

INTRODUCTION

The Conflict in Northern Ireland

The daily, tragic consequences of the conflict in Northern Ireland - bloodshed, imprisonment, widespread suffering and general despair of any just and democratic solution - are a constant spur to the Christian heart and demand a compassionate and effective response to it.

PROPOSAL

It is the responsibility, therefore, of every Christian but particularly of Christian leaders to do everything possible to end this inhuman situation by seeking to channel the course of events away from the road of armed and violent confrontation which is strewn with death and destruction and on to the road of political communication and dialogue which is marked out by the principles of justice and charity and characterised by the democratic use of political and diplomatic persuasion.

FOR

A DEMOCRATIC OVER-ALL POLITICAL AND DIPLOMATIC STRATEGY

We must begin by lifting our eyes to a vision of the peace we want to create and that, in general, can only be a new political situation where the people of Ireland in their nationalist and unionist traditions are living together in friendship and mutual co-operation for the common good of all and where the people of Ireland and the people of Britain are living together in the same way.

FOR

How to make this vision a reality is, therefore, the great question on which all our peace-making is based. For those who believe in the Christian message of justice and love, there can be only one way to do this and that is the way which begins from the fact that people are people, God's sons and daughters, before they are Irish, British, Nationalist, Unionist or Republican. This means that the principles of peace are essentially the principles which respect and correspond to the human dignity and the human rights of all the people who are involved in the present conflict.

JUSTICE, PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

This, in turn, means that the principles by which it must be resolved are the principles of political and democratic justice as they are understood and practised throughout the world and as they pertain to the particular nature of the conflict in Northern Ireland. The dignity of the human person, these principles define "the narrow road" which leads to political salvation. Any road defined by policies which lack the respect that is due to the dignity and the rights of people must, therefore, be seen as "the broad road" which leads to political destruction. Here, those who believe in the Lord Jesus, must be prepared, like His first followers, to leave "all things", all their partizan and sectarian political attitudes, and follow Him down the road of democratic justice and charity to whatever political destination it may lead.

A PASTORAL RESPONSE TO THE PRESENT CONFLICT

INTRODUCTION

The Conflict in Northern Ireland

The daily, tragic consequences of the conflict in Northern Ireland - bloodshed, imprisonment, widespread suffering and general despair of any just and democratic solution - are a constant source of anguish to the Christian heart and demand a compassionate and effective response from it.

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We must begin by lifting our eyes to a vision of the peace we want to create and that, in general, can only be a new political situation where the people of Ireland in their nationalist and unionist traditions are living together in friendship and mutual co-operation for the common good of all and where the people of Ireland and the people of Britain are living together in the same way.

How to make this vision a reality is, therefore, the great question on which all our peace-making energies and abilities must focus. For those who believe in the Christian message of justice and love, there can be only one way to do this and that is the way which begins from the fact that people are people, God's sons and daughters, before they are Irish, British, Nationalist, Unionist or Republican. This means that the principles of peace are essentially the principles which respect and correspond to the human dignity and the human rights of all the people who are involved in the present conflict.

This, in turn, means that the principles by which it must be resolved are the principles of political and democratic justice as they are understood and practised throughout the world and as they pertain to the particular nature of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Rooted in the God-given dignity of the human person, these principles define "the narrow road" which leads to political salvation. Any road defined by policies which lack the respect that is due to the dignity and the rights of people must, therefore, be seen as "the broad road" which leads to political destruction. Here, those who believe in the Lord Jesus, must be prepared, like His first followers, to leave "all things", all their partizan and sectarian political attitudes, and follow Him down the road of democratic justice and charity to whatever political destination it may lead.

The Response of the Church

Since some of the issues at stake in the present conflict pertain to the dignity of the human person and to his or her rights as a child of God and as a citizen in society, they also, by that very fact and for that very reason, pertain to the saving mission of the Church. This means that, in fulfilment of this mission, the Church must, through her representatives and ministers, intervene directly in this conflict to preach the Word of God as it applies to it and to witness to those eternal Gospel values which define, uphold and protect the dignity and the rights of the person.

It is also her mission, in face of this conflict, to preach the message of hope and courage by pointing continually to the Lord Himself as the Saviour who is always "in the midst" with the power that can resolve every conflict and the compassion that encompasses every participant, including those who inflict injustice as well as those who are afflicted by it.

The Church, then, has a pastoral duty to respond to a political situation when (but only when) moral and humanitarian issues are at stake. Political matters, as such, which belong to the sphere of democratic opinion and choice are not her business and she has no role, from her mission, to play in them except to insist that, in all matters, the first role must be given to God-like compassion for people because it is the supreme value in human affairs and the first principle of all human relationships including those of politics.

