

The Road to Northern Ireland

Derry, Northern Ireland, May, 1998

There is a beauty about Ireland's green hills, rocky coasts, ever-changing skies and billowing clouds that make this land not just magical, but mystical. The effect of this "terrible beauty" has seeped into the Irish soul, charging it with faith and hope "for the things unseen."

I spent this past year, 1997-1998, living in Northern Ireland as part of my Jesuit "tertianship" year, a sabbatical year of prayer, study and spiritual renewal before final vows in the Society of Jesus. Several of us lived here in a rowhouse in Derry, site of the 1972 Bloody Sunday massacre by British troops. We attended reflection sessions with other Jesuits in the village of Maghera three days a week. The rest of the week I worked at a church-sponsored human rights center on the Falls Road in Belfast, and visited the elderly, disabled and sick in Derry through a local community center. The highlight of our year was the thirty day silent retreat, "The Spiritual Exercises," which we made in January and February. The whole year was originally envisioned by St. Ignatius as "a school of the heart." It has been that and much more, a great blessing.

Once a week, an Irish Jesuit friend and I explore the glorious Irish coast which stretches 3000 miles end to end. One day, driving along the Irish sea, I saw fifteen, brightly-colored, full rainbows. I discovered roadside shrines hidden on mountain paths and white sandy beaches that resemble the Caribbean's.

Unfortunately, Northern Ireland is not all glory and mystical contemplation. It is a land of pain and crucifixion.

We arrived in Northern Ireland in the summer of 1997 in a moment of hope, just as the IRA announced their cease-fire and peace negotiations commenced. On my very first day in Belfast, a priest friend brought me to meet Gerry Adams, head of Sein Fein, the political party connected to the IRA. He was charming, engaging, and interested in my work for peace. He said they were determined to end the war, end injustice and bring about a new direction for Northern Ireland.

During those first months, studied the tragic history of Northern Ireland and witnessed the bitter anguish of Catholics who still struggle for basic civil rights from British backed Loyalists. From day one, we all fell in love with these marvelous people on all sides.

Since the Troubles began in the late 1960s, over 3,400 people have been killed. The British government claims dominion over these six northern counties. Unionists and Loyalists, made up mostly of Protestants, cling to their allegiance to Britain. Meanwhile, nationalists, including most Catholics, seek not just full equal rights, an end to the Emergency laws and British military presence, but reunification with the Republic of Ireland.

During the past year, under the cease-fire, historic peace talks brought most of the warring factions and political parties around a single table. International pressure helped force the parties to dialogue. But the situation remains unstable. Twenty

people were killed in the last few months alone. But there are hopeful signs that a substantial change has begun with the new peace settlement.

The Good Friday 1998 agreement offers an Easter dawn of peace for this broken land and its traumatized people. Everyone has been touched by the Troubles. Certainly every Catholic house has been raided or lost someone to violence or prison. Riots, roadblocks, British soldiers, and tanks were the daily experience for decades. It was ugly, brutal and terrifying. But now, for the first time, people are dreaming about a safe, peaceful future for their children. The new agreement includes steps toward justice and human rights, the release of all political prisoners, the withdrawal of British troops, a new police force that includes nationalists, and the possibility of a new democratic political process. Even still fringe paramilitary groups on both sides continue to set off bombs and kill people in an effort to break the agreement. Small pockets of violent revolutionaries do not want the agreement and the peace it offers.

During the worst rioting several years ago, an American Jesuit friend stopped an elderly woman on a street in Belfast, introduced himself as a visiting teacher from the United States, and asked her what all the fuss was about.

"You don't understand," she scowled. "Why I could slit the throat of a Fenian [a Catholic] and praise the name of the Lord Jesus Christ at the same time."

This bloodthirsty violence in the name of Christ is one of the most appalling aspects of the Troubles. The war is framed in the context of Protestants versus Catholics. Instead of loving one another as Christ commanded his followers to do, Christians here kill one another with a vengeance. I witnessed this spirit in many different people. It is as if everyone in Northern Ireland is walking around with seven hundred years of blood-stained history on their shoulders. They are possessed by this history of violence and remember specific battles from four hundreds years ago as if they happened yesterday. This memory of war has filled them with a desire for retaliation and vengeance. They are all blind to their demonic violence. Everyone feels their side, their bombs, their murders are justified, that God is on their side, and that they will be proved right.

