

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2011/39/1899
Creation Date(s):	5 June 1981
Extent and medium:	6 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Access Conditions:	Open
Copyright:	National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

Mr. Collins 9/14

AMBASCIATA D'IRLANDA
PRESSO LA SANTA SEDE
VILLA SPADA
VIA GIACOMO MEDICI, 1 - ROMA
TEL. 581.0777
" 581.0134

20/54

AMBASÁID NA HÉIREANN
I NDÁIL LEIS AN SUÍ NAOFA

" " Mr. Kavanagh
Washington

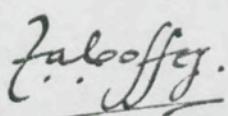
5th June, 1981

Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs
Dublin

Attention: Assistant Secretary Neligan.

We send you herewith photocopy of an article "L'aspetto politico e morale della morte di R. Sands" by Fr. Giuseppe De Rosa, S.J. which appeared in the Jesuit fortnightly review "Civiltà Cattolica" of 16th May, 1981, together with an English translation made in the Embassy.

It is accepted that any article of a topic with international implications appearing in this review has been cleared with the Secretariat of State. In the case of the Sands article we have heard that it was shown prior to publication to Fr. John Magee for his comments and suggestions.



Ambassador.

CIVILTA' CATTOLICA , No. 3142
16th May, 1981

The political and moral aspect of the death of R. Sands

Giuseppe De Rosa, S.J.

In the early hours of the 5th May in the Maze Prison at Belfast (Northern Ireland) the 27 year old Robert Sands, "officer" of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and about a month ago (9th April) elected deputy to the House of Commons of London, died. Condemned to 14 years detention for possession of arms, R. Sands died after 66 days of fasting, during which period he was nourished with water and a small amount of salt, refusing in the last days even nourishment by intravenous means which the prison doctors wanted to administer to him and forbidding that this be done after he would have lost consciousness. The object of the fast was to obtain from the London Government the status of political prisoners for the 440 members of the IRA detained in the Northern Irish prisons, with the possibility of an improvement in prison conditions, so that (their) own clothes could be used, post received and they would not have to do obligatory work.

R. Sands had received on the evening of 28th April Father John Magee, private Secretary of the Pope, whom John Paul II had sent to London and to Northern Ireland to bring a message from the Holy Father in the hope that R. Sands would desist from the fast, to ascertain the possibilities and the opportunities for work of mediation for the solution of the dramatic Northern Ireland problem. But having listened with gratitude to the envoy of the Pope, R. Sands had refused the request to interrupt his fast.

The death of R. Sands - leaving aside the violence which could break out in Ulster - has posed a grave political problem and also an even greater moral problem.

- The political problem.

The political problem is in the fact that the British Government finds itself in a position where it has to choose between letting a person die and conceding the status of political prisoners to men accused of acts of terrorism. It has maintained that it cannot accept the demand of R. Sands because this would mean recognising that the IRA is not a terrorist movement, but a military political group which is struggling with war-like methods for the rights of the Catholic population of Ulster. In reality, the R. Sands affair is not an isolated event but it fits into the political-military strategy of the IRA which by means of the hunger strike to death of its adherents in prison, aims at bringing pressure on Great Britain in order to concede independence to Ulster and thus make possible

the unification of Northern Ireland with Southern Ireland. In fact, after R. Sands other prisoners started the fast to death; therefore in a few days time Francis Hughes who is fasting since the 15th March, Raymond McReesh and Patrick O'Hara, who are fasting from the 20th March, could die. After them there would be others to take their place. Certainly the use of the fast as a weapon for political objects is not new in Ireland. Now, however, it is a question of a strategic choice of the IRA which could involve many people with a strong impact on world public opinion and on the situation, already explosive, of Northern Ireland.

Things being thus, many people are wondering if from the political point of view the British Government has been and is correct in rigidly refusing to recognise the status of political prisoners in the case of the detainees who form part of the IRA, based on the principle that a State cannot concede such status to people guilty of acts of terrorism, or would ^{it} not have been and would it not now be more opportune to show a greater flexibility, for humanitarian reasons, given the very hard conditions, arising also from their attitude of protest, in which the IRA detainees live in the Northern Irish prisons, as well as for purely political reasons, namely in view of the fact that the terrorism of the IRA is a consequence of the persistent discriminations towards the Catholic population of Ulster and it aims not to subvert the British State but to improve the condition of the Northern Irish Catholic minority. The problem is very delicate and we are not competent to confront it. We can only hope for a non-military solution - which in reality would not be a solution - but a peaceful solution i.e. not imposed with force but negotiated between the parties: "We pray - John Paul II said on the 3rd May - so that the Lord may help us to find the ways to a solution which will help the populations of Northern Ireland to turn themselves to a prospect of reconciliation and of peace as has been invoked already many times and from so many parties, up to now in vain". (Osservatore Romano 4/5th May, 1981, 3).