Translated into practice, this means that the only Christian and human way to conduct political affairs and to resolve the conflicts that arise from them is the way of communication and dialogue, practised by every participant, with the respect and the compassion that are due in justice and charity to every other participant.

As a process of listening and responding to what is humanly true and just in the position of every participant, political dialogue in this sense takes as its base the common humanity of all the participants and makes it the common ground where all can meet in harmony of principle to seek and to find the common good of all and, when necessary, to resolve political conflicts justly and democratically.

Given that this kind of dialogue is the Christian and the human way to conduct political affairs and to resolve political conflicts, the Church has a pastoral responsibility to use her resources, her influence and her lines of communication to encourage, promote and, when necessary, even to facilitate it.

The Church and the Dialogue of Peace

It follows, then, that when a conflict like the one in Northern Ireland has become violent and is causing suffering and bloodshed, the Church has a missionary and pastoral duty to intervene directly and to do all she can to bring its violent dimensions and their tragic consequences to an end. Here her role may be to facilitate the necessary dialogue between the relevant parties especially when all lines of communication between them have broken down and the tragic dimensions of the conflict cannot and will not be ended unless and until they are restored. She must then use her political neutrality, her moral credibility and her own lines of communication to provide the kind of sanctuary setting where the parties to the conflict, who sincerely wish to use political and democratic methods to achieve justice and peace, can meet together for the necessary dialogue without damaging their own political or moral credibility and without compromising or appearing to compromise any of their own political or democratic principles.

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These guide-lines for the pastoral role of the Church in a situation of political conflict are given here because they explain the background and introduce the purpose of the pastoral intervention represented by the proposal for "a democratic over-all political and diplomatic strategy for justice, peace and reconciliation" which follows.

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A Pastoral Offer

A careful consideration of present opportunities for ending this conflict suggests that an agreement in principle on a political and diplomatic strategy for justice, peace and reconciliation between the Irish Government and the two main parties on the nationalist side in Northern Ireland, namely, the SDLP and Sinn Fein, could lead to a real break-through in the search for a just and democratic settlement. It is clear, however, to those who believe this that, on the one hand, such an agreement could not be made without the kind of political dialogue already described and, on the other, that, under present circumstances, such dialogue would not take place between the relevant parties unless special arrangements were made to facilitate it.

Given this view of the present prospects for peace, the pastors concerned believe they have a missionary and moral duty to intervene directly by suggesting to the parties concerned that a common strategy would help the cause of peace and by offering to facilitate the dialogue that would be necessary to organise it.

A Pastoral Request

Their only interest in all this is to save life and to protect people from suffering. They are intervening, therefore, on behalf of all those people who, because of the continuing conflict, will be killed, maimed or imprisoned and all those families who will be shattered as a result over the coming weeks and months.

They could not, however, fulfil this saving mission without the co-operation of all the parties concerned and so they have decided to ask each party for its co-operation. By making this request, they are, in fact, asking the parties to facilitate the Church by helping her to carry out her pastoral responsibilities in the present conflict. More, indeed, than that, they are, through this request, inviting each party to take an active part and to play its own role in the Church's own mission for justice, peace and reconciliation.

A Democratic Overall Political and Diplomatic Strategy for Justice and Peace

The following proposal for a democratic overall political and diplomatic strategy for justice, peace and reconciliation is based on the dialogue about such a strategy which has already taken place, particularly between the SDLP and Sinn Fein. It is not an original proposal, therefore, but one which reflects that dialogue and the agreements which, in general at least, emerged from it. ||

1. To persuade the British Government that their request to end their policy of military occupation of Northern Ireland, in which their rights would be fully respected, would not mean their fundamental, long-term interests and the achievement of the goals of justice, and would provide the best basis for lasting peace.
2. To seek the active support and encouragement of the British Government for No. 3 above so that they would be able to achieve and maintain in practice the people of the United Kingdom that they would best serve their fundamental and long-term interests by ending their military occupation of Northern Ireland and building a new Ireland in which traditional and minority would be accommodated and where there would be a free relationship with Britain.
3. To persuade the British Government that, in accordance with the policy (as outlined in No. 1) should be the creation of a new and independent Ireland based on the principle of national self-determination and the principle of democratic consent, they should also for a definitive and peaceful withdrawal from Ireland over a determinate period of time.

