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Conversation with the Bishop of Derry

I met Dr. Edward Daly in Derry on 12 November 1987 (previous report 16 July). He had just returned from the Birmingham Six appeal hearing where he had given evidence on behalf of the appellants.

Birmingham Six Hearing

He had heard the view expressed by lawyers, for example, by Dick Ferguson who is appearing for the Six, that three tougher judges could not have been chosen than Lord Chief Justice Lane, Lord Justice O'Connor and Lord Justice Brown. He felt that the judges had "given their hand away a bit" in the first week. I asked if this was a view he had formed himself, or if it reflected conversation with lawyers. The Bishop said it reflected what he had picked up from lawyers appearing in and observing at the hearing. I asked if he agreed with the criticism expressed in a piece by Kevin Dawson in the Sunday Tribune. He said the piece was exaggerated.

He felt the retired policeman who had supervised the interrogations of the Six (Reade) had been destroyed by Michael Mansfield, so much so that he had felt sorry for him. He said Dawson had been right in suggesting in the Tribune that Reade had been on the point of total collapse when one of the judges made a helpful intervention. He said he felt the retired constable, Clark, had held up well under questioning.

The Bishop said there was a feeling view among the lawyers that the judges would "cop out" and leave the issue to be decided by a jury in a retrial. He said he was satisfied with the way his own evidence had gone, but he felt it would have been more helpful to the Six if the episode of the Derry funerals had not immediately preceded it.

Extradition

I asked what views were being expressed by the Bishop's clergy and local people about the extradition issue. The Bishop said the matter was scarcely mentioned. In fact, on reflection, he said he had not heard it mentioned at

all in recent times. He did not think there would be any strong reaction among nationalists whatever course the Government took. The Bishop did not offer a personal opinion.

Funerals

The Bishop spoke at some length about the funerals issue. He is very much perplexed about what to do. He said that his ruling that Requiem Mass would not be said with the remains of paramilitaries in church had been criticised by quite a number of his clergy and by a number of other people whose opinion he respected (we know from past contacts that Bishop Cahal Daly is one of these). The Bishop is leaning to the view that his ruling cannot be fully enforced because the daily 10 o'clock Mass is frequently a funeral (Requiem) Mass. He would not, however, allow special Requiem Mass to be said. He did foresee, however, although he was concerned at the prospect, that there would be confrontation between the Provos and the ordinary parishioners of St. Eugene's.

He said that the IRA will even go to the lengths of stashing weapons in confessional boxes in their preparation for the vollies and offer further provocation by using weapons which have been used in murders.

He expected that the RUC would insist in future on flanking the cortege which course was exactly what the Provos had been playing for. He understood the pressures on the police from Unionists who were furious at the sight of military formations, balaclava masks and vollies at funerals. The police had turned a blind eye to much of this until about four years ago but had then been obliged to act. He said their presence at the recent funerals had been very excessive. He did not think they could be completely successful in preventing the firing of vollies no matter how many of them were present. He could not see any way out of the dilemma and he foresaw continuing media propaganda coups by the IRA. He felt the local RUC Commander, Turkington, with whom he does not have good relations, would exacerbate the problem with his "Rambo" approach.

The Bishop expected trouble at the cathedral on Sunday when he read the Bishops' letter on the bombing of Enniskillen. He thought the media would be present (he had already refused a request from a TV crew to film him reading the letter). I asked him what form the trouble would take. He said there would be walk-outs and possibly other demonstrations.

He gave the following account of the McSheffery and Deery funerals. The pressure by the Provos to get him to back down was intense. There were constant callers to his door shouting abuse, devices (fire-crackers and the like) were left on the door and a phoneathon began at 4.00 p.m. on Friday, 30 October. It continued without any break until 2.00 p.m. on Saturday afternoon. Callers asked questions like "What would Christ have done?", "Why won't you let them be buried in peace?". The callers frequently departed from these expressions of piety to abuse and threaten the Bishop ("We'll f.....g get ye"). The phone calls stopped when it was realised that the Bishop had left on Saturday afternoon for London. The Bishop said that the two men who had killed themselves in an explosion, McSheffery and Deery, were very bad lots who had been responsible for several murders. They had not been inside a church in years. The Bishop said twice that he would not have asked McSheffery in particular "to walk his dog".

Their coffins arrived from different areas at precisely the same time on the following Monday morning, twenty minutes before 10 o'clock Mass. The Bishop noted that the Provos had taken three days to get the coffin to church in the Marley funeral and two hours in one of the previous funerals in Derry. Despite the fact that the police presence was heavier than ever, they had had no trouble in getting the coffins promptly to the church on this occasion. There were about 2,000 people with the coffins and there were many more arriving in the normal course for 10 o'clock Mass on All Souls' Day. Not all of the people watching the coffins arrive would have been IRA supporters. A good many would have been unemployed people with nothing else to do and looking out for a bit of excitement. It was like a McGuigan fight, except it was "Daly versus McGuinness". The Bishop pointed out again that the Mass was not a special Mass (it was the usual 10 o'clock Mass, but it was a Requiem Mass and the congregation was rather larger because it was All Souls' Day). He believed all of this had been thought out by the Provos beforehand, probably in a back room of the Ard Fheis in Dublin on the previous weekend. The Bishop believes that if the coffins had not been allowed into the church, there would have been violence and the doors of the cathedral could have been broken down. The Bishop said he had heard that Fr. Joe McVeigh and Fr. Des Wilson were on hand to say Mass in the cathedral or if necessary in the grounds outside. In all the circumstances, the wisest course was to allow the coffins into the cathedral. He did not comment on the fact that the priest had prayed for the dead men, but said he would be there the next time himself.

The Bishop's clergy had then become involved in negotiations about the route of the funerals. The normal course for the funerals would have been to leave by the near gate of the cathedral and to turn right leading up the half-mile or so to the cemetery. In anticipation of this, the RUC had gathered in strength up the hill and had parked about 20 landrovers in that direction. The Provos however had taken the coffins to the far gate with the intention of proceeding down the street and through the Bogside. Leaving aside the problem which the much longer route through the Bogside would cause for the police (making it much easier to fire vollies etc.), the RUC also had a problem of reorganising themselves and simply turning around their landrovers. Therefore, they had blocked the funeral procession at the far gate. Negotiations had then proceeded between the clergy and members of the family (the clergy would not talk to Sinn Fein). The families in turn however had referred to Adams and McGuinness who were within the church. The final agreement included provision for the police to accompany the cortege ahead and behind but not alongside. Their condition was that no paramilitary vollies should be fired. This condition was broken near the gates of the cemetery amid much taunting and jeering of the police. The Bishop said that a considerable number of policeman had behaved abominably. They had gone berserk, battoning and firing plastic bullets indiscriminately. The media had been on hand to capture the result which was exactly what the Provos had wanted.

Enniskillen

Throughout our conversation, the Bishop's thoughts kept returning to Enniskillen. He said he hoped to be there that evening for the Catholic service in memory of the dead organised by Dr. Duffy of Clogher. He was arranging a joint service in Derry with Bishop Mehaffy. When I asked him our usual questions about current relations with the police, harassment by the security forces, prison issues etc., the Bishop simply said that all of his concerns on these issues paled in comparison to the atrocity at Enniskillen.

Doc
pp Declan O'Donovan
13 November 1987

cc: Mr. Gallagher
Counsellors
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