In some parts of Belfast, Catholics walk on one side of the street, Protestants on the other. The city is divided by towering metal "Peace Walls."

On March 3rd, 1998, two young men were gunned down in a pub in the tiny village of Poyntzpass. Masked gunmen from a Loyalist paramilitary group entered the local pub, ordered the seven people sitting at the bar to lie on the ground, and opened fire.

Damon, age 26, was a mechanic. Paul, age 35, was a handyman. The two were best friends all their lives. In recent years, they met every Tuesday after work for a pint of Guinness. That night they were busy with big plans. Paul was to marry this summer, and Damon would be his best man. They were talking about the future.

It would not matter anywhere else, except here in Northern Ireland: Damon was Catholic. Paul was Protestant. Their friendship was a rare gift, a sign of reconciliation and the possibility of peace. In this case, the local Protestant paramilitary group was determined to break the peace negotiations and literally kill any peacemakers in the

process. But Damon and Paul transcended the centuries of war and bitterness and learned to love one another. They were true Christians.

Throughout this past year, I heard many dire voices of fear, vengeance, and hatred. But I also heard amazing voices of peace, love and hope. I met wonderful "ordinary" people doing their "wee bits" for peace and reconciliation like my neighbors on Barry Street who radiate kindness and hospitality to one another; the widows I know who struggle to forgive those who murdered their husbands; the former paramilitary prisoners I met who have renounced violence; and my neighborhood friends in Derry and Belfast who work for human rights and reconciliation.

These steady, consistent, persistent voices of peace stay with me most. They touched my heart and offer hope in a culture of despair. Such voices paved the way for the current agreement and point the way to a new, peaceful future. They are worth listening to.

Mairead Maguire, Nobel Peace Laureate, A Voice for Nonviolence

As an outside looking in, I think one of the most consistent voices of peace throughout the Troubles continues to be Mairead Corrigan Maguire. Mairead was thrust into the cause of peace on August 10th, 1976, when two of her nephews and one of her nieces were struck and killed on a Belfast street corner by an IRA gunman's getaway car. The driver of the car had been shot dead by a British army patrol. His car then plowed into the children, as well as Mairead's sister who was seriously injured (and subsequently died four years later).

Their deaths appalled everyone in Northern Ireland. Mairead and her friends suggested a march calling for an end to the senseless violence. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets. They marched every weekend for months. They were the largest peace demonstrations in the history of Northern Ireland. Mairead and her friend Betty Williams co-founded the Community of the Peace People to continue their peacemaking initiatives, and were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

But even after the demonstrations stopped, the media turned away, and the Troubles continued, Mairead deepened her commitment. Throughout these many years, she has been one of the few voices to speak the unpopular word of nonviolence, to point out "that a peaceful and just society can only be achieved through nonviolent means and that the path to peace lies in each of our hearts." With quiet, disarming conviction, she has stood on the streets of Belfast and said No to all violence--No to the IRA; No to the UDA and LVF (the Unionist/Loyalist paramilitaries); No to the British government's Emergency Laws, military raids, interrogation centers, unjust courts, human rights abuses and murders; No to injustice, bigotry, discrimination and brutality; No to anything that desecrates life and dignity.

With her friends, Mairead has organized nonviolent actions for justice, spoken out against war, reconciled with peoples on all sides of the conflict, worked with prisoners, sponsored ecumenical prayer services, and espoused her vision of peace for the whole world. "I believe that hope for the future depends on each individual taking nonviolence into their hearts and minds and developing new and imaginative structures which are nonviolent and life-giving for all," she writes. "Some people will argue that this is too idealistic. I believe it is very realistic. I am convinced that

humanity is fast evolving to this higher consciousness. For those who say it cannot be done, let us remember that humanity learned to abolish slavery. Our task now is nothing less than the abolition of violence and war."

