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PEOPLE OF THE LOWER FALLS ROAD : A WRONGED BUT FORGIVING PEOPLE

HOMILY BY BISHOP CAHAL B. DALY

of Down and Connor

in St Peter's Pro-Cathedral, Falls Road,

on Sunday 31 March 1985 at 7.30 p.m.

My dear people of St Peter's Parish,

Having concluded a week-long visitation of St Peter's Parish, I wish to record some of my reactions.

My first reaction is one of unbounded admiration for the people of St Peter's, in the area commonly called the "Lower Falls". This area is far too often misrepresented by media and misjudged by public opinion. It has become associated in some people's minds with violence, rioting and unrest. In particular, the name "Divis" is made to be seen synonymous with lawlessness and crime. It would seem that some who live in other parts of the city would almost hesitate to visit the area.

These attitudes are totally unjustified. They are a slur on the good people who live here. There are unfortunately a few who give the area a bad name, whether by deeds of political violence or by "ordinary" violence and crime. But they are a minority. The great majority of the people of St Peter's, and of the Divis complex in particular, are warm-hearted, kind, welcoming, peace-loving people. Their cheerfulness, amidst often depressing surroundings, is remarkable. Their spirit of forgiveness, in spite of bitter experiences, is edifying. Their generosity to the needs of the Church, to the poor and to the Third World, in spite of deep recession, is astonishing. The people of St. Peter's and of Divis are among the best people to be found anywhere in Belfast or in Ireland. Society owes them respect and even admiration. Government and public agencies owe them amends for decades of

misplanning, delays, broken promises and neglect.

THE DIVIS COMPLEX

The first thing to be said about the Divis complex is that it should never have been built. No refurbishing will ever make it an acceptable human environment. It stands as a monument to a bad period of urban planning, planning which, however well-intentioned at the time, was disastrously misconceived, and has been demonstrated by experience to have been a source of immense human and community misery. People should not be allowed to go on suffering indefinitely from planning blunders of the past, for which they are in no way responsible.

Following my visit of the Complex, I have to say quite categorically that, in my opinion, there is no acceptable solution to the problems of the Divis Complex other than complete demolition of the flat-blocks, and their replacement by conventional housing.

Let it be said at once that no reasonable person expects this to be done all at once. It will have to be phased over a period of years. But there must be a firm public commitment that this will be done. Whitehall and Farset Blocks have already been demolished. This was a welcome beginning. It has been announced that St. Brendan's and Pound Blocks are to be demolished. This further demolition should be proceeded with rapidly, and the building of new houses in the area thus cleared should be a matter of urgency.

Refurbishing of the remaining flats is undoubtedly necessary. I regret to have to say that the worst of the flats are quite unfit for human habitation and are a disgrace to public housing. This is by no means the fault of the inhabitants, but is due to structural defects and inadequate or failed maintenance programmes. But refurbishing of the whole complex is an absolute necessity, and this in the shorter rather than in the longer term. The refurbishing must not, however, carry any implication that the Flats are to be left standing for an indefinite

future. The people of Divis should not be expected to accept refurbishing, if this is taken to imply willingness on their part to live indefinitely in the Flats. Even the refurbished Flats would still be quite an unacceptable environment for decent human community living. The refurbishing programme should be linked with a firm public commitment to the complete replacement of the Flats by normal housing, through a phased programme to be completed by a specified date, within a reasonable time-span.

I am conscious of the financial constraints affecting the Department of the Environment and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. I am conscious of the fact that they are being asked to pick up the tabs for earlier misplanning for which they were not responsible. But I am still more conscious of the demands of justice and of human rights and the respect due to the dignity of persons and communities. The need for radical action in respect of the Flats has been recognised for years. In 1978, the Planning Team of the Belfast Areas of Need declared :

The Divis Complex is unique in the city because of its size, because of its high density and high rise characteristics, and because of the acute social need of many of its occupants.

The following issues were then identified as requiring urgent attention

Separation of the deck access blocks, treatment of dampness and condensation, heating, lifts, stairways and walkways, pedestrianways, refuse disposal systems, drying areas, open space, car parking, landscape, play areas, general clean up, housing and landscape maintenance, and shopping.

Today, six years later, none of these problems has been solved. Indeed conditions have steadily deteriorated. It is time to admit that the problems are due to basic and incurable structural and planning defects. It is time to admit that the financial cost of maintaining the Flats and the social costs of the problems created by retaining them far outweigh the cost of demolition and replacement.

EXCELLENT NEW HOUSING

At the same time, I want to record my deep appreciation of the excellent new housing now being provided by the Housing Executive in the Lower

Falls area. As houses of this quality replace the older sub-standard houses and are put back where the Flats now stand, the real quality of the people of St Peter's will be seen in its true light, and St Peter's will recover the prestige among Belfast parishes which its people earned down the generations in the past and which they deserve but do not always receive in the present.

UNEMPLOYMENT

Many of the social and community problems of the area derive from its massive rate of unemployment. Parish social workers found recently that, in the case of new babies visited, seven out of ten of the fathers were unemployed. A survey conducted in one of the schools of the parish shows that 73% of the fathers and elder brothers of the present pupils of the school are unemployed. Is there anywhere else in these islands or in Europe where such figures are to be found?