It is certainly a very difficult problem because the British Government cannot make concessions to the Catholic minority without causing the violent reaction of the Protestants and, on the other hand, cannot support the hegemonical pretensions of the majority without causing violent reactions in the Catholic population always dominated and enslaved and left in inhuman conditions of humiliating poverty and inferiority. But it is an illusion to think that the solution can be found with a war between the Protestants and the Catholics of

Ulster or with the presence of a strong English Army, in practice with a military occupation of Northern Ireland. The guerrilla tactics and the terrorism on the part of the IRA, as well as the blind and violent conservatism of the extreme Protestants, and the military occupation of the Six Counties of Ulster do not seem adequate ways to a solution of a problem in which nationalism and colonialism, misery and well being, poverty and privilege clash and where international terrorism finds fertile ground.

- The moral problem.

As well as the political problem, the death of R. Sands and of the others who may follow him in his tragic destiny poses a moral problem on which we would like to make some observations. The aspects of the problem are two. The first can be formulated as follows: "Is it moral to let a man die without preventing him from doing so, even against his will?". The second is: "Is it moral to let oneself die of hunger?".

About the first problem it is possible to respond that, because suicide is an evil, both because it is an attack on life and because it is a grave damage that a person does to himself, there is the moral obligation to intervene to stop this individual leading to his own intended suicide. It is possible indeed to think that in carrying out the act of suicide the individual was not in full possession of his faculties and therefore he did not do it from a free decision. Thus it is a duty to save a person who jumps into the sea, to intervene with medical care to save the life of a person who poisoned himself. However, one should not intervene using physical violence. Thus, in the case in which a person has decided in full conscience to take his own life, one can and one must intervene to dissuade him from such an intention, but one cannot constrain him to this with force. It seems that this is the case of the faster to death. He is carrying out the act of letting himself die of hunger in full determination. Thus, to force him to feed himself or to feed him by force would be a form of violence without saying that this would provoke in the individual subjected to it a reaction. It seems therefore that, in the case of fasters to death who have expressed the wish not to be nourished even when they are in a coma, there would not be moral culpability if one did not intervene to save their life.

The second aspect of the problem is more complex. Undoubtedly the fast to death is a method of taking one's life; therefore to fast finishing in death from hunger is a form of suicide. Then is such a form of suicide morally permissible?

The true and proper suicide. i.e. the direct killing of oneself, carried out by one's own wish and by one's own authority, is an act intrinsically wrong, because it is opposed to both the absolute respect which one must have for his own life as well as for the life of others, and to the explicit commandement of God: "Do not kill", which forbids to man every attack on human life in so far as only God is its master. Suicide, then, from the moral point of view, is always unlawful and deserving of condemnation, in the same way as murder: "...Such an act on the part of man constitutes the rejection of the sovereignty of God and of his design of love" and "furthermore it is also often a rejection of the love of oneself, the negation of the natural aspiration to life, the renunciation of the duties of justice and of charity towards one's neighbours, towards the various communities and towards the whole of society". (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration on euthanasia, 5.5.1980, I, 3).

This applies to the direct suicide which in no case and for no object can become permissible. Thus it is not morally permissible to take one's life to shorten the sufferings of an illness, to escape shame and infamy, to avoid being forced to reveal a secret, not to have to suffer the loss of liberty, indeed not even to preserve a good of high value like virginity. It will be recalled in this instance the case of the Christian virgins who at the time of the persecutions of the first centuries of the Church threw themselves in a river or in the fire to escape the danger of losing their virginity. The Church even if it venerates them as martyrs, has never approved their actions, attributing them to blameless ignorance.

But there is not only direct suicide. There is also indirect suicide, which happens when death is not sought and wished for itself, as a means to obtain an end, but it is only permitted, in so far as it is connected with the good effect which is directly sought and wished; when there are proportionate motives which justify offering or putting life in grave danger.

"One must keep well distinct from suicide - affirms the above quoted document of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith - that sacrifice with which for a superior cause - such as the glory of God, the salvation of souls, or the service of one's brothers - one offers or puts in danger his own life".

Now, the death of R. Sands is a direct suicide or only an indirect one? Is it a sacrifice for a "superior cause"?.

The answer is not easy. Undoubtedly R. Sands carried forward with full decision and knowledge his intention to fast till death. From this point of view one can speak of suicide. Not however of direct suicide but more probably of indirect suicide. One cannot say indeed that he had sought death directly and for itself, but that he allowed it as a means of pressure to obtain justice. It is not by accident that a large part of public opinion has recognised in the death of R. Sands the character of a sacrifice for a superior cause. For our part, we maintain that, if it should assume the aspect of a new form of war and if it should be destined to raise the level of violence which is already high in Ulster, it would not serve the cause of peace and of the true good of the country.

Therefore, while we deprecate and denounce with force the situations of injustice in which social groups and people are forced to live - situations which breed and nourish violence - we feel however obliged to confirm that recourse to violence and to war - whatever are the forms which they assume - cannot be the right road to resolve the difficult problem of Northern Ireland.