

FROM THE DEAN OF WESTMINSTER
VERY REVEREND MICHAEL MAYNE

FAX: 0171-233 2072

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THE DEANERY
WESTMINSTER ABBEY
LONDON SW1P 3PA
TEL: 0171-222 2953

Philip McDonagh Esq.
Counsellor
Irish Embassy
17 Grosvenor Place
LONDON
SW1X 7JR

PRIVATE

19 March 1996

Dear Mr. McDonagh,

I very much enjoyed meeting you and your wife on 11 March. I enclose, for what it is worth, a copy of my sermon.

With all good wishes,

Yours sincerely,

James Fehin (RCS)
pp The Dean

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ABBEY EUCHARIST

Sunday 10 March 1996

I ask you to hold those words from this morning's Epistle against the backdrop of Northern Ireland. 'Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, (yet) we exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now been granted reconciliation.'

Here on Ash Wednesday at the evening Eucharist there was a bizarre moment when the choristers were hitting top C in Allegri's exquisite Miserere ('Make me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me'), while outside there was the clashing accompaniment of the banshee wailing of sirens from police cars on security alert. Guarding a nervous city that once again has armed police on its streets. We are back with the bombs and the men of violence in a cause that has bled like an open sore for the past quarter century.

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Or are we? For in these past weeks there has emerged an impressive groundswell of protest from tens of thousands of people north and south of the border marching as they will today on this day of prayer for peace with white paper doves demanding the end of violence. Paper doves may not be very effective against mortars and bombs, and yet since the peace process began there has been a huge shift of mood and the desire for peace in such huge numbers of people can't just be written off.

Yet the roots of the conflict go much further back than a quarter century. They reflect the long and terrible oppression of the Irish people, one of the most shameful chapters of our history, and few of us begin to understand the depth of anger and bitterness bred by that history: the enforcement of the Protestant faith and the seizure of huge areas of land by Protestant settlers in the 16th and 17th

But if Ireland is imprisoned in its history, the question is, how do you heal the wounds of history? For an open, festering wound must be treated and there can be no lasting peace until it is.

Or, to put it in God's terms, how do you deal with sin? There is only one known way. Through penitence and forgiveness. That is how God brought us to our senses, and that is how we find our reconciliation with him and with each other, in Christ, at the foot of the Cross.

I believe that the only way forward in Ireland is for there to be a mutual expression of sorrow for the past and a mutual forgiveness. An expression of penitence by each community for wrongs done to the other, but I believe the primary obligation for such an act of penitence lies with Britain. The only way of breaking through is by a statesman-like act of a new and different kind, qualitatively different from the endless round of

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injuries; the ruthless massacres under Cromwell, 600,000 Irish killed, 100,000 deported as slaves, mainly to the West Indies; the penal laws against the Catholics; the great famine of the 1840s in which nearly a million people died of starvation and where ships laden with grain and cattle continued to leave daily for England; the refusal of home rule. By the end of the 18th century Ireland was broken, exploited and impoverished, and in the resulting struggle for justice two traditions arose: the way of non-violence and the way of violence.

Many have pressed for non-violent change by constitutional means. Others have chosen the way of bloody revolution - and in 1916, with the Easter Rising, the way of violence became a popular movement and provided a whole literature of drama, poetry and song. And throughout the British were in charge and we cannot escape blame.

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blame. By facing the truth of our history of wrong-doing and repenting of it, we enable a healing of memories and the whole scenario begins to look different.

Of course the way of reconciliation is risky, very hard and deeply costly, but it is not unfamiliar to the deeply Christian, churchgoing communities north and south of the border. Nor is it naive to think that such Christian insights can apply to nations as well as to individuals: one only has to look at South Africa, where Vice-President de Klerk publicly apologized in Cape Town for the misery apartheid had inflicted, and when asked if it was international sanctions that brought about the end of apartheid, replied: 'No: it was deep self-analysis on our knees before God.'

It is, of course, through a fresh understanding of the damage of the past that healing comes: though, in this case, to understand is not to excuse. Nothing can justify the killing or

maiming of innocent people, even if those who plant bombs believe themselves to be at war. Nor would an apology for the past, however generous, stop the terrorists in their tracks. But it would make a huge impact on the great majority of peace-makers in both communities, and help further to isolate the terrorists.

It would be foolish to be optimistic about Northern Ireland, but it would be quite wrong to be without hope. For hope is different. Hope is a state of mind, not a state of the world. Hope is rooted in our own small experiences of how reconciliation is achieved in our own lives; of how by God's grace even the deepest of wounds may be healed; of how penitence and forgiveness may be a kind of breakthrough in human relationships. Forgiveness, as God has shown us in Christ, is a deeper and more enduring truth than the old law of retribution and revenge.

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Vaclav Havel, imprisoned by the communist regime in Poland, though later to become its President, writes to his wife from his prison cell:

'Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, an orientation of the spirit and of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere else.'

It is anchored, Christians claim, in the love of God 'in Christ, through whom we have been granted reconciliation,' both with our Father and with each other. That is our hope, and our only hope.