

GARVAGHY ROAD MARCH

STATEMENT BY CARDINAL CAHAL B. DALY

11 July 1996

Today has been a black day in the history of Northern Ireland. The decision to allow through, or rather to force through, the Orange parade along the Garvaghy Road in defiance of the feelings of the residents was a bad decision, a mistaken decision, a wrong decision. It was a disastrous decision. The consequences for confidence in the rule of law can be calamitous. The State has been seen to capitulate before lawless violence and the threat of violence. I cannot see how the decision can be justified on security grounds or on grounds of balance of security risks.

There is a widespread feeling in nationalist circles in Portadown that the Garvaghy Road residents were "set up". They feel betrayed. It would be hard for them to feel otherwise. There is even a perception that the efforts of the Church Leaders were part of a process of deception. This is not true.

I have to state categorically that the Church Leaders acted throughout in complete good faith and in total integrity. We worked without ceasing through two days and nights to seek a solution to the Drumcree March impasse. I had a lengthy meeting with the Garvaghy Road Residents Group on Wednesday night. I found them responsible and reasonable people, anxious only for a solution which would be just and equitable and peaceful. The Garvaghy Road Community which they represent is a hurt community. They have painful memories of having last year made a generous concession in the interests of peace, only to find their concession greeted with displays of Orange and unionist triumphalism. They tried very hard over the following twelve months to find a reasonable solution for this year's march through dialogue and by agreement with the Orange Order. Their repeated requests for meetings and for dialogue were spurned. Now they feel even more humiliated and betrayed. They have been treated shamefully. They do not deserve to be treated like this.

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I understand their feelings of betrayal. Indeed I personally share their feelings. Today I joined with the other Church Leaders in seeking to have dialogue with representatives of both communities separately. The efforts failed. The meetings ended without any real dialogue having been engaged. We accepted that for the moment we had not succeeded, but we drafted a statement indicating that we continued to hope for and to work for a just and fair agreement between both sides. Our statement was completed and was issued before the Chief Constable announced his decision. The Church Leaders had no prior knowledge of this decision and were in no sense and in no way a party to it.

When we were preparing to leave the premises where we had met, the decision was announced to the public. I was shocked and dismayed by it. I could not believe what I was hearing. The decision leaves the future now very bleak and very uncertain. There is great anger, not only among the Garvaghy Road residents but throughout the whole nationalist community across Northern Ireland. There is great pain. There is great fear.

For me, the events of today and of the days of the Drumcree "stand-off" reveal in stark form the deep-seated injustices which still mark our society. They manifest the ugly sectarianism which persists in this society, and which is an affront to our Christian professions. These injustices must be addressed, this blight of sectarianism must be expunged, with renewed determination and with urgency.

These injustices can never be eliminated by violence. Violence brings only new injustices and more suffering to the innocent. But the peaceful pursuit of justice must be intensified, in spite of, and indeed because of, today's events. I appeal for the avoidance of all violence. I appeal to both republican and loyalist organisations to resist the temptation to renewed armed violence. The peace process with all that it promised all of us for a better future, must not be destroyed in the heat of the understandable passions of today.

I appeal for calm. I admire the efforts of priests, community leaders and people in Catholic communities who are doing all in their power to control the situation and to avert further descent into violence. I call for intense prayer on the part of all our people, that reason and peace and Christian love and forbearance may prevail. Let us all trustingly commend ourselves to the loving mercy of God.