. We are very keen for everybody to be involved".

The figures said otherwise. In this Forum we have commissioned some research to look at the position of Protestants in the Republic where the majority Church is the Catholic Church and we find that the number of Protestants in the south has diminished and dwindled over the years.

When we look at mixed marriages, times in excess of ninety percent of children were brought up as Catholics. More recently in excess of eighty percent. To look at these matters where there are obvious obstacles of regulations, or practical outcomes that do not show what we claim to want, we have to beg serious questions about it. I have to say when I read the regulations pre 1970, in respect of mixed marriages and even those more recently, I see no evidence of parity of esteem. I see a Protestant community that has dwindled away so that any talk of ecumenism is meaningless in terms of an ecumenism of diversity because there is no one to be

disverse with. This is deeply significant in terms of how many people in the North view cooperation with the rest of the island see so I have to say that when- like you- we call for changes even radical changes to address fair employment policing issues and so on because we look at the figures and you too have called today for a radical change in these matters- would it not then be the case, that in the same way the unpalatable truth is that progressive, radical change in the posture and the position of the Catholic Church is going to be necessary if the Catholic Church is to become a major promoter of pluralism in this part of the island where it is in a majority. Is it not impossible to have ecumenism of diversity in this part of the island unless there is in fact a development of the Protestant community here and how are you going to welcome, foster and develop that minority's development in the South? I put the same kinds of questions frequently over the years in the North?

BISHOP DONAL MURRAY: I take your point about the pre 1970 regulations though I do not really see myself how the approach to Inter church marriages can be anything else but to say that it is a matter for the couple. I am not clear on how you could have some kind of quota or something of that kind. Our position is it is a matter for the couple. Our position is that the rights and the duties and desires of the Catholic party and other party are equal; that the couple must make that decision themselves. Now I am not so sure how one can do anything else? 4

DR. JOHN ALDERDICE: Perhaps it is my fault for not making myself sufficiently clear, Judge. That response, and it is heartfelt without doubt, is exactly the response I used hear from Unionist politicians about fair employment with respect. But what we always said and of course the Standing Commission on Human Rights used

say this too was, " look at the figures. "

It is clear that even if we feel we're doing everything that can be done; it is not enough. You have said it: You are right. It is not enough on policing. It is not enough on fair employment. You have said it. You are right. But look at the figures: It is not enough.

BISHOP DONAL MURRAY: It seems to me that is an interesting parallel but it's not actually an accurate parallel. The point about the employment is that somebody else is doing the employing. The point about the mixed marriage is that it is the couple who are deciding, the couple themselves are deciding. It is not we who are deciding. It seems to me that the parallel does not quite hold.

CARDINAL CATHAL DALY: Sorry am I interrupting you?

DR. JOHN ALDERDICE: I assumed it was the Church who was doing the marrying!

BISHOP DONAL MURRAY: But your question is about the decision about the upbringing of the children, as I understand it.

DR. JOHN ALDERDICE: And the regulations under which the marriage takes place and the encouragement and so on. I think we have to honestly face these difficult questions. I come from a tradition where we understanding of prophesy is the challenging of God's people by the prophets from that community. I fear at times in the Church it is too easy to become an apologist for one's own community rather than challengers of one's own community. I must apologise for intervening too much.