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Meeting with Fr. Hugh Starkey,
Belfast, 14 April 1987

I called on Fr. Hugh Starkey, PP of the Sacred Heart parish (which adjoins Ardoyne), in North Belfast on 14 April.

Fr. Starkey led the group of four local priests designated by Bishop Daly as mediators between the family and the police during last week's controversy over the Marley funeral. He gave me the following account of developments over the period 2-10 April.

Thursday, 2 April

Laurence Marley, murdered by the UVF, was a high-ranking officer in the Provisional IRA who spent a long period in the Maze and was released only a year and a half ago. The Marley family live in Fr. Starkey's parish and Fr. Starkey knows Mrs. Kate Marley well. The logistical difficulties involved in mounting a successful attack on Marley (whose house was situated in a cul-de-sac pedestrian precinct and was equipped with various security features) have fuelled local suspicions that the UVF must have had the benefit of local information and assistance. It is possible that he was "set up by his own people" as part of an internal feud within the Provisional IRA. Fr. Starkey is not aware of any connection between Marley and the killing of RUC Constable Nesbitt.

Friday, 3 April

On the evening of 3 April, Fr. Starkey called to the Marley home to comfort the widow. He found the dead man laid out in paramilitary clothing (with a beret and gloves resting on his chest) in an open coffin in the living room. A 'guard of honour' stood by the coffin. Fr. Starkey found the scene macabre and unsettling. The house was full of Sinn Fein people whom he did not know and who made clear their hostility towards

him by lapsing into total silence as he passed from room to room. He said a few prayers over the corpse, talked briefly to Marley's son and departed.

Saturday, 4 April

In the morning, the Bishop called to Fr. Starkey for a long discussion about the funeral. On hearing that there were paramilitary trappings inside the house, the Bishop decided that (in contrast to his usual practice of personally visiting the homes of Catholic victims of sectarian assassinations) he would not call to the Marley home.

The family requested the Ardoyne priests (the Passionists in Holy Cross Monastery who run the Ardoyne parish) to handle the funeral. This was perfectly normal - Marley lived at the Ardoyne end of Fr. Starkey's parish. Fr. Starkey left it to the Ardoyne priests, accordingly, to keep in contact with the family over the weekend.

Sunday, 5 April

At 5.30 p.m. the Bishop rang Fr. Starkey and asked him, as his personal representative, to call to the Marley home in order to get an assurance that, at the funeral the following morning, the Church's regulations governing paramilitary funerals (no paramilitary displays in the church or its grounds) would be strictly observed. Fr. Starkey went along and obtained an assurance that, in exchange for police restraint (unspecified at that stage) there would be no paramilitary trappings (e.g., beret and gloves on the coffin) or displays (e.g., firing of volleys). Sinn Fein had already decided voluntarily that the Tricolour would be taken off the coffin when it reached Brompton Park and the top of Crumlin Road (a sensitive loyalist area near the entrance to Holy Cross church). Fr. Starkey informed the Bishop who availed of an interval while attending the Passion Play in St. Peter's Cathedral to ring the Chief Constable. He passed on the assurance given by the family and

Sinn Fein and asked that the police keep a low profile at the funeral. Hermon replied by saying that the RUC had information which suggested that the Provos were indeed planning an (unspecified) paramilitary display at the funeral.

On Sunday evening the Provos fired a volley of shots at the Ardoyne memorial in Berwick road.

Monday, 6 April

On Monday morning it became clear to Fr. Starkey that the Provos were intent on stirring up trouble with the police over the funeral and on "embroiling and embarrassing the Church" in the process.

First, there was a series of bombings and bomb hoaxes all over Belfast early on Monday morning. Secondly, at 8 a.m. the Provos told a large number of shops in the Ardoyne area to close for the day. More significantly, workers on the (Provo-controlled) building sites in the area were told not to report back for work until Thursday. These two directives were issued before the police had even appeared on the streets (i.e., at a time when there was nothing for ^{the} Provos to protest about). It was clear that they had in mind "making a saga out of it". (In this connection, incidentally, there were rumours - which Fr. Starkey has yet to verify - that Sinn Fein had the body embalmed on Tuesday).

The police showed up in massive numbers and with scores of landrovers. It was as if "we were on a war footing". In view of the assurances given the night before, the scale of the RUC presence made no sense to Fr. Starkey (who was sceptical about the Chief Constable's claim). The Provos, all too predictably, cancelled the funeral.

In the course of Monday, Sinn Fein began to mount pressure on the Bishop or Cardinal to appear at the Marley home. They also wanted a statement from the Bishop. In a phone conversation

with the Bishop's secretary on Monday evening, Martin McGuinness said: "We have the body and will keep it for a week, if necessary, until the Bishop speaks". McGuinness, who was still smarting over the statement issued by Bishop Edward Daly in Derry, clearly wanted to force the Bishop to say something in public, preferably a rebuke to the police and sympathy with the predicament of the family, which could be contrasted with the hard line taken by Bishop Edward Daly, and would imply, therefore, that the latter did not enjoy the support of his colleagues. (From the mere fact that Bishop Cathal Daly was allowing a Requiem Mass for a paramilitary funeral to take place with the coffin present, it was clear that he did not agree with his Derry colleague's veto in this regard). Fr. Starkey believes that McGuinness basically wanted to "even the score" with Bishop Edward Daly and hoped to use Bishop Cathal Daly for this purpose. The latter, wisely in Fr. Starkey's view, refused to be drawn into this trap. Taking the view that it would merely play into the hands of Sinn Fein, he decided to issue no statement at this stage.

