

Priests and Peace : the Role of the Redemptorist Order in the Northern Ireland Peace Process

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Abstract

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Résumé

L'Église catholique en Irlande — et surtout sa hiérarchie — a fermement condamné la militaire de l'armée républicaine irlandaise provisoire. Cependant, il y avait au sein de l'Église une stratégie parallèle qui consistait à entretenir le contact avec les chefs républicains. Ce fut surtout l'Ordre Rédemptoriste à Belfast qui suivit cette dernière politique, ses membres étant persuadés que la responsabilité de l'Église catholique allait au-delà de la simple condamnation du mouvement républicain. Cet article examine le rôle de l'Ordre Rédemptoriste grâce à des entretiens avec le Père Alex Reid, principal architecte de cette stratégie, et aux documents privés rédigés alors que le Gouvernement irlandais se lançait dans le processus de paix à la fin des années 1980. L'article démontre que les Rédemptoristes ont très largement contribué à la mise en place et au développement du processus de paix en Irlande du Nord.

PRIESTS AND PEACE : THE ROLE OF THE REDEMPTORIST ORDER IN THE NORTHERN IRELAND PEACE PROCESS

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Abstract/Résumé

The Catholic Church in Ireland – and the hierarchy in particular – strongly condemned the military campaign of the Provisional Irish Republican Army. However, within the Church, there was also a parallel strategy of engagement with republican leaders. This latter strategy was primarily pursued through the Redemptorist Order in Belfast where there existed a belief that the Catholic Church had a responsibility wider than just condemnation of the Republican Movement. This article examines the role of the Redemptorist Order based on interviews with Fr Alex Reid, the main architect of its strategy, and through access to private documents prepared as the Irish government first became involved in the peace process in the late 1980s. The article concludes that the Redemptorists made a significant political contribution to establishing and developing the peace process in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland, peace process, Redemptorists, Catholic Church, IRA, ceasefire.

L'Eglise catholique en Irlande – et surtout sa hiérarchie – a fermement condamné la campagne militaire de l'armée républicaine irlandaise provisoire. Cependant, il y avait au sein de l'Eglise une stratégie parallèle qui consistait à entretenir le contact avec les chefs républicains. Ce fut surtout l'Ordre Rédemptoriste à Belfast qui suivit cette dernière politique, ses membres étant persuadés que la responsabilité de l'Eglise catholique allait au-delà de la simple condamnation du mouvement républicain. Cet article examine le rôle de l'Ordre Rédemptoriste grâce à des entretiens avec le Père Alex Reid, principal architecte de cette stratégie, et aux documents privés rédigés alors que le Gouvernement irlandais se lançait dans le processus de paix à la fin des années 1980. L'article démontre que les Rédemptoristes ont très largement contribué à la mise en place et au développement du processus de paix en Irlande du Nord.

Irlande du Nord, processus de paix, Rédemptoristes, Eglise catholique, IRA, cessez-le-feu.

Individual members of the Redemptorist Order based at the Clonard Monastery in Belfast, have been involved in a dialogue with republican leaders since the start of Troubles in 1969. They have acted as mediators at times of internecine disputes and fulfilled important roles in prison protests such as the 1981 hunger strikes. The paper

will explain the “pastoral mission” that motivated the response of the Redemptorist Order to the conflict and examine its work, which sought to develop formulas and proposals aimed at defining and implementing a political alternative to the armed struggle. It will draw on two unpublished papers written by members of the Redemptorist Peace Ministry in 1988 and 1989, at key moments when confidential contacts were being established between constitutional nationalist politicians and members of the Republican Movement ¹.

The position of the Catholic Church

The outbreak of the contemporary Troubles in Northern Ireland in 1969, in the words of Marianne Elliott, “shook the Catholic Church – as they did the entire Catholic community – in a way not experienced since the 1790s” ². Relations between the Catholic Church and the institutions of Northern Ireland were distant but an accommodation acceptable to both sides had been reached in the aftermath of the partitioning of Ireland in 1921.

During the initial stages of the post-1969 conflict the Church advocated reform within Northern Ireland. There was support for an internal solution to – hopefully – improve the political position of the Catholic community in a reformed Stormont-type arrangement. Moreover, at that time, the Church hierarchy led by Cardinal William Conway were also conscious that their statements should not provoke loyalist violence against members of the Catholic community.

The Church stance was in line with the policy of political participation advocated by the SDLP, the voice of constitutional nationalism. It was not just the hierarchy that was close to the SDLP way of thinking. A 1986 survey of clerical attitudes ³ found that 87.9 per cent were inclined to vote for the SDLP while only 3.9 per cent said they would be “most likely” to vote for Sinn Féin candidates.