In February, when the United States and Britain threatened to bomb Iraq, Mairead pointed out the hypocrisy of the British who were calling for an end to the bombings and the start of dialogue in Northern Ireland, while at the same time ending dialogue and starting bombing raids in Iraq. Meanwhile, as the politicians debate about "decommissioning" the paramilitary forces, she calls for a deeper disarmament, "the decommissioning of the mind and the heart." If we can truly disarm our minds and hearts, Mairead teaches, the war will really end and a whole new history of justice, peace and reconciliation will begin.

Des Wilson and Joe McVeigh, A Voice for Justice

Fathers Des Wilson and Joe McVeigh have stood in Belfast on the side of the poor, the oppressed, the interrogated, the imprisoned, and the resisters for decades. Most church officials have consistently denounced the violence of the paramilitary groups, but have been slow to demand justice and human rights for those under the brunt of military oppression. Father Des and Father Joe have been ostracized and persecuted, but they continue to side with the people, and call for justice and human rights.

"The new Agreement between the parties and the two governments," Fr. Joe McVeigh writes in *The Irish Witness*, the newsletter of the human rights center he runs, "must lay the basis for democratic politics on this island in which the people have the power and in which all those elected, and those such as the police and judges who serve the state, are accountable to the people. It must above all mean significant changes in respect for human rights."

As church leaders, they voice the cry of the oppressed: There can be no peace in Northern Ireland without justice and human rights. There on the Falls Road, they point the way up from the bottom to a more just society.

The Jesuits of Portadown, A Voice of Compassion

Since the late 1980s, a small community of Jesuits has lived in a row house in the Catholic section of Portadown, a contentious, deeply divided village that exploded in 1996 when the annual Protestant/Unionist parade through the Catholic section resulted in violence and murder. The Jesuits have maintained a quiet presence among the beleaguered Catholics of Portadown, and stood with them as they suffered provocation and insult. They have listened and accompanied the people, worked for a peaceful resolution to the Parades crisis, and tried to teach nonviolence to their people.

Though the Jesuits have been criticized for getting mixed up in the Parades controversy, they have remained faithful to the local Portadown Catholics who continue to feel the brunt of age-old oppression. Like the Redemptorists of the Falls Road in West Belfast, they walk with the people, suffer with them, and witness to the truth that there can be no peace without compassion for those in need.

The Families of Bloody Sunday, A Voice for Truth

Kevin McDaid was 17 years old when he joined 30,000 other civil rights marchers, including his 20 year old brother Michael, on a walk through the Bogside of Derry on January 30th, 1972. He told me how British soldiers suddenly opened fire, murdering 14 unarmed marchers, and injuring 13 others. His brother Michael was one of the marchers shot by British sharpshooters from high above the Bogside along the ancient walls of Derry. Two months later, a British judge ignored the testimonies of hundreds of witnesses and excused the British military of any wrongdoing.

Over the years, the families of the victims and the survivors have persistently pushed for a new inquiry to clear the names of the dead and bring justice. On the twenty-fifth anniversary of Bloody Sunday, another witness, Don Mullan published *Eyewitness Bloody Sunday*, a collection of the original eyewitness testimonies citing evidence that the British military deliberately planned ahead of time to murder several of the marchers to "set an example."

The persistent, intelligent work of the families and Don Mullan has led to the opening of a new inquiry into the Bloody Sunday massacre. The families are cautiously optimistic. As one Bogside resident and family members walked me through the neighborhood, and showed me bullet holes in apartment buildings and the places where the marchers were killed, I heard their testimony: there can be no peace in Northern Ireland without the truth. The full story needs to be told and heard, and Britain must admit it murdered these nonviolent people and make restitution.

Gordon Wilson, A Voice for Reconciliation

On November 11th, 1987, the IRA blew up an empty Catholic church hall in the center of Enniskillen, as hundreds of people stood along the streets to watch the annual Remembrance Day parade. The six story building came crashing down upon dozens of people, killing seven of them.

A 19-year-old nursing student, Marie Wilson, stood there with her father Gordon. They had lived in Enniskillen all their lives, and were well loved in their local Protestant church.

