

Northern Ireland— A Case for Kairos?

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This year's Dominican Peace Action summer school was held at Carlingford, a small coastal town just south of the border with Northern Ireland, a few miles from Newry. A useful vantage point from which to learn at first hand from those who have had to live with 'The Troubles' for more than two decades; and to hear from groups and participants engaged in conflict-resolution and the search for further, long-term 'solutions'—bearing in mind the old adage that Northern Ireland has a problem for every solution'. On the principle that pilgrimages should be made to harassed as well as holy places, we made ours both to St Patrick's grave at Downpatrick and to the R.U.C. training establishment in Belfast.

Families travelling from the U.K. were joined by Irish 'residents', Dominican sisters and others, who shared their experience and concentrated our minds. Hosts and guests may have come with differing agenda; but it may be fair to say that our reasons for coming together were three-fold. First, as workers for peace, it would be inconceivable to ignore or turn our backs on the unresolved conflict within our own jurisdiction: the denial of human rights which sparked off the first Civil Rights march in August, 1968, with the repercussions - military intervention, the suspension of Stormont, internment, the Anglo-Irish Agreement etc., with which we live today.

Second, considering the physical proximity of the two islands and their intimate historical association, much of that history must fill us with shame and compel us, the ex-colonial power, to metanoia. As Christians we must share in the responsibility for past crimes committed against the Irish people. And if, as the contributors to the Evangelical statement 'For God and His Glory Alone' recently declared, 'the essential nature of repentance is losing face', then we have, each in our own way, to confess that 'we are not just victims of history—we have been *wrong*'.

This drives us, thirdly, to express a measure of solidarity with fellow-Christians caught up in the conflict: to search with them for ways to find a democratic process (what the philosopher A.N.Whitehead called 'the victory of persuasion over force') which will satisfy

legitimate demands for justice and grant fair shares in making the decisions that will shape their future. It is not enough to reject the labels 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' as mere flags of convenience; we have to acknowledge that there is a religious as well as a tribal component in the conflict, a theological as well as a politico-economic perspective.

The first impression left on any visitor to Northern Ireland is the sheer ordinariness of people's lives; living with fear and tension has become normality. Just as in the days of the Blitz people adjusted to living in shelters, coping with shortages, so in Belfast they sweep up the broken glass, make detours round the bomb-sights, allow time for negotiating road-blocks and just carry on 'living and partly living'. Eliot's *Women of Canterbury* speak for them too:

We know of oppression and torture,
We know of extortion and violence,
Destitution, disease,
The old without fire in winter,
The child without milk in summer,
Our labour taken away from us,
Our sins made heavier upon us.
We have seen the young man mutilated,
The tom girl trembling by the mill-stream.
And meanwhile we have gone on living,
Living and partly living . . .

There is a minus as well as a plus side to this adaptability, True, it prevents apprehensiveness, the fear of 'battle, murder and sudden death', from becoming obsessive, neurotic, clouding consciousness with confused images of doom and destruction. It sets those 'unnatural' fears alongside the more natural fears shared by all—of unemployment or debt, debility or dispossession. But it may also obscure the inescapable truth that it can never be acceptable for citizens of 'these islands' to be subjected to constant harassment, living under the shadow of military protection or intrusion. Perhaps the worst scandal created by the current 'Emergency' in Northern Ireland is not the killing, maiming and terrorising of innocent civilians; but the normalising of a totally abnormal—even obscene—situation, Living with fear, people become 'accustomed to her face', when that face should have been buried centuries ago, decently interred along with the bones of history's heroes and villains.