The conflict that broke out after 1969 positioned the Catholic Church in a struggle with the Republican Movement for the allegiance of the local Catholic community. In the first instance, the hierarchy were confronted with a position that they were denouncing the use of violence that was initially used to defend the Catholic community from loyalist attacks. However, this period was short-lived as IRA actions went well beyond purely defensive activities.

The Northern bishops issued a statement in May 1970 noting that an individual or group seeking to “deliberately provoke violence” would be acting in a manner that was a “betrayal of the Catholic community – a stab in the back”. However, as Fionnuala O’Connor has written : “Official Northern Catholicism has had difficulty finding a clear and consistent message on militant republicanism” ⁴.

The response of the hierarchy and the majority of the clergy came in a variety of ways. In the first instance, there was repeated condemnation of the actions of the IRA and other paramilitary groups although republicans paid little heed to this criticism clearly distinguishing between the Church as their religion and the Church as an institution. Gerry Adams, the Sinn Féin President, observed: "It's my Church as well as Cahal Daly's".

There were also the threatened imposition of theological sanctions on IRA members in the form of excommunication and withdrawal of Catholic burials for paramilitaries. The issue of how republican funerals were conducted was frequently highlighted by the tricolour on the coffin and the presence of balaclava and black beret wearing IRA members in the graveyard readying for the gun salute.

Bishop Edward Daly told Fionnuala O'Connor: "The paramilitary funeral is one of our major problems [...]" while O'Connor herself observed that:

even though most priests clearly accept that those baptised Catholic deserve a Catholic burial, they are plainly embarrassed by the publicity, aware that the occasion presents to the world the spectacle of the most sharply opposed elements of the Catholic community in close proximity and apparently engaged together in a sacred rite⁵.

But as IRA activity continued for three decades, it may well be concluded that the threat – and imposition – of Church sanction had little impact. Indeed, in Elliott's words, the Church "had little to show for its denunciation of republican violence"⁶.

Aside from statements issued in the name of the Northern bishops, individual comments on the IRA campaign and the overall conflict were confined to a small number of religious. Among the hierarchy, Tomas O Fiaich, Edward Daly and Cahal Daly were the best-known voices, while a number of independently-minded priests such as Denis Faul and Des Wilson were also heard. Interestingly, there were few public interventions by the Redemptorist Order or by its members despite – as discussed below – the crucial involvement they played in ending the conflict.

Despite individual attitudes to the IRA and republican violence, the Catholic Church from the start of the Troubles included the rights of prisoners among its pastoral mission. At no time was this more evident than during the hunger strikes in the 1980-81 period. The ramifications of those events and the deaths of ten republican prisoners on hunger strike were significant for all involved in search of peace in Northern Ireland, including the Catholic Church.

McElroy argued that throughout the 1980s the “burning issue” for the Church was its attitude to the post-hunger strike electoral advancement of Sinn Féin. He noted: “the bishops clearly aligned themselves with constitutional nationalists in their desire for some type of new political initiative for Northern Ireland”⁷.

This policy was in keeping with the strategy of the 1982-87 Garret FitzGerald-led government in Dublin which feared Sinn Féin supplanting of the SDLP as the largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland coupled with potential instability in the Republic resulting from increased electoral backing for military republicanism.

There were considerable degrees of difference within the church hierarchy towards issues associated with the Troubles. Cardinal Thomas O Fiaich was more sympathetic than most clergy and members of the hierarchy to nationalist aspirations. Shortly after succeeding Conway as Archbishop of Armagh in late 1977, O Fiaich explained his political positioning in an interview with the *Irish Press* newspaper:

I think the British should withdraw from Ireland. I believe in a declaration of intent. I know it's a coloured phrase but I think it's the only thing which will get things moving. [...] I don't see any long-term solution for the Northern Ireland problem save in an all-Ireland context. We are only putting off that day⁸.

Despite O Fiaich's intervention, cognisance must be taken of the fact that these were personal views and not an official Church position. Under Canon Law each bishop has a considerable degree of ecclesiastical autonomy. O Fiaich was not issuing a collective viewpoint. Nevertheless, the subtleties of Canon Law were not appreciated by many reading O Fiaich's interview. Given the position he held, most people equated his comments with official Church thinking. The Rev. Ian Paisley dubbed O Fiaich “the IRA bishop from Crossmaglen”.

