

# **Understanding The Signs of the Times**

After the Anglo-Irish Agreement - 21st April, 1986

## **Introduction**

As members of various Christian Churches in Ireland our primary loyalty is to Jesus Christ, not to any political allegiance. We believe we are called to break down the enmity that divides us, to enter into community with each other, and to face the political realities that confront us in our world.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement is a recognition by the two sovereign Governments that things cannot go on the way they are going in Northern Ireland. In this they are correct. Economic decline, the destruction of the social fabric, and of the content and values of both cultures, the lives lost, the diminishing future for our children - all these mean that we are destroying ourselves.

## **Facing Reality**

Things will never be the same again in Northern Ireland whether the Agreement works or not. There is no way back. For better or worse the situation has moved on. The fact of the Agreement (whatever may be said about its precise form or the way in which it was negotiated) confronts us once again with an opportunity to face reality and to change course, or else be sucked into further destructive conflict.

Facing reality is a difficult thing to do. It often means facing a situation we would prefer not to be in. It can mean that we must let go of aspects of our past. It means facing and assessing the possibilities open to us - possibilities which may be disagreeable. Changing course means risk and uncertainty. It is often easier to take refuge in bewilderment, denial, anger, bitterness and in blaming others. But losing ourselves in these emotions will ultimately lead to our destruction.

Catholics and Protestants are called to follow Christ. Facing reality for us means that we must seek the truth and allow ourselves to be confronted by it. This means that we must be willing to face the political reality of our situation.

## **Facing Reality on the Protestant Side**

Many Northern Protestants feel a deep sense of betrayal over the Agreement. Most feel a deep sense of unease. The Agreement is seen as unjust, unfair, undemocratic, and as having been imposed without due consultation. These feelings are real, they run deep. Nevertheless, the fact of the Agreement is opening up a basic choice for Unionists: either to create a relationship with their nationalist fellow citizens that will recognise the legitimacy of the two traditions and lead to sharing of power and responsibility, or a line of action that will lead to the end of the Union and a probable repartition amidst substantial violence - a form of Protestant 'Sinn Fein'. We are at a point where the Protestant community is choosing life or death for itself (and for others too).

People have a right to reject the Anglo-Irish Agreement and to show dissent from it. But how far will that dissent be taken and where will it lead? Resistance to the UK Government has consequences and costs. The political leadership of the Protestant community has a duty to spell these out. If the Protestant community finds the Agreement completely unacceptable it must then offer an alternative which is not only acceptable to itself but also to the Catholic community.

The Union has been seen as the best long-term protection of the Protestant community's position in Northern Ireland. That is a perfectly legitimate position to hold but the Union cannot be maintained entirely on the terms of Northern Ireland Unionists alone. There is a price to be paid and it cannot be one-sided. The Union means a two-way relationship. The British Government and people have their legitimate concerns and interests too. If Unionists want to maintain the Union they must ask themselves what price they are prepared to pay.

What are the political alternatives and what quality of life will they lead to economically and culturally?

For Northern Protestants to seek to preserve their culture and heritage and to maintain political links with Britain is perfectly legitimate, but some attempts to preserve these will end up by destroying the things they hold most dear. There is a way of seeking to save life which ultimately means losing it. It is only by losing something of ourselves that we can hope to create a future for ourselves and our children. 'Whoever wants to save his own life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for me and for the Gospel will save it'. (Mk 8:35).

A state to which a significant proportion of the people refuse their consent is not viable in the long term. In the end, the Protestant/unionist position in Northern Ireland will only be preserved by creating a viable relationship with the Roman Catholic/nationalist community. It is understandable to talk about majority and democratic rights. However, majority rights are acceptable only if they recognise the rights of minorities and if they do not become an abuse of rights. Democratic rights mean by definition the rights of all the people and not just the majority. Rights only have value in the context of relationships between communities.

### **Facing Reality in the Catholic Community**

Facing reality in the Catholic community means facing up to accepting responsibilities. It means that the dreams and aspirations preserved down the years must be tempered with reality. It means seeking justice but also accepting that no one can have all he or she wants and that everyone must operate within the realm of the possible.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement is met with hope by some in the Catholic community. For others there is an attitude of 'wait and see': will it bring real change, especially in the realms of justice and security? Others on the republican side reject it as an acceptance of partition.

