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+ Eamon Martin

Truth Recovery,
Reconciliation
and the Churches

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Truth Recovery, Reconciliation and the Churches

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On 22 January, speaking at an ecumenical service at Saint Anne's Cathedral here in Belfast, I suggested that "peace, reconciliation and forgiveness on this island can only be progressed if we bring to light the truths about our troubled past that remain hidden and festering and engage in respectful conversations across our communities about what we mean by a shared future." We were gathered that day to celebrate the centenary of the Irish Council of Churches, and also fifty years since the ground-breaking talks at Ballymascanlon in 1973 when, during some of the darkest days of the 'Troubles', Christian Church leaders from across the denominations on this island came together to build trust and mutual understanding. I asked the congregation in Saint Anne's if perhaps it was time now for similar courageous steps to be taken.

"It may seem ambitious," I said, "but might we in the Churches offer to help develop an agreed truth recovery process to address the legacy of pain and mistrust that continues to hang over us? And, might our Churches, also work together to create spaces for dialogue at parish, congregation and community level, so that all voices can be fully heard about the kind of society and values we want for our children and grandchildren." I was careful to add: "The Churches have no desire to dominate such conversations. We are merely servants." It is in that spirit of service that I offer my thoughts to your conference today.

The reaction to my address in January was interesting, and quite mixed. Some welcomed my comments warmly and acknowledged that the Churches might have a significant contribution to make, especially given the overwhelming lack of support here for the Westminster government's current Northern Ireland Troubles Legacy and Reconciliation Bill. Even though at the time I was simply putting out a view for discussion, some reporters asked for

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the Churches to immediately set out and publish their proposals for a truth recovery process. Other correspondents were more hard hitting, including several anonymous social media commentators who told me to “just go away”. Various people questioned if the Churches could be impartial, citing what they said was the Churches’ poor leadership during the Troubles and collective failure to sufficiently condemn violence, sectarianism and injustice from one side or another. Examples were given of clergy publicly supporting paramilitary campaigns. The Catholic Church’s damaged credibility in getting to the truth about abuse was also pointed out to me several times.

But it was the heartfelt reaction of one correspondent, whose brother was brutally murdered during the Troubles, which unsettled me most. He wrote:

“Words are well and good – words like ‘draw a line’ ‘get on with your life’ ‘forget the past’. I don’t dwell on the past, but I refuse to let others tell me how to deal with it ... this toxic topic of legacy will still go on long after all our family members have passed on. The word reconciliation in my opinion is as toxic as the whole legacy and truth and justice process.”

His words are a sad indictment of where we seem to be, twenty-five years since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and a challenge to all of us, including the Churches, to really get where victims are coming from. In every conversation about legacy, truth and reconciliation, the views of victims and survivors of the conflict must remain front and centre.

THE ONGOING CORROSIVE IMPACT OF SECTARIAN VIOLENCE

Back on Saint Patrick’s Day, 2021, the Christian Church leaders on this island accepted that “we have a moral responsibility to acknowledge the corrosive impact of violence ... and a duty of care to those still living with the trauma of its aftermath.” A quarter of a century on from the Agreement we should all honestly ask ourselves: have we done enough to secure the precious gift of peace, to dismantle the barriers which divide us? Are we open to establishing the full truth of our past in order to facilitate forgiveness and healing? I remember Senator George Mitchell observing that the peace process is not just about demilitarisation and decommissioning of weapons. The bigger challenge, he said, is to ‘decommission mindsets.’

I am convinced that our inability, and perhaps even our unwillingness, to decommission mindsets and to find a way of sensitively opening up the wounds of past and allow deep, inner

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healing, has prevented us from achieving the kind of conflict transformation envisioned in the Good Friday Agreement and mandated by referenda, north and south, on 22 May that year. Twenty-five years on, we need to keep reminding ourselves that the Agreement was not simply about the cessation of hostilities and the silencing of the bomb and the bullet; it spoke more widely about the building of a peaceful society through a restoration of relationships.