One minute they were looking at the crowds, waiting for the parade to begin. The next minute they were buried under a mountain of concrete, struggling to breathe.

Through the rubble, Marie grabbed her father's hand. "Daddy, I love you very much," she said. He called out to her, but there was no response. They were both pulled from the rubble, but Marie died a few hours later.

Gordon Wilson was released from the hospital that evening with only minor injuries. When he arrived home, a BBC-TV crew was waiting for him. The words of forgiveness and hope he spoke were repeated for months and years, and most likely prevented the violent retaliation that usually follows such attacks. "I have lost my daughter," Gordon told the BBC, "but I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge. Dirty sort of talk is not going to bring her back to life. I don't have an answer. But I know there has to be a plan. If I didn't think that, I would commit suicide. It's part of a greater plan, and God is good. We shall meet again. I shall pray for those killers tonight and every night."

He refused to call for vengeance, retaliation or the execution of the bombers. He would not condone further violence. He did not want to support killing. He wanted to love as Marie loved, as Christ loved. His remarks shocked the nation, led many people to attack him, but also inspired hundreds of thousands of people to consider the possibility of peace.

Gordon Wilson was an unusual voice of forgiveness and reconciliation in a land of vengeance and retaliation. He died a few years later from a heart attack. Today, his widow Joan lives alone in the family home in Enniskillen. I visited her earlier this year. Over tea, she told me about that terrible November day, and the rage she initially felt toward the IRA bombers. For decades, Gordon and Joan prayed the Lord's prayer every evening. They were serious in their request, "Forgive us just as we forgive those who hurt us." They intended to live those words. When Marie was killed, they knew that if they wanted to remain faithful to the Gospel, they had to forgive.

"I recalled the commands of the Lord," Joan said to me, "'Love one another. Love your neighbor. Forgive seventy times seven.' I thought of St. Stephen, who was stoned to death, and how Marie was killed by stones, too, and I remembered that St. Stephen forgave his murderers, and I knew that as Christians, we were required to do the same. How could I pray the 'Our Father' ever again if I did not forgive the bombers?" she asked. Ever since the tragedy, from the moment they spoke the words of forgiveness, they felt at peace.

The Wilsons teach us that there can be no peace without forgiveness and reconciliation. When the victims' family members offer forgiveness in a spirit of love to those who commit murder, not only do they reconcile the divided Christian community, they sow the seeds of peace. The healing process begins.

John Hume, A Voice for Peace

John Hume was a young high school teacher in Derry during the 1960s. He was deeply inspired by Martin Luther King, Jr. and the U.S. civil rights movement and decided to organize a Catholic civil rights movement in Northern Ireland. In 1968, several hundred Catholics set off to march from one end of the country, calling for civil rights and justice. But halfway on their journey in the remote central hill country, British-sponsored Unionist paramilitary sharpshooters ambushed them and opened fire. After that attack, many young Catholics renounced nonviolence and joined the I.R.A. But John Hume never wavered. He remained faithful to the vision of nonviolence.

In the late 1980s, John Hume began secret negotiations with Gerry Adams and other IRA leaders. He urged them to pursue negotiations with the British, declare a cease-fire and begin a political peace process. Their conversations over many years eventually led to the 1998 Good Friday agreement.

I first met John late one night in a restaurant. He came over and joined a Jesuit friend and me for a glass of wine. He spoke about the peace process and his commitment to nonviolence. He was tired but excited about all the hopeful developments. A few weeks after the Good Friday agreement, he invited me to visit him one afternoon at his home in Greencastle, along the coast of Lough Foyle. I thanked him for his work for peace and the hope he has brought to Northern Ireland.

We talked about nonviolence, nuclear weapons, the Good Friday agreement and my work with the U.S. peace movement.

"We have to convince people that one nuclear weapon is one too many," he said, "that if one nuclear bomb is used, it will be a catastrophe, killings millions of people, and injuring more." He urged me to meet with U.S. Congressional and Defense leaders, and make friends with people in the media. "You need to gain visibility, to keep the movement in the public eye." He offered to help me and the anti-nuclear movement in the United States.