Catholics have to decide which is more important to them in the immediate future: a United Ireland, or justice and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Many Catholics assume it is impossible to get justice in Northern Ireland. But the fact of the Anglo-Irish Agreement introduces a new element into the situation: it is impossible to know if the process which the Agreement has initiated will lead to a tolerable degree of justice until this process is tested and it is impossible to do this unless Catholics also agree to take part in testing the process.

Facing reality for Catholics means doing more than criticising what they see as unjust elements in the State. It means also taking responsibility for developing fair institutions. It means accepting that entry into political institutions in Northern Ireland can never be done on nationalist terms alone but will always be as a result of compromises that take account of unionist fears and identity.

Facing reality means coming to terms with Protestant fears and aspirations and being serious about initiating a process of reconciliation rather than sitting back and making a series of demands. It means that the British Government cannot do everything and cannot be held responsible and blamed for everything today in Northern Ireland.

Facing reality for Catholics means recognising that there are two kinds of justice: one is that of Shylock, which demands its pound of flesh and involves the oppressed becoming the oppressor. The other is that of Christ. This is a forgiving justice that brings both parties into a new relationship of forgiveness and repentance. Catholics have to play their part in bringing this new relationship about.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement has not yet brought any real changes or concrete results. So far it remains in the realm of promise for Catholics. But it will not be enough to sit back and wait for results. Any Agreement can only work, the promise can only be delivered, if significant sections of the Catholic community are prepared to take risks.

*Policing:* Facing reality means accepting that without major constitutional change the police force in Northern Ireland will continue to be the RUC.

Three principles should govern policing:

- (a) Both communities should be involved in the political control of policing;
- (b) Both communities should have a reasonable representation in membership of the Police;
- (c) The Police should act impartially towards both communities.

The London and Dublin Governments need to work more urgently to see that these principles are put into practice.

Catholic perceptions of the RUC in many areas are very negative. However, it would be wrong for Catholics simply to continue to oppose the RUC without putting forward alternatives. In doing this it is not enough to wait until ideal political structures are in place. There must also be an effort to take responsibility for dealing with the day-to-day policing problems that need to be faced. Catholics must also give due recognition to changes that have occurred in the RUC.

Protestants also have to ask themselves if they want the RUC to be a sectarian force taking the side of Loyalists in political or sectarian disputes or if they want it to be a professional, community-based police force. Putting police personnel out of their homes or refusing to work with them simply leaves a vacuum which will be filled by paramilitaries. Corruption, violence and disorder follow from this.

*Violence:* `Violence creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers' (Martin Luther King). Many of the groups involved in the Northern conflict have resorted to the use of violence on different occasions. Often such violence springs from feelings of bitterness caused by real oppression. Its use is meant to bring about justice. But in fact violence in Northern Ireland has continued and deepened the basic divisions at different levels of society, especially among the under-privileged. It has led directly to the involvement of unknown numbers of young and older people and the arrest and imprisonment for very long periods of over 1,000 people (who are often used as scapegoats by the rest of society), as well as causing deep suffering to their families. It has helped to put on the statute book legal measures which fall far short of internationally acceptable standards and with which many people - both inside and outside of Parliament - are deeply unhappy. It has also undermined the conditions for the development of new employment. In the face of all this, to say that violence is the only way to bring justice is simply unreasonable. Choosing violence in Northern Ireland, in our judgement, means rejecting Christ's way.

Catholics have to face the reality that violence has re-introduced the bitter division within their community between those committed to constitutional means and those who support violence. It has also led to an even greater gulf between Northern Nationalists and the people of the Republic. The most constructive action that could be taken for under-privileged people - both nationalist and unionist - would be for the IRA to declare a moratorium on the use of violence. Sinn Fein could then enter the political process as a constitutional party to work for the reconstruction of social and community life in Northern Ireland. Other political parties would find it impossible to exclude them from the democratic process and this would lead to a whole reshaping of political moulds in Northern Ireland and would provide the greatest possible challenge to the status quo.