AND WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Almost a thousand sectarian hate crimes continue every year; the recent inexcusable and life-changing attack on Detective Chief Inspector John Caldwell, reminds us of where we've been and where we do not wish to return; the security threat is once more deemed to be 'severe'; human rights and dignity remain threatened by ongoing paramilitary style intimidation and punishments; too many communities remain barricaded off from each other behind so-called 'peace walls'. In communities with multiple deprivation, including the highest levels of child poverty and destitution, self-harm and suicide – those very communities which were most impacted by paramilitary activity and security force presence during the conflict – there is little to celebrate by way of a peace 'dividend'.

In his book, *Overcoming Violence* (Columba Press, 2012), Rev Johnstone McMaster argues that the violence of these past decades and, indeed, centuries has dehumanised all of us, and not just the perpetrators of the violence. He says:

“Whether the violence is carried out in the name of God, the name of the state, or the ideological cause, it is self-destructive ... the destructive, dehumanised legacy, stretches far into the future, and the violent generation need not be surprised when children mimic their parents” (p.211-212).

CHRISTIANS AND THE WORK OF RECONCILIATION

The moral imperative facing the Churches today is to ensure that such a bleak prophecy cannot be allowed to come to pass. This means taking risks, and being proactive in pursuing whatever might lead to reconciliation – 'Reconciliation' – that much used, and abused word whose meaning in our context is rarely fully unpacked and dissected. For Christians, being reconciled in Christ is not just a personal quest. Reconciliation also calls for truth, conversion and transformation at societal and ecclesial levels. To build a more reconciled community means confronting the scandal

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of sectarian violence, asking forgiveness for the crimes, bloodshed and strife that were often fuelled by the distortion of religious allegiance, terms, symbols, occasions and labels. We have not yet substantially reflected openly and honestly as Churches on how our relationships have been scarred as a result of recent conflict, or on the deeper generational wrongs and traumas that lie underneath, unaddressed, and continuing to drive in a sinister way much of the sectarianism that we see today.

In our Saint Patrick's Day statement 2021, we in the Church leaders group noted that

“Christ’s teaching, ministry and sacrifice were offered in the context of a society that was politically divided, wounded by conflict and injustice”

and that Jesus lived out His message of hope,

“by repeatedly and intentionally crossing social boundaries to affirm the dignity of those who had been marginalised or excluded by his own people and by society.”

We also acknowledged and lamented the times that we, as Churches,

“failed to bring to a fearful and divided society that message of the deeper connection that binds us, despite our different identities, as children of God, made in His image and likeness. We have often been captive churches; not captive to the Word of God, but to the idols of state and nation.”

The work of reconciliation is compulsory for Christians. Reconciliation was not an optional extra in the Gospel message and teaching of Jesus: it was a core value.

To leave unchecked sectarianism, bigotry, hatred and violence between Christians, is a grave scandal. Christians believe Christ Jesus Himself accomplished peace ... He broke down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, reconciling us to God in one body through the cross (see *Ephesians* 2:14-18). Saint Paul also reminds us (*2Cor* 5:18-21) that, as ambassadors for Christ, we are entrusted with the work and ministry of reconciliation. The Cross confronts us to go beyond ourselves to the other, and to make sacrifices for peace, harmony, forgiveness, and healing.

This link in Christian theology between “reconciliation” and “the Cross” reminds us that reconciliation is costly; it expects something of us - a sacrifice, a self-emptying. The German Lutheran pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed for his opposition to the Nazis, contrasted what he called “cheap” and “costly” Grace. In Chapter One of his classic work *Discipleship*, he

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says, “Cheap Grace is the mortal enemy of our Church”. According to Bonhoeffer, “Cheap Grace” is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance; “Costly Grace”, on the other hand, is a call to follow Jesus who gave His life on the Cross to reconcile us to God and with one another; forgiveness and, correspondingly, reconciliation are therefore rooted in a contrite heart and spirit.

RECONCILIATION AND TRUTH RECOVERY

The sacrament of reconciliation in the Catholic tradition involves contrition, confession, restitution and a firm purpose of amendment. We confess not only what we have done, but also what we have failed to do - our sins of omission. And we repent; recognising that through our fault we have damaged our relationships with God and with others. And this is what opens us to conversion and healing.