Bishop Cahal Daly of Down and Conor articulated an alternative and more hard-line attitude to the Republican Movement, on one occasion describing the IRA as “an evil and barbaric organisation”⁹. Not unsurprisingly, given his position on the Republican Movement, Daly did not accept the tradition nationalist analysis of the Northern problem, observing: “There can be no imposed unity within Northern Ireland, within Northern Ireland as it now stands. [...] In both cases we have the need for consent”¹⁰.

Nevertheless, while the Church engaged in incessant condemnation of republican violence there was also a parallel strategy of engagement with republican leaders. This latter strategy was primarily pursued through the Redemptorist Order in Belfast where there existed a belief that the Catholic Church had a responsibility wider than just

condemnation of the Republican Movement. A private – and still unpublished – paper prepared by the Redemptorist Peace Ministry in 1988 sought to explain the pastoral mission that motivated their response to the on-going conflict :

The daily, tragic consequences of the conflict in Northern Ireland – bloodshed, imprisonment, widespread suffering and general despair of any just and democratic solution – are a constant source of anguish to the Christian heart and demand a compassionate and effective response from it [Redemptorist Peace Ministry, 1988].

Clonard and the Communication Sanctuary

The Redemptorist Order – the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer – was founded by Saint Alphonsus Liguori in Scala, a village south of Naples in Italy in the 1730s. Missions, spiritual exercises and renewals drove the work of the Congregation. The first Redemptorists to work in Ireland came to conduct a mission in Limerick in 1851. The first Belfast residence was established in 1896 in the Springfield area located on what Elliott has labelled “that ethnic frontier zone between Protestant and Catholic enclaves of West Belfast” ¹¹.

When the contemporary conflict started post-1968, the Redemptorists found themselves on the frontline of sectarian violence. They witnessed at first hand the causes and consequences of the conflict. More specifically through their location on the peace line, by their pastoral activity in republican West Belfast and also in the prisons, the Redemptorists came to know the personnel in the Republican Movement.

Two references to the Clonard Monastery provide evidence of the considerable position played by the Redemptorists in life in West Belfast. In his autobiography, Gerry Adams recounted a childhood memory :

To me Clonard was a wondrous place with high, high ceilings and a huge high altar. The altar boys wore long, red soutanes and white gowns. The priest’s incense spiralled upwards through the shafts of sunlight which came slanting down from stained-glass windows at the very top ¹².

Fionnuala O’Connor, in her 1993 book based on interviews with 50 Catholics, quoted a young woman from the Falls Road in relation to the novena at Clonard, which has been organised every summer since 1971 :

There’s people who go to the novena who’d never darken a church door the rest of the year. And a lot go there on a Sunday because

maybe in the church near them the priest does nothing but give off about the organisations [republican paramilitaries] or he goes on about teenage pregnancies all the time. Clonard, they're more spiritual. They give you a good feeling about yourself, and you want to pray ¹³.

Given their involvement with the local community and the level of local knowledge available to them, the Redemptorists knew just who they had to talk to when the time came to start a talks process. One of the leading individuals involved in Redemptorist peace work, Fr Alex Reid, noted: "When there is a battle outside your door, you couldn't but get involved. We became a ministry to the Troubles, if you like. And then, through dealing with the local situation, [...] you get involved in the bigger picture" ¹⁴.

There has been considerable debate about the genesis of the Northern Ireland peace process. Several journalists and academics have sought to date the start of the process and also to link that date to the involvement of particular individuals. Initially, the peace process was acknowledged as starting with the private discussions between Gerry Adams and John Hume in the mid-1980s. However, as more details of the clandestine contacts between the various participants have emerged, the role of the Redemptorist Order in establishing political contacts and developing political ideas has been accorded much greater prominence.

In this regard, members of the Redemptorist Order have been active in peace making since the first day the Troubles began. Indeed, from the mid-nineteen seventies onwards, Redemptorist priests have been involved in attempts to produce an IRA ceasefire. Their work was undertaken through the Redemptorist Peace Ministry, the name given to the pastoral mission they pursued. The old Gaelic term "tearmann" was used to reflect the desire for the Clonard Monastery to be seen, according to Fr Reid, "as a space or sanctuary where politicians could come under the invitation of the Church in order to find some way of making peace" ¹⁵.

The role of Fr Alex Reid

Fr Alex Reid was born in Co. Tipperary but had been based at Clonard since the start of the contemporary conflict. His role in the Northern Ireland peace process can be traced back to the start of the Troubles. As a member of the Redemptorist Order, Reid saw himself as a mediator. However, as will be examined below, he was to become an active participant in the peace process, arguably the key person in starting the process. Moreover, he was more than a peace facilitator. He became an active participant in what became the peace process.