As he walked me to my car, I noticed he was limping. "I'm very concerned about my health," he said, listing a series of ailments. "But I'm too busy to stop at the moment." We said goodbye and I watched him disappear alone in to the hedges. He has done more for peace than anyone in Northern Ireland, and I pray that he may continue to be a voice of reason and sanity.

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Along with many others working at the grassroots, these good people have faithfully pursued a vision of peace for Northern Ireland throughout its darkest years. Indeed, they have given their lives for a new future. Without their steadfast commitment, the current peace accord and wave of hope would never have been possible. They dared to envision a new future when everyone else gave up. At long last, after thirty years of blood and tears, their voices, and the voices of the dead, the voices of the victims, the voices of the children, are being heard.

Perhaps that new day, that rich harvest of peace, justice and reconciliation is finally at hand in Northern Ireland.

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What does the vision of nonviolence demand of Northern Ireland? Surely, every one on every side must put down their weapons, their hatred, and their vengeance and work nonviolently for justice and peace.

Catholics and nationalists should continue to seek their full civil and human rights. But they must not resort to violence, weapons, or murder. A future of peace with justice can only become real through the means of peace and nonviolence.

Protestants and loyalists need to welcome full equality and justice for all, and likewise, put away their fears, their hatred and the old structures of injustice that have dominated and oppressed others. They too must not resort to violence, weapons, or murder anymore. Every paramilitary group must disarm and disband.

Both Catholics and Protestants need to return to the nonviolent Jesus who commands us to pursue justice on the one hand, and to love our enemies and forgive everyone on the other.

But the vision of nonviolence also calls upon the British government to let go of colonial, imperial methods of political domination and oppression; to support real democracy for everyone; to allow for new, fair judicial and police systems; to insure

the human rights of all; to wipe away all emergency legislation enforcing injustice; and to release all political prisoners.

The British government and all people of faith, Catholics and Protestants, are summoned to the vision of nonviolence, to tear down unjust structures, create a culture of democracy and equality and welcome a new day of peace.

The British government is correct in its demand that all parties practice nonviolence. But before they can take the splinter out of the eye of the people of Northern Ireland, they must remove the wooden beam in their own eye. Their stand is inconsistent, if not outright hypocritical. Britain can not expect to be taken seriously in its call to the paramilitary groups to cease bombing and adopt nonviolence, while at the same time, Britain itself refuses to practice nonviolence. Britain continues to support the U.S. bombing raids and sanctions on the women and children of Iraq. Yet, at the same time, Britain denounces the bombings in Northern Ireland.

Nonviolence requires consistent practice in every area of life. Britain should stop bombing Iraq, lift the sanctions on Iraq, dismantle their weapons of mass destruction, and stop dominating others. Then, they will be able to call others to disarmament and nonviolence with real moral authority.

Most of all, the churches need to seek this moral authority. They need to renounce their just war theory, repent of their silence during centuries of war and injustice, and return to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and his nonviolent way of the cross. Once Christians on all sides, Catholics and Protestants, begin to obey Jesus' command to love our enemies, not to kill them or oppress them, then the future is sure. Once they forgive one another and pursue healing and justice, they will discover an authority they never knew existed. God's reign of peace and justice will be at hand.

Such Gospel actions sound simple and obvious, but over here, they are a matter of life and death. No one wants to let go of the past. They see bloodstains everywhere. They have grown used to decades of domination, fear, control, and violence. Peace is unknown to them.

And yet, the beauty of the land, the ancient spirituality that rises from the people, offers a way out: Let go of the past. Stop clinging to resentment. Learn the wisdom of peace. Live and let live.

As I walk the streets of Derry and Belfast, listen to the stories of the people, and count the rainbows, I know that the blessings of peace and the demons of violence lie within us all. We're all undergoing a school of the heart.

As the people of Northern Ireland pass through their bitter crucible to a new day of peace, they have much to teach us in the United States. Their journey is a parable of the world. We need to support them, and undertake the same journey ourselves.