

PRESS RELEASE**CHRIST'S LIGHT IN OUR DARKNESS**

Homily at Mass in the Church of St John the Baptist, Portadown

Sunday, 14th July, 1996, 12 noon

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It is easy to fall into the deepest pessimism about the possibility of any peaceful and just future in our society. I want you to remember the infinite love and mercy of God, in whose loving hands all our futures rest.

THE ORANGE MARCH

Why did all of those concerned not foresee the appalling consequences of the decision forced upon us last Thursday? Are there any members in the Orange Order who are even now asking themselves, was it worth it to put the whole prospect of peace in our land at such risk for the sake of forcing through a march which they knew would humiliate and affront their fellow-citizens in the town of Portadown? Are there people in the British Government who are prepared to say, even at this late and fateful hour, "We got it wrong and we are sorry"?

2.

We have sadly seen some of the consequences of the decision to force the march through. Much though I deplore the decision, which I find indefensible and incomprehensible, I totally condemn all recourse to violence, all rioting, all throwing of stones or, even worse, of petrol bombs. I condemn all blocking of roads, all interference with the rights of citizens to a peaceful and orderly way of life. I most strongly condemn the bomb last night in Enniskillen. There is no justification for it. There is no excuse for it. It is morally wrong and sinful. I implore the IRA and the loyalist organisations not in any circumstances to recommence armed violence.

The overwhelming majority of nationalists totally condemn all acts of violence. I appeal again for calm, for dignified restraint, for Christian forbearance and forgiveness.

FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

Peace can be built only on justice and truth. Many fundamental questions need to be asked and to be answered about what has happened to justice and to truth in recent days. It is said that the police authorities simply could not hold the line against overwhelming numbers of Orangemen. But surely the authorities of the State have the responsibility to protect its citizens in all circumstances and in face of all threats from other citizens. The question must also be asked why were the Orangemen allowed to assemble in such massive force in the days and hours preceding the march, when the very purpose of their assembly manifestly was precisely that of overwhelming the police lines? After all, they came by car and by coach or otherwise along the public roads of this land and their purpose clearly was to form a massive assembly so as to defy the police. Are there not powers at the disposal of police and government to avert or prevent assemblies for an illegal purpose? Can the police not control the public thoroughfares? There were days leading up to the Twelfth when preventive action could have been taken, if the will to do so had been there. Many nationalists are asking whether the RUC would have allowed a comparable multitude of nationalists to assemble with the clear intention of overwhelming the police by force of superior numbers? Are there two systems of law in operation in this land?

3.

During the days of the "stand-off", intimidation of Catholics, attacks on Catholic property and dwellings, were rampant across the whole of Northern Ireland. An innocent man, Michael McGoldrick, was murdered simply for being a Catholic. Roads were blocked by various obstacles and obstructions, including felled trees. Access roads to ports and even for a time to the airport, were blocked. Transport was brought to a standstill. Illegal roadblocks were mounted by groups of Orangemen. There were all the appearances of an organised campaign to destabilise this State, as happened at the time of the unionist-directed Ulster Workers Strike in 1974. There has been much made of the right of Orangemen to parade along the "Queen's highway". What are we to say of the blocking of these same highways by Orangemen themselves during those days of shame? How many Orangemen have been arrested and charged on foot of these illegal activities?

Or are we to assume that there are circumstances in which the rule of law simply cannot be enforced by the forces of law and order in Northern Ireland? It would seem to be just a short step from that to conceding that Northern Ireland in its present forms is ingovernable under the rule of law. Surely unionists are the last people who would admit that or would take steps to bring that about. Surely the moderate elements in unionism will now be motivated more determinedly than ever to ensure that this year's events never occur again; and, perhaps even more importantly, to create conditions in which this land which unionists claim as "their own" becomes also a place where people of a different tradition can live with dignity and full equality and justice and call it "their land" too; and in which the RUC, which many unionists see as exclusively "their" police force, can be seen by nationalists as being equally concerned to safeguard their rights too and to respect their feelings too, so that nationalists could some day call it "their" police force too. Perhaps the present crisis may cause moderate unionists to commit themselves vigorously to bring about the changes which these essential ends require. After all, Orangeism is not the only expression, or even the truest expression, of unionism; and nationalists should remember that. Orangeism is not the sole expression, or even the characteristic expression, of Protestantism; and Catholics should remember that. Nationalists respect unionism as an integral part of the life of this State; they want to share Northern Ireland with unionists on a just and equal footing. It is the excesses and distortions of unionism which they resent. We Catholics respect Protestantism as deeply felt devotion to our common Lord, Jesus Christ. It is only distortions and caricatures of the noble Protestant religious tradition which we regret.