Unemployment disproportionately affects the young. The situation is calamitous. The long-term consequences can be socially destructive. A similar situation obtains over most of West Belfast. It is a serious social crisis. Crisis measures are needed to cope with it; and they are needed now, not ten years hence, or even five years hence. Research indicates that, after several years of unemployment, many may become permanently unemployable. Skills are allowed to die out. The will and even the ability to work are sapped. Continued neglect could bring much of West Belfast close to loss of its capacity for economic recovery.

There must be industrial development sited in West Belfast. We wait anxiously for the promised new Shorts development of a branch factory in the former De Lorean plant. (Let it be remembered, incidentally, that De Lorean is not solely a "West Belfast project". It is situated at Dunmurry, as close to Protestant communities as it is to Catholic ones. Employment for Protestants is as welcome as it is for Catholics.) But this can be only a beginning. The Belfast Areas of Need Planning Team declared in 1978 :

The Government is giving the highest priority to the creation of new employment opportunities in West Belfast generally and future employment prospects of those living in Divis will largely depend on these efforts.

Six years of deepening depression later, could the people of West Belfast be blamed for being sceptical about official declarations and promises? It would surely be hard to expect them to have confidence in the political will of Government to tackle the disastrous economic problems of the area.

I have also to say that the neglect which has permitted the continuing social deterioration of the area has allowed the name of Divis to become a positive obstacle to employment prospects, almost a disqualification for employment, for its residents.

Linked with this is the highly disturbing fact that there are indications that an address in West Belfast can be used by the authorities as a pretext for refusing employment to a young person on alleged "security grounds".

While saying all this, I have also to record my gratitude for the commitment of Government Departments and their officials and agencies to generous aid for the many youth employment and community resources schemes in West Belfast parishes. I recognise also the encouraging work being done in youth training and work experience programmes. But all these programmes, however welcome and encouraging, are not tackling the basic underlying problem of chronic unemployment.

PARAMILITARY VIOLENCE

All our social problems in Divis and in West Belfast are compounded by paramilitary violence. The latest example of this was the bomb which last week brutally killed a young British soldier. All over the parish, I found expressions of shock at the killing, sympathy for the victim and his relatives, and depression at the endless prolongation of this senseless campaign. The bomb exploded a few yards from the church

and right against the schoolyard wall. It was placed therefore in between two sanctuaries, the sanctuary where God lives and is worshipped by his community, and the sanctuary of the Catholic school, where the children of the community are taught to love God and to follow Jesus Christ's way of love and forgiveness. It was by the mercy of God that no child was killed or seriously injured by the blocks of debris hurled over the wall by the force of the blast. Any passerby could have been killed. The roof of the Pro-Cathedral was pierced at several places by the fall-out from the blast.

But the worst damage done to the Catholic community by this bomb and by this whole campaign is the corruption of consciences by the claim that moral evil is right, that murder is a legitimate political method. The Catholic community is damaged in its deep heart's core by exposing children to the sight of the mangled remains of a mutilated body on a sidewalk. I personally witnessed the terror in the eyes, the tremor in the voices, the bewilderment in the faces of the children. I personally encountered that day the panic of the mothers. Let those responsible for their horrific experience reflect on Our Lord's words about those who scandalise the little ones :

It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone put round his neck than that he should lead astray one of these little ones. (Luke 17 : 2)

To those who perpetrated that operation and to those who ordered it and who planned it, and to those who direct this whole campaign, I want to say :

The people of St. Peter's have suffered enough. For their sake, for God's sake, stop this killing. It is not guns and bombs that we need in St. Peter's. It is jobs; it is houses; it is proper school facilities; it is decent amenities for our children and for our old people. Your campaign is only obstructing the struggle for justice for our people. It is piling further misery upon misery for an already much oppressed community.

SECTARIANISM

I wish to say also that the continuing spate of sectarian speeches which has marked recent months also carries with it real danger for the Catholic community as well as great damage for the Protestant community. Going around Divis, I met numerous families who were able to point across the street from the windows in the Flats to where they lived until their houses were burnt and their streets sacked by loyalist mobs in the early 1970's. By God's grace, they look back without bitterness, indeed they look back with sorrow for their former good Protestant neighbours who had to look on helplessly but heartbrokenly while all this was being done in the name of Protestantism, but to the shame and disgust of decent Protestants. But it must be said that sectarian speeches are a form of verbal violence, and those who make them are playing with fire.

WILL ST PETER'S NEVER GET A CHANCE?

In earlier days in Ireland people asked : "Will Ireland never get a chance?" I ask today : "Will St Peter's never get a chance?" I say to republican paramilitaries : "Give St. Peter's a chance. Give West Belfast a chance. Give the people peace".

I say to government and public bodies : "Give St. Peter's, give Divis, a chance. Give them and the people of West Belfast jobs, houses, decent amenities and services. Give them justice."

To the people of St. Peter's I say : "Stay in your parish, if you possibly can. Stop the drift of many good families away from the area. Stay and keep pride in your parish and confidence in its future. You can make its future as great as its past has been.

'Do not be afraid' : the words are not mine; they are the words of the Lord. Do not be afraid; the Lord will always be by your side; He will not abandon you. St. Paul says :

Stay firm in the faith; be brave and be strong. Let everything you do be done in love. (1 Corinthians 16:9)

Sufferings bring patience, and patience brings perseverance,
and perseverance brings hope, and this hope is not deceptive,
because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the
Hcly Spirit which has been given to us. (Romans 5 : 4-5)