When the IRA announced its first ceasefire in August 1994, Albert Reynolds acknowledged the role played by Reid: "That priest was absolutely vital in trying to bring about peace. He never gave up in going back and forth. He was at all times absolutely reliable in conveying what the various views were" ¹⁶.

Reid had over many years built a reputation of trustworthiness with leading members of the Republican Movement. This had been earned through his involvement with known republicans in Belfast who used Clonard as a type of "safe house" in which differences could be resolved. For example, Reid played a mediating role between rival republican groups – the Irish National Liberation Army and the Official IRA – in the mid-1970s. In 1977 Gerry Adams asked the Redemptorists to intervene to calm tensions between the Official IRA and the Provisional IRA. The former accused the latter of bombing its Easter parade although loyalists were later identified as being responsible.

This type of mediating intervention continued over many years – for example, in March 1987 a statement confirming the end to an internal feud in the INLA was issued in the name of Redemptorist priests, Gerry Reynolds and Alex Reid. Reid had also built his credibility with republicans through an involvement with prisoners. In the late 1970s, Reid along with another priest, Des Wilson, met two Sinn Féin leaders in the company of O Fiaich to discuss the situation in the prisons. This role continued during the hunger strikes in 1980 and 1981. Reid was a frequent visitor at the Maze Prison and acted as a conduit for messages between the different sides.

Reid sought – and continues – to maintain a low-key background role. However, in March 1988 he found himself involved in a huge international event related to Northern Ireland. Two British soldiers, Derek Woods and David Howes, had been murdered in horrific circumstances after their drove into an IRA funeral in the Falls Road.

The two men were dragged from their car, beaten and driven away by IRA members. The two soldiers were found a short distance away lying on a patch of waste ground. They had been stripped to their underpants and socks before being shot. Reid arrived on the scene. In photographs reproduced the following day on newspaper front pages across the world he was seen knelt beside the almost naked bodies of the two men. Mary Holland, writing in *The Observer* ¹⁷, states that, as the dying soldiers lay on the ground, Reid said to her: "This one is still breathing. Do you know how to give the kiss of life?"

Reid's belief was that the Church had a responsibility wider than just condemnation of the Republican Movement. From his earliest contacts with senior republicans in Belfast – at a time when church

condemnation of their actions was vocally strongest – Reid identified a constituency prepared to actively examine the feasibility of a political alternative to the military campaign. Reid said :

One of the things I discovered very quickly was that the people who most wanted peace were the IRA. Who wants to live that kind of life, always on the run ? These were young men in their early twenties with wives and young children caught up in nightmare stuff. They wanted some way of getting out of that honourably ¹⁸.

The Mission Statement of the Redemptorist Peace Ministry, 1988

A Mission Statement for the peace work of the Redemptorist Order was drawn up in 1988 at the suggestion of Cardinal O Fiaich. The statement was in fact a blueprint for the ministry, which endorsed the idea of direct face-to-face dialogue with representatives of the IRA.

The Redemptorists were driven by a vision of peace. They believed they had a pastoral responsibility to intervene directly in the conflict. Their objective was clear :

Seeking to channel the course of events away from the road of armed and violent confrontation [...] and on to the road of political communication and dialogue which is marked out by the principles of justice and charity and characterised by the democratic use of political diplomatic persuasion [Redemptorist Peace Ministry, 1988].

It was against this backdrop that the Redemptorist Peace Ministry operated. “The Church has a missionary and pastoral duty to intervene directly and to do all she can to bring its violent dimensions and their tragic consequences to an end.” [Redemptorist Peace Ministry, 1988].

What was meant by direct intervention was unambiguous and clearly established in the Mission Statement – “to use her resources, her influence and her lines of communication to encourage, promote and, when necessary, even to facilitate it [peace]” [Redemptorist Peace Ministry, 1988].

This was not a priest-led initiative ; rather, approval was forthcoming from the official Church in the guise of Cardinal O Fiaich “who fully supported and indeed participated in the ministry” ¹⁹. The Clonard Monastery was, however, located in the Diocese of Down and Connor where Bishop Cahal Daly was not prepared to meet republican representatives, even in a pastoral capacity. But under Church rules the Redemptorists were not directly answerable to their local bishop. The position and authority of the Provincial Superior of the

Redemptorist Order in relation to the priests and brothers in his Order is similar to that of a bishop in relation to the clergy in his diocese.

