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Meeting with Fr. Francis Harper
(Ballymurphy), 24 March 1987

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I met Francis Harper, the parish priest for the Ballymurphy/
New Barnsley area, in West Belfast yesterday.

Ballymurphy is probably the "hardest" Republican area in West
Belfast. It consists of a number of dilapidated housing
estates situated between Turf Lodge (in which the Provisional IRA
are firmly entrenched) and the Springmartin district. It is a
particularly desolate and run-down area. The focal point is
Fr. Harper's church.

The Ballymurphy Parish (Corpus Christi) extends over a fairly
wide area fringed by Whiterock Road. It has a population of
about 7,000. The unemployment rate is roughly 80%.

The following were the main points made by Fr. Harper in our
discussion.

Provisional IRA

Although the INLA are present in the area and the INLA feud is
a major preoccupation at present, Ballymurphy is firmly in the
grip of the Provisional IRA and has been for many years. There
are very few signs that Provo control over the area is
slackening. The Provos have a whole series of 'safe houses' in
Ballymurphy (a number of which Fr. Harper pointed out to me in
the vicinity of his church). Springhill Avenue, a small
cluster of derelict houses immediately opposite the church, is
virtually "a dormitory for the Provos". There is constant
traffic in and out of the houses - "as one of them leaves by
the front door, another is coming in the back door". There

have been occasional rumours that the Government planned to demolish the Springhill Avenue houses but nothing has come of these rumours so far. Paradoxically, while externally the houses seem totally derelict, a number of them are very well-appointed inside - thanks to the wealth accumulated by the Provos from protection rackets and other activities.

The Provos are known to move sizeable quantities of arms and ammunition in and out of the area. They store them in their safe houses. Many of these safe houses are acquired through intimidation. Families who are widely regarded as respectable and law-abiding may in fact be sheltering Provos and/or their weapons because they have been intimidated into doing so. In the course of a police raid a couple of nights ago on a Ballymurphy house belonging to a couple whom nobody (including the police) suspected of any paramilitary involvement, 200 rounds of ammunition and some weapons were discovered.

The Provos run a number of drinking clubs in the area, each of them formerly a legitimate community centre. The Westrock "drop-in" centre (a refuge for people recovering from drug addiction, alcoholism, etc.) is believed locally to conceal a Provo "indoctrination centre". It is strongly suspected that a room on the premises is used by the Provos for the purposes of recruitment and propaganda indoctrination.

Fr. Harper tries, as far as possible, to "keep the peace" with the Provos. He sees no point in tackling them head on. On certain matters, however, he tries to assert his authority. While he will mark the death of a Provisional (as much as of anyone else) with a Mass, he will not allow the remains into the church. (The way he puts it to the Provos is that he "hopes they will not insist" on bringing in the remains - in most cases, they don't). He is more adamant with them about paramilitary trappings inside the church - "that is absolutely out".

Ballymurphy has seen some of the worst paramilitary violence in Belfast over the past seventeen years. Fr. Harper and his priests have counted a total of over seventy victims since

1971. In addition to killing and maimings (for which both the Provos and the INLA have been responsible), a considerable amount of property has been destroyed. Houses have been fire-bombed and cars have been damaged or destroyed. (In the last three years alone, damage valued at a total of £170,000 has been inflicted on cars in the parish).

In addition to paramilitary activities, every variety of ordinary crime or social disorder is to be seen in Ballymurphy. There is a high incidence of joy-riding, drug abuse, glue-sniffing, alcoholism and marital breakdown. The Provos occasionally "play at being policemen", circulating, for example, a list of individuals suspected of joy-riding and warning them to stop or face dire consequences.

The Provos get worried whenever there is talk of a new employment scheme in the area. There are rumours at present that the Army encampment at Fort Whiterock may be closed down and the premises made available for the purposes of a community enterprise scheme. It is widely accepted, however, that the Provos would respond immediately with a bomb attack on the premises.

INLA

The INLA have co-existed with the Provos in Ballymurphy for a number of years. The current feud has caused considerable alarm. After the Steenson murder, in particular, "people don't know who is going to be hit next".