If a truth recovery process is to lead to genuine reconciliation it will include an authentic and honest critique of the past which recognises the immense pain and life-changing trauma which actions or inactions have caused to a fellow human being. It will entail a readiness to honestly share the truth of what happened; to express contrition for the long-lasting suffering that has been caused, a firm purpose of amendment – ‘never again’, and an openness to repairing the damage in whatever just ways might still be possible – even many years after the events. Reconciliation therefore entails sacrifice, crossing the road to the other in a sincere desire to repair damaged relationships - be they personal, communal, societal – and from a faith perspective, our spiritual relationship with God.

That is why I would describe truth telling and recovery as a work of mercy which involves a change of heart – we recognise the dignity of the other, especially the one who we may have once seen as our enemy; through speaking the truth in love and through conversion of heart we see in them a brother, a sister, a child in God’s image like ourselves.

Such a truth recovery process would have to be handled with immense care and sensitivity – daring to bring together those deeply hurt and those characterised formerly as their enemies; to create spaces and mediate support so that those victims and those who resorted to the use of violence can mutually agree not only to inhabit the same space, but also be enabled to foster empathy and mutual understanding.

That is why I think the Churches could have an important part to play in truth recovery. I stress once more – not to dominate or take the lead – we are mere servants; called to facilitate where invited, to till the ground, to help prepare hearts, to support with our

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presence and prayers. If it is to lead to healing and reconciliation at personal and societal level, truth recovery is therefore about much more than information retrieval. It is the beginning of a journey towards the restoration of relationships upon which a genuinely shared future might be built.

THOUGHTS FOR A TRUTH RECOVERY PROCESS

Over the past five decades around fifty countries have availed of truth processes of one kind or another to sensitively bring together those who hurt and those who were hurt; to help unravel the knots and traumas of the past which continue to suffocate meaningful progress in the present and stifle any hope for future peace and reconciliation. It is clear from these processes that the past is not separate from us – a foreign or forgotten country; an unresolved past continues to fuel political and community suspicions and distrust in the present. We choose to deal with the past or we instead store up and bury our hurts and bequeath them to our children and grandchildren.

I made that call in Saint Anne's Cathedral in January because I believe now is the time to engage much more widely in cross-community conversations and dialogue about how we can sensitively heal the wounds of the past and present and address the restless yearning for clarity that still imprisons so many families here. Those who hold vital clues and information are getting older and some are dying. Memories are fading. Victims and their family members are themselves getting older. Some have already gone to their rest. But the unanswered questions do not disappear with death. They linger on, as a constant nagging reminder to the next generation of unfinished business, of a grief that is unsatisfied with silence, a pain that does not go away but lies beneath, an unhealed wound that is passed down the generations.

There are people on all sides who carry secrets – memories of their own involvement in the deaths or injury of thousands of men, women and children. In some cases they pulled the trigger, planted the bomb, followed orders or gave the command for summary justice, death or punishment. In other cases they willingly drove a car, kept watch, spread fear, collected money or information, sheltered perpetrators, colluded, tortured, forced confessions or covered up, destroyed evidence or intimidated witnesses. These were awful, terrible times. Shocking and horrific things happened. There must be so many people walking around today who know in their hearts that the truth and information that they have locked down inside them is capable of setting another person free, unlocking the uncertainty and grief of families. An effective truth

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recovery process may also allow those who participated in violent conflict to find their own inner healing and leave this world in greater peace with God and with their brothers and sisters.

The emergence of cross-community initiatives like ‘Healing through Remembering’ and WAVE Trauma projects are already enabling victims and survivors to find mutual support through dialogue and solidarity with one another.

Tomorrow, I will pray once more with the families of the Disappeared. Their experience and painful vigil has many lessons for the wider healing and reconciliation of our troubled past. Perhaps more than others, they appreciate how precious it is when someone comes forward and shares details of what they knew, or did, way back then. I avail of this opportunity to appeal again to the conscience of anyone who can help with the cases of Lisa Dorrian, Joe Lynskey, Seamus Maguire, Columba McVeigh and Robert Nairac, to bring forward even the slightest clues to shorten the agonising wait of their families and support persons and allow them at last to have a Christian burial. The process for the location of victims’ remains guaranteed those who came forward that the information they provided would only be used for the recovery of the bodies of the Disappeared and not to deliver a prosecution.