The Cardinal, however, contacted Fr. Starkey both on Monday evening and on Tuesday evening. Under Sinn Fein pressure to demonstrate his concern, he wanted to issue a statement. On both occasions Fr. Starkey persuaded him not to.

Tuesday, 7 April

Fr. Gerry Reynolds appeared on the scene for the first time. The negotiations with the police, however, were conducted for the most part by the two Ardoyne priests (Fr. Fitzgerald and Fr. Carberry). After the second postponement of the funeral, the priests talked to the local RUC at 12 noon. They reached agreement on a plan whereby, in exchange for an undertaking that there would be no paramilitary displays, the police would keep a certain distance back from the cortege. This plan was put by the priests to the family and Sinn Fein at 3 p.m. Sinn Fein, however, did not want the funeral to take place at that late stage in the day (when a low turnout would be likely) and,

in order to ensure that it took place on the following morning, added an extra demand which had the effect of prolonging the negotiations. The plan remained, however, fundamentally unaltered.

Later that afternoon, Fr. Starkey rang the local RUC Inspector, Wilson, to say that, at the Bishop's request, he would be taking responsibility for the funeral arrangements the following morning. He asked Wilson to convey this to the Assistant Chief Constable with responsibility for North Belfast (Stanley Steenson). He then went to the Marley home, told the family and Sinn Fein that he had been in touch with the police and indicated the agreed arrangements. The Sinn Fein members in the house kept on asking him: "Where is the Bishop? Where is the Cardinal? Why won't they come down here?" Fr. Starkey replied that "Bishops don't do this kind of thing personally" and that he was there as the Bishop's special representative.

In order to ease the pressure on Bishop Daly to issue a statement, Fr. Starkey and the three other designated mediators (his curate, Fr. Kerr and the two Ardoyne priests) issued a statement of their own (in consultation with the Bishop).

Wednesday, 8 April

At 8.30 p.m., Fr. Starkey and Fr. Kerr went to see the ACC (Steenson) and finalised the funeral arrangements. The RUC agreed that, in a departure from their usual policy of flanking the coffin directly, they would pull back and allow the mourners to flank the coffin directly. A distance of three feet would be preserved between the mourners and the police surrounding them. Fr. Starkey agreed that the police landrovers would head the procession, followed by the hearse and then by the coffin and mourners. He and Fr. Kerr would walk directly in front of the coffin, however, in order to give the police guidance on the positions they should take up. The funeral route posed no problems. The RUC, perhaps as a conciliatory gesture, approved a very long and circuitous route

"through all the Provo hotbeds". The result, in Fr. Starkey's view, was that the Provos had their "best recruitment drive in years".

Fr. Sharkey went to the house at 9.15 a.m. and confirmed the arrangements to McGuinness. McGuinness said that, if the RUC were prepared to keep their word, the funeral could take place. Before the cortege set off, however, Fr. Starkey instructed everyone in the house (most of whom, he told me, he had never seen at Mass in the parish) to get down on their knees and recite the (complete) Rosary with him. They all did so. This gesture (which he described as his "master stroke") was intended to remind people that this was a religious ceremony, not a political event, and that the Church "called the shots". Once this was over, the cortege headed off, Fr. Starkey preceding the coffin as planned.

In Fr. Starkey's view, the RUC "more or less" kept their word. Inevitably (because of the narrow streets) it was difficult for them to maintain the three feet distance. The jostling and fighting which broke out behind the coffin on the road from the house to the church was due to "faults on both sides", i.e., individual Provos and RUC men who wished to settle scores with their opponents.

The Mass in the church, at which no sermon was delivered, passed off without incident. Sinn Fein kept their side of the bargain - there were no paramilitary trappings or displays either there, in the grounds or at Milltown cemetery. At two specified points along the route (the top of Crumlin road and the bottom of Shankill Road) the Tricolour was removed as agreed.

Fr. Starkey was very critical, however, of the massive Army and RUC presence at the cemetery. It was even worse there than it had been in Ardoyne earlier in the day. The security forces' demeanour was clearly provocative - there were soliders with riot shields at the ready "before a single stone had been thrown".

Fr. Starkey mentioned that, in the house before the funeral set off, Danny Morrisson showed Fr. Kerr a photostat of a document evidently signed by a RUC officer in which the RUC accepted the assurances given by Sinn Fein that there would be no paramilitary displays at the funeral. If the RUC were satisfied that there was indeed no Provo plan to stage a stunt at the funeral, why was there such a massive RUC/Army presence at all stages of the funeral?

Later on Wednesday, the four priests met Bishop Daly and reviewed the funeral at length. They began work on a statement which the Bishop eventually issued on Friday, 10 April.

Conclusion

Fr. Starkey feels that the Church has come out of the affair well as far as its relations with the RUC are concerned: it promised the police that there would be no paramilitary displays and that is, in fact, what happened. However, Bishop Daly's refusal to act according to Sinn Fein's bidding (which Fr. Starkey fully applauds) has created resentment towards the Church in that section of the nationalist community which Fr. Starkey hopes will only be temporary. At Milltown cemetery one of the Sinn Fein people commented sourly to him: "We got a great turnout after all - despite your Bishop".

David Donoghue

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15 April 1987

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