The ambush on Steenson and his friend occurred in a side-street a matter of yards away from the church. There is a metal gate on the street which is occasionally closed by the police but has been open for the past few months. A group of youths (reportedly eleven, in all) spent most of the evening of 14 March touring up and down the street on motor scooters. It appears that, shortly before Steenson pulled into the street (en route, reportedly, either to his mother-in-law or to a meeting in a nearby house), the gate was closed by the youths.

Steenson was forced to stop and reverse down the street. He and his companion were then killed. How his killers knew that he would be driving through that street is not clear. There has been much speculation about the killing. The rumour of possible Provo involvement, however, is firmly discounted locally. Fr. Harper himself believes that the Provos have a tactical interest in allowing the feud to continue for a while longer as it has the effect of diverting police attention away from the Provos' own activities.

In contrast to more cautious Provos, INLA members have been unashamedly displaying their weapons in public since the feud began. There has also been a "war of slogans" - every night an INLA slogan is painted onto a wall somewhere only to be erased mysteriously by an unseen hand on the following day.

Security Forces

The RUC come into the estates several times a week, either in Saracens or accompanied by soldiers on foot patrol. Their purpose is usually to make arrests or carry out house raids. They respond very rarely to requests for assistance e.g. with the removal of abandoned cars. If they come at all, they do so usually five or six hours later. Fr. Harper finds their caution entirely understandable - all too often in the past the police have been lured into booby-trap situations in Ballymurphy.

People behave in a hostile way towards the RUC largely because of Provo intimidation. Many Ballymurphy residents would like to go to the police on various mundane matters - "if only the Provos would leave them alone". There are some who "take their lives in their hands" and go over to Taggart Memorial RUC station. The price they pay locally for this can vary from a snide remark passed by the Provos to a knee-capping or worse on grounds of alleged touting to the RUC.

Asked about the level of harassment by the security forces, Fr. Harper replied that "there is not very much of that at present". However, one bone of contention, in Ballymurphy as

● ●sewhere, is the obtrusive presence of the security forces at Republican funerals. People in Ballymurphy greatly resented the massive RUC/Army presence at the funeral of "Spotter" Murphy (a Provo who had died in London) last October. Fr. Jim Donaghy, one of Fr. Harper's curates, and some other priests issued a statement at the time which was heavily critical of the security forces. Fr. Harper indicated to me that, while the tone of that statement was perhaps a little intemperate, he fully shared its sentiments nonetheless.

Anglo-Irish Agreement

The Agreement is rarely mentioned. The attitude of most people towards it is one of indifference - its effects are not visible in their daily lives. Sinn Fein regularly attack it.

The only "glimmer on the horizon" is that the SDLP have recently become more active in the area and there is in consequence a possibility of reduced support for Adams in Ballymurphy at the next Westminster election.

Another "glimmer" relates to the International Fund. A meeting has been arranged for tonight in Tullymore Community Centre at which the possibility of financial assistance from the Fund for displaced persons will be discussed. (A lot of people now living in Ballymurphy were 'displaced' in the early years of the troubles from their homes in Whiteabbey, Newtownabbey, etc. and would be interested in any prospect of compensation for this). Fr. Harper does not know who the organisers are but does not rule out the possibility that Sinn Fein are involved. He suggested that, in the event of such assistance being provided from the Fund, the Agreement would be regarded in a much more favourable light in Ballymurphy.

EEC Food Aid

Fr. Harper mentioned that, despite strenuous efforts by Sinn Fein to "get in on the act", the free food supplies recently made available by the EEC were distributed in Ballymurphy by the Church through the St. Vincent de Paul Society. Sinn Fein

tried unsuccessfully to have the food distributed by the Upper Springfield Resource Centre, a local community group with close Sinn Fein connections.

Fr. Desmond Wilson

Finally, Fr. Harper told me that, although Fr. Des Wilson lives nearby in Springhill Avenue, he and his clergy have very little to do with him. Fr. Wilson is closely involved with the Conway Mill and does not participate in any religious activities in the parish. He is intelligent and well-meaning but fundamentally misguided. "Unable to say no", he has allowed himself to be used by "some very sinister people". For Fr. Harper, however, there are times "when you simply have to say no".

David Donoghue

David Donoghue
25 March, 1987.

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