The Peace Ministry had the approval of the Provincial Superior of the Redemptorist Order. This allowed Reid to tell those he was meeting that his activities were being undertaken “under the authority of the official church.” There could, therefore, be direct and formal contact with the Republican Movement. This was explicit from the Mission Statement :

Here her role may be to facilitate the necessary dialogue between the relevant parties especially when all lines of communication between them have broken down and the tragic dimensions of the conflict cannot and will not be ended unless and until they are restored [Redemptorist Peace Ministry, 1988].

Working for a Peace Process

The peace process strategy more commonly traced to the mid-1980s had in fact its origins almost back at the start of the contemporary Troubles. Reid had met Garret FitzGerald when he was Minister for Foreign Affairs in the 1973-77 Fine Gael-Labour coalition. There was a later meeting with Michael O’Kennedy who was Minister for Foreign Affairs in the 1979-81 Charles Haughey-led Fianna Fáil government. There was, however, a united response from the main political parties in the Republic – they were not willing to meet with representatives of the IRA before that organisation declared a ceasefire.

Although there was a political stalemate, Reid and the Redemptorists continued with their peace ministry. At that time, it was clear that there were two significant ingredients required to kick-start a peace process. Firstly, the Republican Movement needed a political wing ; talking with political representatives was always going to be easier for politicians in the North and the Republic, even when the lines between republican politics and IRA military action were blurred. The one positive outcome from the 1981 Hunger Strikes was the emergence of Sinn Féin. The election of Bobby Sands to Westminster and the electoral success of two other prisoners in the general election in the Republic in June 1981 clearly demonstrated a previously untapped constituency for republican political activity. Secondly, with an alternative to armed struggle opening up to republicans, they needed the credibility of talks with constitutional nationalists in the North and more importantly with those in the Republic.

The latter was a major stumbling block to progress. The idea of a ceasefire was strongly resisted within the Republican Movement. A

memory of the internally debilitating ceasefire in 1975 still remained with republicans. Reid was told that political movement could come through the creation of a united nationalist position involving Sinn Féin, the SDLP and the main political parties in Dublin. He recalls : "And if they could come together and agree on a common democratic strategy, that would provide an alternative strategy that could credibly be sold to the IRA" ²⁰.

There was little prospect of this thinking winning over the Garret Fitzgerald-led Fine Gael-Labour coalition government that was in power in Dublin between November 1982 and February 1987. As Taoiseach, Fitzgerald's principle motivation in the aftermath of the 1981 hunger strikes was to prevent a resurgent Sinn Féin supplanting the SDLP as the main nationalist party in Northern Ireland.

The IRA campaign continued, but in Reid's interpretation of what Adams was telling him a historic breakthrough was possible. The republican leadership, if offered the possibility of an alternative, purely political, route for achieving their objective, were open to persuasion if a strategy involving nationalist parties in the North and the Republic could be built. Reid recalls : "So the problem then was, the Sinn Féin leadership could do nothing about developing such a strategy unless they were able to talk directly to the other parties. And the other parties at that time wouldn't speak to them unless the IRA stopped" ²¹.

In effect, the peace process started with the Redemptorist priest. Numerous attempts were made to get the SDLP and senior politicians in the Republic to talk with Sinn Féin. But, for a variety of reasons, none of these attempts were successful in establishing the first contact. The process was stillborn until 1986 when Reid himself seized the initiative.

The Clonard-based priest first put pen to paper : "I decided this was the last throw of the dice, that I would put it all on paper so that the opportunity that was there to end the armed struggle would be known and on paper [...]" ²². The fifteen-page typed letter was sent to John Hume in May 1986 and to Charles Haughey in November of the same year.

Reid subsequently held separate meetings with the two senior politicians. He argued that the Adams-led republican leadership could be convinced to lay down their arms but that the only way this could come about was through face-to-face discussion. Talks had to be aimed, in the first instance, at ending the isolation of the republican movement. Adams and his supporters had to be shown that a broad constitutional and nationalist family existed which they could join to pursue the objective of a united Ireland. But this would only happen when the IRA no longer felt that it was out on its own.

Haughey listened but his instinct was not to meet Adams while the IRA campaign continued. However, at a subsequent meeting, the Fianna Fáil leader introduced Reid to his party's Head of Research, Martin Mansergh ²³.

The Mansergh-Reid-Adams connection was crucial to the development of the peace process. The Redemptorist priest facilitated communications between Adams and Mansergh. After Albert Reynolds replaced Haughey and the process entered deeper negotiation in the 1992-94 period, Reid would become a regular figure around Government Buildings in Dublin.