This air of 'normality' serves to remind us quite how abnormal it is, even in a post-Cold War world, to live without those shadowy

presences: not to be governed by tribal or racial animosity, the new nationalisms which are only the old slogans writ large. In the light of the Yugoslavian catastrophe, the simmering unrest of Eastern Europe, the collapse of the old U.S.S.R. into Balkanisation or worse, who can now say that Northern Ireland is all that 'abnormal'? At least we cannot now make the mistake we have constantly made in underestimating the continuing, demonic potency of nationalism. Pragmatic Anglo-Saxons often show irritation with the Old Testament attitudes, the obsession with covenantal theology that underlie biblical Protestantism; or the pseudo-mystical nationalism, slogans of holy war or songs eulogising 'the patriot dead' which romanticise the dreary catalogue of murder and sectarian vendettas. They detect on the one hand echoes of an Afrikaner, laager mentality, informed by a State Theology which sanctifies the status quo; the authors of the South African 'Kairos Document' of 1985 described this as 'canonising the will of the powerful and reducing the poor to passivity, obedience and apathy'. And they reject on the other hand a perversion of Christianity which reduces it to a politico-cultural ideology and bypasses or glosses over its (truly) crucial demand for metanoia and radical change.

Both of our dominant traditions could well learn from the way Holocaust Theology has served to justify the status quo in Israel. By its constant recall of the crimes committed in an ever-receding past it has been used to demonise opponents and fuel fears of catastrophe and national extinction. Both Israel and Ireland are in danger of remaining prisoners of history. Any departure from traditional mind-sets—whether in questioning the inevitability of the Nation-State or in insisting on the imperative to compromise—is interpreted as betrayal of the ideals for which our forefathers fought or foremothers starved.

There is, of course, a right use of history whereby it ceases to be a prison and becomes a platform or springboard for new initiatives and further advance. That is the approach of the Irish historian, F.S.L. Lyons: 'To understand the past fully is to cease to live in it, and to cease to live in it is to take the earliest steps to shape what is to come from the material of the present.' No one can claim to have totally escaped the teaching of biased or selective history. Segregated schooling has ensured that history has been taught with a sectarian or nationalistic perspective. 'Our' history becomes either 'Irish' history or 'British' history; what one school teaches as a heroic story of struggle against imperialist oppression will be taught in another as rebellion by clerically dominated Fenians against civilised institutions, the protection of the powers that be, 'ordained by God'.

Recent attempts by religious and academic bodies to provide a

Common Curriculum for Northern Ireland, officially known as 'Education for Mutual Understanding' (EMU), encourage hopes that such blinkered perspectives of the past, with all those inherited suspicions and stereotypes, can now give way to a common exploration of 'Cultural Heritage'. EMU is now a compulsory cross-curriculum theme enabling both similarities and differences to be addressed.

Nevertheless, in the absence of real trust, integrated schooling and common curricula may well appear as tools of government policy in opposition to the existing schools. EMU could be a thin veneer of ideological conditioning comparable to the unifying Communist myth in Yugoslavia. The recent tragic events in Bosnia and Croatia have demonstrated how easily this 'table-cloth' can be swept away, leaving communal hatred and bitterness unresolved, exposed and explosive underneath.

Moreover, those who passionately advocate integrated education in Northern Ireland have to acknowledge that even the best schemes must be operated by teachers who have to come to terms with their own fears and formation, make their own journey into common understanding and, in the absence of any serious integrated teacher-training, make radical readjustments when faced by new and unexpected challenge. In his Corrymeela Working Paper on '*Integrated Education*', Frank Wright warns us: 'Given the not unfounded Catholic suspicion of anti-Irish and proselytizing intention of schools outside Catholic control, there is always a risk that schemes for integrated education might drift into *de facto* British-Unionist-Protestant education. If it gets into deep enough rivalry with the Catholic hierarchy, its liberalism or anti-clericalism becomes a thin veneer for unionism.'

As with integrated education, so with constitutional reform and power-sharing, the road to lasting 'shalom', peace with justice, in Northern Ireland is strewn with landmines and boobytraps. No mere optimism survives even a superficial study of the problems faced by what Conor Cruise O'Brien rightly describes as the 'Double Minority' within the island. The deeper you penetrate the maze of seemingly intractable dilemmas the more you feel you are wading through treacle, swimming through barbed wire. Christian hope, however, differs from optimism as widely as Bonhoeffer's 'cheap grace' differs from the gospel demand for death and resurrection. There have been too many false prophets crying 'peace, peace, where there is no peace'—only papering over the cracks: too many deaths to false hopes in Northern Ireland—where, one asks, are the grounds for hope and resurrection?