Loyalist paramilitary groups have also committed terrible atrocities. Some Protestant politicians have flirted with these groups. Members of the security forces have also on occasions been guilty of unjustified killings. There is a need for all the groups in the conflict to examine their conscience about the use of and attitude towards violence.

## **Facing Reality in the Republic**

Facing up to reality in the Republic means facing the fact that consent is not available for a United Ireland at this point and is unlikely to be for a long time to come.

Facing up to reality means that Britain cannot be blamed for everything today in Northern Ireland. It means that the Republic must bear some of the burden of responsibility along with the British Government. It means that the Republic will have to be genuinely sensitive to Protestant fears and aspirations, as well as committing itself to the costly struggle for justice for both Nationalists and Unionists.

Facing up to reality means the Republic has to make a fundamental choice: is achieving a United Ireland at the cost of bloodshed and deeper bitterness more important than seeing that Northern Nationalists and Unionists gain justice and live in peace? The reality is that any form of political unity would require changes not only in the Constitution (as accepted by the New Ireland Forum), but also in the laws and political processes of the Republic to accommodate both Northern Protestants and Northern Catholics. Do people in the Republic really want this and are they willing to pay the price? The ideal of unity is a legitimate and a

noble one but it must be a genuine unity of peoples and not of territory if it is to avoid the trap of domination.

The most immediate need is that the people of Northern Ireland find some way to live together, because whatever political structure emerges the same people of the same two traditions will still be living in the territory that is now Northern Ireland. Any involvement of the Republic or of Britain in Northern Ireland should only be to help to satisfy this need. This point will be particularly relevant when the Anglo-Irish Agreement comes to be assessed.

### Facing Reality in Britain

Facing reality in Britain means accepting that Westminster is the sovereign power over Northern Ireland, and the Anglo-Irish Agreement, if anything has strengthened this reality. The British Government - and Churches - have therefore a duty to face up to unionist fears and frustrations at having no in-put into the Anglo-Irish Secretariat. They also need to ensure that the security forces are subject to the strict rule of law, that the administration of justice is fair and impartial, and that the socio-economic situation of Northern Ireland is radically improved. Northern Ireland remains the biggest challenge to Britain's commitment to democracy and good government.

### **The Christian Stance: 'Outside the Camp' (Heb 13:13)**

As Christians, our primary loyalty is to Jesus Christ, not to any political allegiance. We witness to a Christ who transcends all political and national allegiances, to a Jesus who died outside his political and religious 'camp' (and was rejected by it). Christian Churches are not 'religious' adjuncts of political causes. The Church is called to be a sign of the Kingdom of God by working to break down enmity. It is the pilgrim people of God on the move through the political and national kingdoms of the world, called to Christ's Kingdom, which challenges all our political beliefs.

Followers of Christ should be ready to question all political dogmas at this time, thereby putting politics into its true perspective and nourishing a spirit of compromise. Clergy are called to help people worship the true God - the God who will have no other God before him, whether religious or political.

It is not enough, therefore, simply to reflect and communicate the sufferings and injustices endured by members of our own congregations. As prophets we are also called to challenge each other to move out of our situation of brokenness and division. Many Roman Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland are fervently committed to their faith but all of us need to ask ourselves whether our faith challenges an exclusive, narrow view of Christ's Kingdom, or whether it reinforces such exclusivity. At this time we need to distinguish carefully between our Christian and political allegiance and see what God is saying to us in this situation. As Christians, we do not ask others to bear the cost and risks of change or to make sacrifices; we bear them ourselves.

Many elements are needed to bring about reconciliation and justice in these islands. The Anglo-Irish Agreement deals with two of these, namely, the involvement of the Dublin and London Governments. Other elements are also required, of which the most important is reconciliation and justice within Northern Ireland. In this light, the question is not whether we approve of the Agreement or not but whether it will help towards achieving this ideal.

Both Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland are called to put their allegiance to Christ above all else. All of us stand before Christ as people who have been forgiven and who ask Our Father 'to forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us'. Forgiveness, repentance, and the forging of new relationships are at the very centre of what it means to be a follower of Christ. This attitude has to have some concrete bearing on our search for a way forward.