Reid would type up the contents of these discussions and pass the document on to the other side, generally with some personal commentary about positions and possibilities. The Irish government was given documents with significant republican fingerprints, as Mansergh admitted :

The IRA were kept informed of the state of the dialogue, though it was not always clear if a particular written message had come from the IRA or Sinn Féin, as from time to time we received both, or indeed whether it always strictly mattered. My working assumption was that one was always dealing with the one movement, in which people had different roles at particular times ²⁴.

It was a slow process. As each new version of what emerged as a joint position paper was exchanged, Adams continued to argue with Reid that face-to-face dialogue would speed up the entire process. With the exception of two meetings in 1988, Haughey was unwilling to sanction direct contacts although from the middle of 1992 his successor approved regular meetings between Adams and Mansergh. Throughout this entire process, which was conducted in secret, Reid was clearly driven by a conviction about the pastoral responsibility of his church to intervene directly in the conflict.

The Dialogue of Peace, 1989

When Fianna Fáil returned to power in 1987, direct contact was made with Sinn Féin. As noted previously, two secret meetings were held between representatives of the two parties in 1988. Dr Martin Mansergh, along with Fianna Fáil colleagues Dermot Ahern and Richie Healy, met with Gerry Adams and two other senior republicans, Pat Doherty and Mitchel McLaughlin, in Dundalk. It was a high-risk strategy. Haughey told Ahern if the Co. Louth meeting was made public those attending would be disowned. There was no official sanction. There was some unease in the Fianna Fáil delegation about the contacts especially as republican violence continued. It was only a

few months since the Enniskillen bombing on Remembrance Day in November 1987 when IRA actions left eleven people dead and more than sixty injured.

The first meeting between the Fianna Fáil delegation and the republican leadership took place at the Redemptorist monastery in Dundalk. The meeting lasted for two hours. The atmosphere was cordial and business-like. The first tentative steps, which would lead to the August 1994 IRA ceasefire, were being taken. The first face-to-face meetings were hugely significant for the republican movement as Reid explained :

It was a big thing for Sinn Féin to say they had met representatives of Fianna Fáil – in brackets, the Irish Government. That created credibility with the military side of their movement, that they were actually being taken seriously and engaging at the highest level [...] ²⁵.

While these early contacts served to tease out definitions of key concepts such as self-determination and consent, the discussions ended without any apparent movement. The Fianna Fáil delegation concluded that the IRA was not yet prepared to call a ceasefire. It was clear to those involved that the principal republican objective with the dialogue was to win political credibility and to end their isolation.

Despite the ending of the formal contact, secret channels of communications were kept open by Reid. A position paper written in 1989 by Reid sought to explain the clandestine “dialogue of peace” that was underway. The document – originally intended for public consumption but unpublished – was prepared to help forward the cause of a “just and lasting peace” ²⁶.

The 1988 Mission Statement of the RPM was incorporated into the 1989 paper by way of explaining the pastoral considerations motivating the Redemptorists. However, the significant material in the 1989 document concerns the contemporaneous account given of the state of the peace process at that time and the active role being played by the Redemptorist Order. The document clearly sets the origins of what became known in the early 1990s as the Northern Ireland peace process.

Here we wish to concentrate on the pastoral efforts we have been making, particularly over the past four or five years to persuade the Republican Movement, namely the I.R.A and the Sinn Féin Party to end the use of armed force in the pursuit of their aims and to change over completely to the use of political and diplomatic forces [...] [Redemptorist Peace Ministry, 1989].

The 1989 document was prepared against “a state of impasse” in the dialogue between republican leaders and the Redemptorists represented by Fr Reid. The breakthrough face-to-face contacts with Hume and Mansergh had ended the previous year without success although a dialogue of sorts was being maintained through Reid. The Redemptorists noted that they had been involved in :

a long process of dialogue with the leadership of the Sinn Féin Party during which formulas and proposals aimed at defining and implementing “a political alternative to the armed struggle” were considered and discussed in terms of the democratic principles that must govern a just resolution to the conflict [Redemptorist Peace Ministry, 1989].

The 1989 RPM document pointed towards progress in the discussions with the republican leadership :

We managed to define “a democratic overall political and diplomatic strategy for justice, peace and reconciliation” which, in terms, at least, of its broad thrust, the Sinn Féin leadership were prepared to recommend as a credible, political “alternative” to the armed struggle of the IRA. provided they were satisfied before they recommended it that, if the IRA were to accept it as such, it would, in fact be implemented by the Irish Government and other relevant parties on the nationalist side of the conflict [Redemptorist Peace Ministry, 1989].

