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Working in Northern Ireland

Eamonn Cowan

The conflict in Northern Ireland today has roots deep in the history of both Ireland and Britain. The early years of this century brought to a head the long struggle for Home Rule and independence from Britain. That independence grew out of a guerrilla war and a general election in 1918 which produced a majority of Irish in favour of self-rule _ or Home Rule as it was called. That election also highlighted the existence of a large group located in the north of the island strongly opposed to Home Rule. These million people saw themselves as Protestant and British _ they regarded Home Rule as Rome Rule and had no wish to be submerged in Catholic Ireland. For the most part these people were the descendants of those who, many generations before, had been brought from England and Scotland to settle on the land and help pacify the native Irish.

In 1920 the British Parliament passed the Government of Ireland Act, as a result of which Ireland was partitioned. Self-rule was granted to the greater portion of the island and it became the Irish Free State. The six northern counties remained under British rule and formed part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This Northern state had a population of 1.5 million _ 1 million Protestants who were British and 0.5 million Irish Catholics. In 1921 a new Parliament was opened in Northern Ireland _ a Protestant Parliament for Protestant people. With a permanent Protestant majority and a system of government which ensured majority rule, the scene was set.

The Catholic Irish minority never really accepted the new Northern Ireland and was not given any reason to "belong" by the majority. There was concern among the Protestant community that they would remain the majority. With that end in view there was discrimination against Catholics when it came to jobs, public housing, and voting rights. Put simply, Catholics found it difficult to get work, houses, and voting rights were linked to possession of property.

Attempts to draw attention to the state of affairs were ignored by British governments, on the grounds that such matters were the concern of the regime in Northern Ireland. In 1968, Catholics began a campaign for what they regarded as civil rights. There was a tardy response to those demands and finally the response from the majority government was violence _ Catholics were burned out of their homes in Belfast and were fired on by units of the police. The British army was introduced to protect the Catholic community from attack. At that stage the Irish Republican Army began an armed campaign in the belief that only through the

breaking of the link with Britain and the reunification of the island could justice be secured by the minority in Northern Ireland. The armed campaign of the Irish Republican Army did not have the support of the people of Ireland, nor of the Catholic population of Northern Ireland. In fact, Catholics themselves suffered from the actions of the IRA as well as the attacks of Protestant paramilitary groups _ this was true especially in Belfast where Catholics were killed in large numbers for no reason other than that they were Catholics. Terrible things were done on all sides _ IRA, Protestant paramilitaries, and the security forces. The armed struggle continued for 25 years, resulting in over 3,000 deaths, thousands of wounded, and much destruction. There are very few families in Northern Ireland who have not been touched by the events of these years, and both communities have suffered much. Since last August the guns have fallen silent and the search is now on to find a settlement which may lead to a permanent peace.

Between 1862 and 1987 the Vincentians staffed St Patrick's College, Armagh, which is located in Northern Ireland. St Patrick's was originally the minor seminary for the archdiocese of Armagh, but had in recent years become a secondary school for boys. Because of the problem of declining vocations and the consequent difficulty in staffing schools, the community made a decision to withdraw from Armagh. Our departure from there in 1987 meant that we no longer had a presence in Northern Ireland, and that at a time when people were experiencing so much trauma. We were anxious to find a new way to serve the Church and people in the North. In 1992 Fr Frank Mullan and I went to the diocese of Down & Connor, Fr Frank to Ballymena and I to live and work in a very poor parish in West Belfast _ one that had suffered a great deal in the years of violence. Since 1993, at the request of the bishop, I have joined Fr Frank in living and working in Ballymena. Ballymena has a population of about 50,000 people and lies about 40 kilometres north of Belfast. It is a very Protestant town with a minority Catholic population of about 7,000. We work with two diocesan priests, one of whom is Parish Priest. Frank and I live in a part of the town with a large Protestant community not well disposed to the presence of a Catholic church, much less two priests. Many Catholics have been intimidated into leaving the locality over the past 20 years. Life can be uncomfortable at times, e.g. church and house are stoned, and one of our parish churches was bombed some years ago. There is a poverty of smouldering suspicion, fear, and even, at times, hatred, in many of those living around us. Here we are at the core of the Protestant community in Northern Ireland and it could be a "bridging point." We are searching for small ways in which we can link persons in the work of healing that is necessary.

Each month we meet a small group of Protestant ministers serving in the town _ let it be said that not many ministers are interested in such contacts. We have come to realise how difficult it is for them to be involved with Catholic priests, or

indeed with any ecumenical contacts, due to the hostility of their local congregations. In Ballymena it demands courage for a Protestant minister to be part of cross community contact. Our monthly meeting might be small, but it is not without significance and importance in the task of healing.

The Vincentian Mission team, based in All Hallows, will give a two week parish mission in Ballymena at the end of May. We are presently involved in preparing the parish for that event. Two groups from the parish have joined other lay groups here in All Hallows linked to mission preparation, but also gaining insights into the emerging theology of both Church and ministry. The Church in Ireland is faced with the challenge of something dying and something coming to life. Both the present cease-fire in the North and the possible settlement resulting from present negotiations will present a new scene and new opportunities.

Recently, the diocese of Down & Connor completed an audit with a view to identifying the needs to be addressed in a Pastoral Plan for the diocese. Each diocese in Ireland is involved in a similar audit aimed at putting in place a Pastoral Plan for the whole country. Among the issues raised in this diocese were:

- 1) Pastoral care for young people, especially those in second level schools, many of whom are alienated from the institutional Church.
- 2) Adult religious education and formation.
- 3) Priests are looking for help in the areas of human development, pastoral theology and spiritual direction.
- 4) There are many people in the more deprived areas of Belfast who are angry with the Church _ victims of violence, women, and those who feel the Church did not speak for them when they had been victims of injustice.
- 5) The perceived link between violence and religion has fuelled the movement towards growing secularism in Ireland. Many young people are disillusioned with church and all organised religion _ Protestant and Catholic.

Recent years have seen a great deal of attention given to the matter of collaborative ministry, especially in our attempts to work with and for poor people. The Daughters of Charity have been working and living in some of the poorest Catholic areas of Belfast for many years. We have already made public our interest in working with the Daughters and the Society of St Vincent de Paul in the more deprived areas of Belfast. Presently, this avenue of possible development is being explored with a view to establishing a common project in

the future. In some small ways this is already taking place. Fr Frank has recently been appointed chaplain to the Northern region of the Society of St Vincent de Paul and I have been asked to work with some adult groups in a poor parish in Belfast.

In preparing this statement I have been conscious of the difficulty of trying to make sense of a situation which is complex, even for those living in Ireland and Britain. Only those who have lived here can have an insight into this reality. A question of politics for those in London or Dublin is a matter of life and death for the people in Northern Ireland.

"Little" was a big word in the thinking of St Vincent de Paul. "Now the little Congregation of the Mission wants, with God's grace, to imitate Christ the Lord, in so far as that is possible in view of its limitations."

In many ways it would have been good to present a grand and coherent scheme for our involvement in Northern Ireland. As you can see, what has been described is small, uncertain, tentative, and, possibly, temporary _ our position here will be open to review and evaluation in the coming months. The first form of service to any community is presence, but our presence here in Ballymena has a "mission tent" quality _ a time of wondering, searching, and being able to stay with the process. It clearly falls within the ambit of that word "little" so valued by St Vincent. What is certain is that Northern Ireland is a place in need of much healing. It is good to be here at this time. What we are about is seeking to place a Vincentian thread in a garment of healing for a broken people.