4.

GARVAGHY ROAD

I spent some hours yesterday along the Garvaghy Road and in Craigwell Avenue among the residents. I am proud of them, proud of their dignity and their absolute determination to prevent violence within their community or emanating from their community. It is a lie to claim that they are being orchestrated by the IRA or being manipulated by Sinn Fein. From what I saw and heard for myself in that area, I know that people associated with SDLP and people associated with Sinn Fein have been working day and night to maintain calm and discipline and to prevent violence. I understand from reports that the same is true of SDLP and Sinn Fein representatives in other areas across Northern Ireland. I believe that all of these leaders are genuinely striving to avoid wider violence, as are the leaders of the loyalist parties. These people deserve our support, rather than the denigration being heaped upon them by some people whose hands have been far from clean during these days.

There are Protestant residents in Garvaghy and in Craigwell Avenue, a small number, admittedly, but some. I have spoken with some of them. I have seen and heard assurances being given to them by their Catholic neighbours that, to a man and to a woman, their Catholic neighbours will protect them. Their Catholic neighbours are imploring them not to leave the area. I myself heard instructions being given by community leaders in the Garvaghy Road area to groups of Catholic men to spend the whole night awake, watching and protecting Protestant houses from attack by louts, usually under influence of alcohol. I know that Garvaghy is not alone in this. Similar things are happening across the whole Catholic community in Portadown. I have no doubt but that good Protestants in other places are doing the same thing for their Catholic neighbours. I know also that many decent Protestant people in Portadown have been disgusted by what has been happening here in recent days.

THE INJURED

We pray at this time for all those who have been injured in clashes with the police. Several are in hospital. One has already died. Others are critically ill. Seeing these mutilated young men and their distraught parents has brought home to me the sheer awfulness and evil of all violence.

5.

I do not forget, and I hope none of us forget, that policemen too have been injured and traumatised. Police men and women have distraught parents too, and wives, and children. Let us pray for them too. The Chief Constable and the police should not have been left to accept the responsibility for a decision which was clearly taken for political reasons and to bear the consequences of an abdication of responsibility by the British Government.

POLICING

There is, however, especially since last Thursday's decision, a huge crisis of confidence in the police among the nationalist community at large. In my own modest way I have tried for years to urge both the police and the Catholic public to work to build up mutual trust and confidence. For the present, that confidence has been totally shattered. Restoration of confidence will require immense and prolonged efforts on the part of the RUC. Sadly, their whole process of confidence-building has now to be built all over again virtually from zero. That process must be now recommenced and it must be vigorously pursued and it should be conducted on the part of the RUC, as far as nationalists are concerned, in a genuine spirit of humility, regret for what has happened and readiness for real change. Radical measures will be needed, both as regards the RUC and the Police Authority and the Police Complaints Commission; but changes are essential. Every society needs a police force in whose integrity and impartiality all political communities and all social strata can have confidence. Northern Ireland needs this more than most societies do.

In the immediate term, police must observe the maximum restraint in their use of plastic bullets. One has to view with great disquiet the frequency of recourse to plastic bullets by the police, the fact that one person has died, others are critically ill, many have been hospitalised, many others carry wounds and bruises, as a result of plastic baton rounds or of police truncheons.

It would be helpful if truthful statistics about all these activities and fatalities were published. One factor causing great disquiet and resentment at this time is that many people, particularly in the nationalist community, feel that they are not being told the truth. Only the truth can restore in the community that confidence which is an essential condition of respect for the rule of law and respect for civil authority.