THE PROPOSAL

At the request of the elected representatives of the Nationalist community, the Irish Government would agree to organise a formally constituted Irish Peace Convention. The Convention would consult on the formulation and implementation of a political and diplomatic strategy to achieve justice, peace and reconciliation in accordance with the following policy objectives:-

1. To persuade the British Government, in the best interests of the people of Ireland and the people of Britain and in accordance with the principles of national self-determination and democratic consent, to adopt a policy to encourage or allow for the creation of a new and independent Ireland, based on agreement between the people of the Nationalist and Unionist traditions and on friendship and co-operation between the people of Ireland and the people of Britain. *which?*
2. To persuade the British Government that the 1920 arrangements have failed and to facilitate the coming together of the people of Ireland of both traditions to determine their own future by calling, as and when appropriate and jointly with the Irish Government, a Constitutional Peace Conference representative of all the people of Ireland to enable them to decide their own future in agreement and peace; and, then to support by legislation any agreement reached between them.
3. To persuade the people of the Unionist tradition that their consent to and their participation in the creation of a new and independent Ireland, in which their rights would be fully guaranteed, would best serve their own fundamental, long-term interests and the interests of the people of Britain, and would provide the best basis for lasting peace.
4. To seek the active support and encouragement of the British Government for No. 3 above so that they would use their influence and resources to persuade the people of the Unionist tradition that they would best serve their own fundamental and long-term interests by coming together with the people of the Nationalist tradition to build a new Ireland in which traditional diversity would be accommodated and where there would be a new relationship with Britain.
5. To persuade the British Government that, in accordance with the policy (as outlined in No.1 above) for the creation of a new and independent Ireland based on the principle of national self-determination and the principle of democratic consent, they should plan for a democratic and peaceful withdrawal from Ireland over a determinate period of time. |||

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6. In keeping with the social and economic principles of the 1916 Proclamation, it would also be the function of the Convention to consult on the formation and implementation of policies, relating to the island as a whole, which would promote the social and economic progress of the Irish people and so provide a secure future and increased prosperity for everyone.
7. The policy objectives set out above would form the basis of an over-all political and diplomatic strategy for justice, peace and reconciliation. In combination with the Convention, the Irish Government, without prejudice to the continuing exercise of its normal responsibilities, would actively promote, through its executive organs and representatives, any agreed strategy and seek effective support for it from the Irish abroad and from the wider international community.
8. This Irish Peace Convention would be:-
 - a. Open to the democratic representatives of all the people of Ireland.
 - b. Without prejudice to the duties and functions of Dail Eireann, the Oireachtas and the Government under the Constitution, and to Ireland's existing international obligations.
 - c. Formally constituted by agreement between the parties to it with a foundation-charter based on the democratic principles of the 1916 Proclamation and in keeping with the true Republican vision of an Ireland embracing all Irish men and women, irrespective of their history, traditions and beliefs. This foundation-charter would define and set out its policy objectives, the methods for implementing them and the procedures which would govern debate and decision-making within the Convention.

This strategy is proposed as a credible and realistic way forward to a new, just and independent Ireland on the grounds that it would have the support of the vast majority of the people of the nationalist community and be powered by all the political and diplomatic forces at the disposal of the Irish Government. As a strategy for justice and peace, supported and powered in this way, it could, in operation, mobilise for the achievement of common objects, the greatest resource that Ireland possesses, namely, the talent and energy, the ingenuity and vision of the Irish people themselves.

By its very nature, therefore, the kind of strategy proposed above would have an inherent capacity for achieving the traditional aims of nationalism and republicanism in Ireland which would be far greater and far more efficacious than any now available. For this reason, it is proposed, in particular, to those who still believe that they must take up arms to resist political injustice in Ireland and to forward the traditional and just cause of Irish republicanism.

It is also proposed to them because it is clear that, not only the operation but even the very existence of a common, nationalist strategy for justice and peace will depend on whether or not it has been accepted in common and is being supported in common by every significant section of the nationalist community and this, given their powerful and unyielding commitment to Republican ideals, must include the people of the Republican Movement. In other words, not only the operation but the very existence of the proposed strategy depends on whether or not it is accepted as 'an alternative to arms'.

It must also be said that the continuing use of arms in the pursuit of nationalist aims is, as every day makes clear, also continuing to divide the nationalist people fundamentally among themselves and, therefore, against themselves and the achievement of these aims. This means that, without the co-operation of the people of the Republican Movement, the people of the nationalist community, as a whole, will not have the kind of political unity and cohesion among themselves which alone can give them the political strength and sense of purpose they will always need if they are to pursue the cause of Irish dignity and independence efficaciously and with the courage that can never be daunted. Nil neart gan cur le cheile.

Given, then, that the kind of strategy for justice and peace proposed above would become available to the national and republican people of Ireland should the people of the Republican Movement decide to end their military campaign, a new and compelling moral reason for doing so comes into sharp focus and must be faced and acknowledged with the kind of courage, honesty and compassion which history shows are native to the spirit of real and living Republicanism. The trust, therefore, must be that, under the inspiration of this spirit, the people of the Republican Movement will give a positive and co-operative response to this proposal.