Various proposals for truth telling and information retrieval have floundered on the question of justice, restitution, and prosecution. It is understandable that many victims desire recompense and wish to hold open even the slightest possibility for prosecution. Experience from other places of conflict, however, points to a greater use of restorative justice and mediation rather than adversarial processes. Of interest also is transitional justice incorporating both judicial and non-judicial modalities (see Coulter et al, *Northern Ireland A Generation After Good Friday ...*, Manchester University Press 2021, p 72).

No one is naive enough to think that finding a successful truth recovery process will be easy. To date it has proven difficult to find either the will, or the way. Even the defining of terms: ‘truth’, ‘victim’ ‘reconciliation’, has proven controversial. With all the differing, complex and sometimes competing narratives regarding events, the questions are: Whose truth are we telling? Who are the victims? Whose stories are most important?

CONCLUSION

The presence of so many obstacles has led to some suggesting that we would be better with a kind of agreed ‘amnesia’, pretending that we can somehow draw a line under the past. In this talk I have argued that our failure to recover the truth will only continue to

undermine the foundations on which our peace is built and stifle the opportunity for ongoing peace-making and reconciliation. Past wounds will remain open, festering and infecting the present, fuelling an ongoing compulsion to blame, and leaving the door open for revisionism - the replacement of truth with a pretence or sanitised false narrative of the past which is offensive to victims.

Many people in our communities are still not convinced of a reason to proceed with a Truth Recovery Process. Those in favour need to explore further and raise awareness of why we should engage in such a process - and to whose benefit? I have been offering here my thoughts on the principles that should underpin such a process e.g., to acknowledge the harm done and the traumatic impact on individuals and their families; to enable those who took up arms to critically reflect on their actions seeing what happened from the perspective of those who were pained; to challenge the entrenched “say little or say nothing” narrative or shallow excuses that “it had to be that way” and “it’s now all in the past”. I have emphasised that the primary purpose of such a process should be to bring healing, and to enable victims to have a better understanding of the circumstances surrounding their experiences. As I have explained, taking insights from faith, such a process is necessary if we are to finally move things forward towards the fostering of inner peace and reconciliation.

Of course, it is very important in any truth process to avoid re-traumatising survivors; the recovery of truth and, in particular, the uncovering of previous false information and explanations, can easily lead to the re-opening of wounds and reliving of emotions; it is one thing to learn what happened - the facts and circumstances, but that in turn often brings to the surface the unanswered ‘Why?’ questions; the ‘Who?’ questions. There is also the reality that many perpetrators may fail to empathise sufficiently with victims; only give partial information; be unwilling to admit that anything they did was wrong, and instead seek to find justification by reading the past reflexively through the lens of the present. The goal of encounter between victims and perpetrators must be the speaking of truth in love (*Eph* 4:15) which is only possible when, as Pope Francis puts it, “one can hear within their heart the heartbeat of the other” (Message for World Day of Communications 2023).

A truth recovery process that is designed with the help of victims, placing their needs and their fears at the centre, has the potential to help restore emotional and mental health and well-being not only for the individuals concerned but also for their families and communities.

Experience tells us that those who understand the past more deeply and honestly will be more likely to be open to engage in the

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work of reconciliation. Investment in truth recovery is therefore an investment in the dissolving of intolerance and prejudice.

The responsibility to seek truth and to restore wounded relationships rests with all of us, particularly those of us who profess to be disciples of Jesus Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, who asked us to love our enemies. He emptied Himself totally, accepting even death on the Cross to reconcile us with God. The engagement of people of faith in support of truth recovery springs from our desire and hope for the restoration of relationships and repair of divisions; the work of finding truth and reconciliation is therefore the work of God.

Twenty-five years on from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement it is obvious that we are simply not managing on our own to overcome the centuries of sectarian hatred and distrust which has sparked into violence on so many occasions. Christians here must have the humility to acknowledge our human limitations, be open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; and cooperate with the 'costly grace' of God in doing something new. Perhaps in that way it will be possible to achieve conversion of even the most hardened of hearts and facilitate the speaking of truth in charity.