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1. I met Fr. Alec Reid and the Rev. John Young at Clonard Monastery in Belfast on 18 February 1977 to find out what, if anything, had emerged from talks they might have been engaged in since their meeting with the Minister for Foreign Affairs on 21 January. (Fr. Desmond Wilson was out of Belfast for the day but the two I met said that he was still involved with them in all talks.)

2. Since 21 January, they had had further talks with the NIO, Provisionals and loyalist para-militaries, mainly the UDA and the ULCCC. As far as the loyalist para-militaries were concerned, the clergymen felt that they were not a major obstacle to peace at this stage. Whatever activity they were involved in was limited and was a reaction to Provisional violence. If the latter stopped, loyalist para-militaries would be prepared to sit down and talk to anyone. There might be problems if loyalist politicians moved in a direction unacceptable to the para-militaries but since the politicians were inclined to tougher and more rigid positions than the para-militaries, a major difference of opinion was unlikely. The Rev. Young, in particular, was inclined to be dismissive of the threat to the minority in east Ulster from loyalists and said that he found it offensive to hear Dublin politicians talk about this threat as if it were a major factor in the situation. There would never be a Beirut-style situation in Belfast, even if the British left, and it was an insult to the loyalist community generally to make such a suggestion.

3. Their talks with the Provisionals were not going well. All the representatives they met seemed to take an equally hard-line position and there was no difference in emphasis between northern and southern based people. They mentioned Billy McKee, Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, Seamus Twomey and Joe Cahill as people with whom they had spoken but these names emerged in the course of our conversation and may not be a complete listing. They were clearly not anxious to give me too much detail about persons, places or dates of meetings, but they did confirm that a meeting had taken place in Bailieborough, Co. Cavan on 13 February and I formed the impression that further meetings with the Provisionals were planned provided that the names of the clergymen did not become matters of public knowledge. Fr. Reid talked about the Provos. as being stronger than they ever were and that it was this realisation which made it so difficult to deal with them at the moment. Twomey was particularly hawkish and it was a pity that David O'Connell

was not free as he was the most likely influence for peace within the movement. The Rev. Young said that he was not as certain as Fr. Reid seemed to be that the Provisionals were at a peak of strength now. The toughness with which the Provisionals were talking - and he referred particularly to McKee and Cahill whom he had known for some years - might in itself be an indication of weakness and McKee seemed to be more concerned than ever about the effects of prolonged violence on young people.

4. The clergymen maintained regular contact with the NIO (Laneside) and what they were currently being told was (a) the Provisionals knew how to contact the NIO if they wished to do so. The doors opened in 1975 were still open and it was the Provisionals, not the NIO, which had stopped availing of the access and (b) because of the attitude of the Irish Government, there could be no talks between the NIO and the Provisionals. When I asked which of these points was being stressed, both the clergymen agreed that it was the latter and they went on to say that if the Government's attitude softened somewhat there might be a prospect of some talks. They did, however, also make the point - and Fr. Reid made it very strongly - that the Provisionals were not in a mood to talk to the British. Their last two experiences, in 1972 and 1975, of talking with the British, had greatly increased their distrust, especially of the NIO officials with whom they had been in contact. They genuinely believed that they had been given an oral declaration of intent in 1975 and the generation of Provisional leaders involved in those talks were still the ones who mattered. Thus, one could not be optimistic that, even if the British did agree to talks at this stage, the Provisionals would be prepared to talk. The Provisionals seemed more interested in talking to loyalist representatives and it might well be that the best approach for the clergymen in the coming weeks would be to by-pass the British authorities and try to bring all the Northern Ireland interests together. The loyalist interests - as far as I could gather, the clergymen were referring only to loyalist para-militaries - had indicated willingness to talk to the Provisionals provided the campaign of violence was "brought to a halt". Fr. Reid also claimed that the SDLP would talk to the Provos. once the violence ended but I am aware that his only SDLP contact is Paddy Devlin and though it is possible that he might have given this impression, it is unlikely that the party as a whole would support such a line.

5. The other points of interest to emerge from the talks which the clergymen had with the Provisionals were that

(i) the Provisionals kept insisting that they or their representatives need not necessarily be involved in settlement talks. As long as the outcome was acceptable to the movement, they did not mind who was involved in working out the settlement;

(ii) the only non-negotiable element in the Provisionals' demand was a public declaration from the British of their intention to withdraw from Ireland.

Assessment

6. I have known of Frs. Wilson and Reid for some years. Fr. Reid is a southerner whose northern experience is confined to his parish work in Clonard, a parish which at the outbreak of the troubles, was under attack from extreme loyalist elements and which subsequently became an easy breeding ground for the IRA. Clonard Monastery has seemed to many observers to identify rather closely in times of crisis with the IRA, mainly the Provisionals, and even by Clonard standards, Fr. Reid is regarded as being particularly sympathetic to the Provisionals. Nothing he said in the meetings of 21 January and 18 February contradicted this impression. Fr. Wilson worked as a curate in Ballymurphy from the beginning of the troubles until his "resignation from the diocese of Down and Connor" last year. He is now a community worker in the same area and is apparently paid by the Rowntree Trust. His identification is primarily with the under-privileged in west Belfast and he is an outspoken critic of all establishments, Church and State, north and south. (It was only with difficulty that he restrained himself from walking out of the meeting with the Minister on 21 January - he disagreed with the Minister on almost all issues but especially on the importance of the maintenance of democratic principles.) I would not see him as being a strong supporter of the Provisionals and his local reputation is that he has some sympathy with the Official IRA. The Rev. Young I had not met before but he is known to Deputy Harte for about seven years and is described by him as a broad-minded, progressive churchman, in his late fifties. He is highly respected and well-known by most Unionist/Loyalist politicians and is on first-name speaking terms with most. He has always been interested in better relationships and had

little time for the old Stormont Parliament. (He told Deputy Harte in April 1972, the week after Stormont was prorogued, that he went on his knees in a prayer of thanksgiving.) He is convinced that the British are leaving Northern Ireland and makes it clear that this is something he himself favours.

7. The talks which the clergymen are engaged in must be seen against the background of their personal sympathies. All three are, of course, anxious to see peace but, while they would not deliberately set out to mislead, I am not convinced that they would necessarily convey accurate impressions of other groups' thinking to the Provisionals and indeed they might well mislead the Provisionals into thinking that the door to Laneside is open even more widely than it is. Given the Provisionals present mood about talking to the British it seems unlikely, however, that the Provisionals will initiate talks. In a recent French television interview, Twomey said:

"I cannot say at the present time but they [the British] looked for a truce before. They were the people, not us. We didn't ask for a truce. They were the people who sent their emissaries looking for a truce from us.

Question: Are there talks at the moment between the Republican Movement, as you would say, and the British Government?

Answer: No. The Republican Movement broke off the talks because the British Government could not deliver anything they promised and could not keep their word on a lot of things they promised, in fact, on a terrible lot of things."

In summary, the recent newspaper reports about an imminent and permanent ceasefire would appear to be without much foundation. It does, however, appear worthwhile to maintain contact with the three clergymen to follow the progress of their talks and I have said I would probably contact them again on a future visit to Belfast.

Donlon

Seán Donlon

21 February 1977

cc. PSM

PSS

Mr. Nally (D/Taoiseach)

Mr. Colwell (D/Justice)