Firstly, there is hope rather than despondency to be found in recent history and its record of log-jams released, power-structures seemingly

embedded in concrete crumbling before our eyes. Yesterday it was the Berlin Wall, the apparatchiks of Apartheid, the commissars of the Eastern Bloc: tomorrow, perhaps, it will be the turn of Israel and Ireland? As Christians we believe in the dynamism of the Holy Spirit who blows where she wills and blows away the man-made walls of separation and segregation, the ghettos of the mind with all that alienation and suspicion. 'The God of Surprises' uses the most unlikely instruments to work his will. And that will is surely our ultimate wellbeing and the peace that passes mere human understanding. A historical perspective acknowledges the depth of pain in the present, the necessity of dying to false hopes and slick solutions if any real resurrection is to take place. Hope is rooted in history; like our incarnational faith it is grounded in experience. As the poet, Norman Nicholson, remarked, looking to his Northumbrian hills, it may be a *theological* virtue, but it is a *geological* grace.

Secondly, there are innumerable groups, confessional and ecumenical, academic and pragmatic, well established in Northern Ireland, who have acquired a wealth of experience in community relations, mutual understanding and political cooperation. These groups have now moved on from exhaustive study of the problems, threatening 'analysis-paralysis', to the long process of confidence-building, the healing of the memories, to which the tiny minority of yesterday's men, the triumphalists who believe in military solutions and strong arm intimidation, are resolutely opposed. Peace movements have a proper role in pointing to and living out alternatives: gradually replacing over a long term the so-called peace-keeping troops (sent in, as someone remarked, 'like bulldozers to cut corn') whose presence becomes daily more provocative and counter-productive. It is to these groups and those who work with them that we look with greatest hope; and it is they who, often at some personal risk, retain the vision without which the people perish.

Thirdly, these groups have found their inspiration in Liberation Theology; what is perhaps needed above all today is a Kairos Theology which enables us to seize the opportunity as and when it is offered: the moment to move forward as the log-jam starts to shift. Already some movement is perceptible; the old slogans have lost their power to suppress reason and poison imagination; a new generation is taking over, as in Israel and S.Africa, which is saying, in effect, 'There must be another and more excellent way—anything is better than this.' The *Kairos* is the point where the black despair of Good Friday has become the seed of Resurrection. That in the end is the only Gospel the Church has to offer and the only one worth listening to.

Properly understood, the *Kairos* is the moment of truth when God offers his people a unique opportunity for repentance and decisive action. Jesus wept over Jerusalem, foreseeing its destruction, 'and all because you did not recognise your *Kairos* when God offered it' (Luke 19, 44). To believe in the 'God of Surprises' and to live out the values of the Kingdom (with us, within us, but still to be worked out) is to be expectant, waiting on the dynamic Spirit who prays within us 'with unutterable groanings', willing us to find the things that belong to our peace.

If the *Kairos* is to be perceived and taken, Christians have to hold fast to the imperatives of penitence and hope. In a culture steeped in history, tragic and heroic, the work of patient reconciliation requires in the first instance liberation from the prison of stereotypes, those sad ghettos of the spirit. Historians and theologians can then collaborate in the long, painful process of the healing of the memories. Milan Kundera once remarked that 'the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting'.

Forgiveness is found when those memories become not a barrier of bitterness, but a bridge to be crossed to discover and embrace your neighbour. As Eliot's Becket reminds those women of Canterbury, the cost of failure would be shared by all of us—

for every evil, every sacrilege,
Crime, wrong, oppression and the axe's edge,
Indifference, exploitation, you, and you,
And you, must all be punished. So must you.