Despite the apparent progress achieved in the Redemptorists’ dialogue with the republican leadership a major difficulty to movement remained. The Republican Movement wanted talks without an end to the IRA campaign. However, the Irish government was unwilling to discuss what the RPM described as “proposals for peace” until “the IRA ends that campaign or, at least calls a cease-fire.”

The latter distinction is highly significant in light of the controversy which developed over the absence of the word “permanent” from the August 1994 IRA cease-fire statement. It would appear that, in 1989, consideration of a “cease-fire” by the Republican Movement was not in terms of a permanent end to violence but, rather, as a prelude to political discussion with the option of a return to conflict left open. The RPM noted the information being supplied by the republican leadership who :

could not prudently or realistically advocate or support any proposals for “a political alternative to armed struggle” or any new formulas for defining and applying the democratic principles which, in theory at least, should govern the exercise of political self-determination as it

relates to the present conflict, unless and until they could discuss them directly and without pre-conditions (in particular, the pre-condition that the IRA should first end its armed campaign) with the Government or Governments and other political parties whose co-operation would be necessary to implement them or, at least, to facilitate their implementation [Redemptorist Peace Ministry, 1989].

This was not a viable option for the Irish government. The impatience of the RPM is evident in the 1989 document :

This impasse, we believe, is holding up the opportunity of a real breakthrough on the road to a just and lasting peace [...]. We are convinced, from our knowledge of the possibilities, that it could be satisfactorily and even quickly resolved by means of a special pastoral intervention [Redemptorist Peace Ministry, 1989].

The Redemptorists proposed a “communication sanctuary” under their auspices to end the impasse. This sanctuary – described as a mission of the Church –

could be set up and maintained without loss of face or compromise of principle by any of the parties concerned provided all of them accepted the intervention as an authentic exercise of the Church’s mission in the present conflict and were prepared to co-operate with it [Redemptorist Peace Ministry, 1989].

The Redemptorists as Political Neutrals

The Redemptorist Peace Ministry did not consider itself a party political organisation. In fact, the RPM sought to neutralise any political dimension inherent in its involvement as a motivator and participant in the nascent peace process in Northern Ireland. In 1989, when offering to become a “communication sanctuary” for the participants the Redemptorists observed :

Our only interest in making the proposal is to save life and to protect people from suffering. We are intervening, therefore, on behalf of all those people who, because of the continuing conflict, will be killed, maimed or imprisoned and all those families who will be shattered as a result over the coming weeks and months [Redemptorist Peace Ministry, 1989].

A senior member of the Redemptorist Order, Father Brendan Callanan, said of the RPM : “It does not purport to support, nor does it in fact support the position of any political party. It is a Christian group aimed at encouraging and understanding between two

communities and the promotion of a more peaceful, more reconciled and more just society in Northern Ireland”²⁷.

This self-image as political neutral was reinforced in 1988 when the Mission Statement of the RPM was drawn up. The document observed :

[The Church] must then use her political neutrality, her moral credibility and her own lines of communication to provide the kind of sanctuary setting where the parties to the conflict, who sincerely wish to use political and democratic methods to achieve justice and peace, can meet together for the necessary dialogue without damaging their own political or moral credibility and without compromising or appearing to compromise any of their own political or democratic principles [Redemptorist Peace Ministry, 1988].

Communication and dialogue were the central tenets of the RPM. Those involved in Clonard argued that the only Christian and human way to conduct political affairs – and to resolve the conflicts that arise from them – was through communication between those involved. The Redemptorists saw themselves not only as politically neutral in this process but also as honest brokers.

[The Church] has a pastoral duty to respond to a political situation when – but only when – moral and humanitarian [*sic*] issues are at stake. Political matters as such which belong to the sphere of democratic opinion and choice are not her business and she has no role, from her mission, to play in them except to insist that, in all matters, the first role must be given to God-like compassion for people because it is the supreme value in human affairs and the first principle of all human relationships including those of politics [Redemptorist Peace Ministry, 1988].

Nevertheless, on account of Clonard’s physical position within the Catholic community in West Belfast the Redemptorists were in a unique position vis-à-vis the Republican Movement. The external perception – and it would appear that from a SDLP vantage point – was one that encompassed a political dimension for Clonard.

In a note of a confidential conversation – but leaked to the media in 1997 – the SDLP’s Brid Rodgers voiced SDLP frustration to Dypmna Hayes, an Irish Foreign Affairs official. Hayes prepared the note for her superiors. She recollected :

Ms Rodgers is concerned with the poor coverage available to the SDLP in *The Irish News* of late. She put this down to the fact that the editor in chief of *The Irish News*, Mr Jim Fitzpatrick, has recently formed an

unofficial alliance with Fr. Alex Reid and Mary McAleese of QUB. Referring to this group as the “triumvirate”, Ms Rodgers described their main object as promoting a new nationalist consensus, which owes more to Sinn Féin than the SDLP. All three are in regular touch with the Sinn Féin leadership and are in reality pushing the Sinn Féin agenda²⁸.

Father Brendan Callanan rejected the claim that the RPM was promoting a republican agenda, saying that this was “absurd” and at no point has it ever tried to influence the editorial policy of a newspaper. Leaving aside the latter issue, it is difficult to accept the view of the Redemptorists as political neutrals. The peace process has involved many participants, aside from the parties in Northern Ireland and the Irish and British governments there have been others involved. For example, the European Union and the United States have participated at different stages and to varying degrees. At times this involvement has required those involved to adopt particular positions such as the Clinton administration’s decision to grant Gerry Adams a visa in March 1994. These are inherently political decisions with political consequences – hence any attempt to adopt the position of political neutral is difficult to maintain.

A similar case exists with the Redemptorist Order, which involved itself directly in dialogue with the Republican Movement and encouraged constitutional nationalists to meet and talk with leading republicans. This stance is inherently political – what it is not is party political – and reduces considerably the Redemptorists claim to be a neutral participant.

The Redemptorists acted as a conduit on the nationalist/republican side of the dialogue. In that regard their role is worthy of consideration and as the “full story” of the peace process is told, their role should not be undervalued.

NOTES

- 1 The Redemptorist Peace Ministry was located in Belfast. It facilitated contact between the various participants in the peace process and drafted a number of documents on the subject, most of which were private publications including those referred to in this paper. The Mission Statement of the Peace Ministry was prepared in 1988. The author wishes to thank Fr Alex Reid for releasing this material for use at this time.

- 2 Marianne Elliott, *The Catholics of Ulster*, London, Penguin, 2000, p. 471.
- 3 C.F. Gerald McElroy, *The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Crisis*, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 1991.
- 4 Fionnula O'Connor, *In Search of a State*, Belfast, Blackstaff, 1993.p. 277.
- 5 Fionnula O'Connor, *In Search of a State*, pp. 306-307.
- 6 Marianne Elliott, *The Catholics of Ulster*, p. 473.
- 7 Gerald McElroy, *The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Crisis*, p. 64.
- 8 *Irish Press*, 16 January 1978.
- 9 *Sunday Times*, 29 May 1988.
- 10 Quoted in Gerald McElroy, *The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Crisis*, p. 63.
- 11 Marianne Elliott, *The Catholics of Ulster*, p. 404.
- 12 Gerry Adams,. *The Politics of Irish Freedom*, Dingle, Brandon, 1986, p. 33.
- 13 Fionnula O'Connor, *In Search of a State*, p. 324.
- 14 Interview with Fr Alex Reid, Dublin 15 October 2002.
- 15 Interview with Fr Alex Reid, Dublin 15 October 2002.
- 16 *The Guardian*, 12 September 1998.
- 17 *The Observer*, 12 April 1998.
- 18 Interview with Fr Alex Reid, Dublin 15 October 2002.
- 19 Interview with Fr Alex Reid, Dublin 15 October 2002.
- 20 Interview with Fr Alex Reid, Dublin 17 April 2002.
- 21 Interview with Fr Alex Reid, Dublin 17 April 2002.
- 22 Interview with Fr Alex Reid, Dublin 17 April 2002.
- 23 The first meeting with Mansergh remained one of Reid's most vivid recollections from his involvement in the peace process. It was a key moment, according to Reid : "What does the Bible say ? – 'There was a man sent by God'. I thought, 'Cometh the hour, cometh the man'. Martin was the ideal person for conducting a debate with the republican movement, which aimed at talking the gun out of Irish politics. You wonder if it would have succeeded without him". See Rafter, 2002.
- 24 Martin Mansergh,. "The Background to the Peace Process", in *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, Vol.6, 1995.
- 25 Interview with Fr Alex Reid, Dublin 16 April 2002.
- 26 Untitled document c.1989. Private papers of Fr Alex Reid, previously unpublished.
- 27 *Belfast Telegraph*, 20 October 1997.
- 28 Department of Foreign Affairs memo entitled, "Concerned with poor SDLP press coverage". This note of a conversation between Hayes and Rodgers, dated Lurgan 3 April 1997, was leaked to the media on 19 October 1997.

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