

Readiness to Hear One Another

A talk presented at Stormont in 2011 by Professor Raymond G. Helmick, S.J. of Boston College

Welcoming Session

Niamh Journey Towards Healing Conference

Parliament Buildings, Stormont, March 9, 2011

When I first came to Northern Ireland, early in June of 1972, this building had just been closed down and its Parliament suspended. On the Sunday when, with my colleagues, a group of Protestant and Catholic theology students from the United States planning to do work projects here for the summer, I arrived at the often-bombed railway station next door to the Europa Hotel, heading for our quarters in housing belonging to Queens University on Upper Crescent, all the streets we passed were guarded by armed masked men and the city felt full of menace.

I was to work, with three others of our group, on the rebuilding of whole streets of houses burnt out the previous summer in North Belfast. My closest partner, a young Presbyterian from Pittsburg, had the skill to be laying brick, while I functioned as hod carrier. But it gave me opportunity to meet people of both traditions in Northern Ireland, including those armed men who had been guarding the streets.

How to meet them? They wore the designation “men of violence” in the public eye. I made the assumption that they were not some sort of psychopaths, but instead people who had put their own lives at risk for purposes that made sense to them, as protectors of their own community. If I was ever to understand what was going on here, they were among those I must hear. I must not impose my own understanding on Northern Ireland’s situation but instead hear how its people, of all persuasions, understood it themselves, and if I were not talking to the people seen as most troubling, I would not be talking to the right people.

As of now, I think we can all be happy to see this conference opening in a building where a devolved Assembly meets and deals with the needs of this society, by invitation of the Office of a First Minister and Deputy First Minister from different sides of the community. A long and often painful journey has brought us here and we all have the task of caring for those who were bruised in the course of it.

I was sharply aware that, for Protestant Northern Ireland, the name “Jesuit” was one of the most frightening words in the English language. I remain always grateful for the generous way people from both sides of the community have received me. But as I find myself invited now to address the opening of this conference, I think I should bring something Jesuit to it. This is a page of the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius Loyola, an introductory page called the “*Praesupponendum*,” the “Presupposition” for the exercises. When I identify myself as a Jesuit I have always hoped this might be the most Jesuit thing about me, the spirit in which I have tried to meet all the different expectations people in many different conflict situations would have of me.

Ignatius, 16th century soldier that he was, determined to live a life of faith after seeing the hollowness of the life he had led to that point, went through a lengthy period of reflection as a hermit in a cave at Manresa in Spain. When he emerged he structured his experience into this manual, the *Spiritual Exercises*, and began, even as a student in the universities of Salamanca and Paris, to guide others through these exercises, so that they could make their own decisions about their lives. Because he was not a trained theologian at this stage, his work attracted the dangerous and suspicious attention of the Inquisition.

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The essential question in all this is: Whom shall I exclude from my moral community? At the very beginning of Ignatius' book, he has this remarkable page, the Presupposition to the Exercises. It reads:

To assure better cooperation between the one who is giving the Exercises and the one who receives them, and more beneficial results to both, it is necessary to suppose that every good Christian is more ready to save the proposition of another than to condemn it as false. If he is unable to save the proposition, the one who made it should be asked how he understands it, and if he understands it badly, it should be discussed with him with love. If this does not suffice, all appropriate means should be used so that, understanding his proposition rightly, he may save it.

This short paragraph has been put through many processes of translation. The original was in Ignatius' rough local vernacular Spanish. It was rendered into Latin and into a more literary Spanish and eventually into numerous other languages, those more often translated from the Latin or from the more elegant Spanish than from the original. The paragraph scandalized many editors of the *Spiritual Exercises* to such an extent that it was left out of several editions, and when it was retained the final sentence was often translated to mean that the one giving the Exercises should argue the case with the exercitant so as to win the argument and make him abandon his proposition. Not so the original, in which Ignatius is still, even at that stage, arguing that he should be helped to *save* his proposition, not to abandon it.

You see the radicalism of this procedure. At one time I used to carry it about, copied out by hand in the original rough Spanish, as Ignatius wrote it, in a diary/date-book which I carried about in my pocket, until I ripped out the page to give it to a close associate of the great Lebanese Shi'ite Imam Musa al-Sadr, the Ghandi-like figure who had founded a Movement for the Dispossessed of all creeds in Lebanon and was most universal in his dialogue with all creeds, Christian and Muslim, an ever radical voice of peace. Musa, by the time I met his associates, holy man that he was, had already been "disappeared" in Colonel Gadaffi's Libya, surely killed, but his Shi'ite followers in Lebanon, used to the idea of vanishing Imams who would return, sought in every way to plead with Libya for his release. I found that his spirit closely matched what I had learned from the Ignatian *Praesupponendum*.

You note that this is not simply a proposal of Christian charity in our discourse. It is a theory of knowledge, applicable to all, Christian or not; specific to the Christian only insofar as it is a practical living-out, in its openness to the other, of Christian faith. If I am to win all the arguments, know it all beforehand, my mind has already shut down. The proposition of the other, of course, refers to what is truly important in the other's perception, experience, conviction. It is not as if there were no truth criterion. If I am to learn, I must approach the other's proposition with openness. Winning an argument will get me nowhere and I will lose the light that the other's perception could give me. But the other will learn also, coming to an understanding of his own proposition that will enrich it and lead deeper into truth.

I said that I find, in this Presupposition to the Ignatian Exercises, the most Jesuit thing by which I would like to define myself. We Jesuits are often seen as people who win arguments, who have an answer to everything, whose objective is to turn people away from their own "propositions" to ours. But that is the very opposite to what Ignatius proposes here. There is a bit of the "Don't, please, turn me over to the Inquisition, at least until you've thought about this some more." But at its root there is a way of life.

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Now we may meet persons or groups whose proposition truly repels us. Here the “terrorist” may be our primary example. But it is this determination to save the other’s proposition that has led me to take seriously, to converse with, to strive to save the proposition of those identified as “terrorist.” That has certainly included all the militant groups here in Northern Ireland. I never agreed with their belief that violence was the necessary or an acceptable answer to their problems, but found I had to respect their dignity as persons and, normally, the integrity of their commitment. The same determination brought me to seek out Yasser Arafat when he was most despised as “terrorist,” Yitzhak Shamir when he seemed the least likely of Israel prime ministers to work for peace, Ariel Sharon as well as to likelier men like Yitzhak Rabin or Ehud Barak, the Druze leader Walid Joumblatt and all the other leaders of warring factions, without exception, in Lebanon, the Hezbollah leadership included, all to be respected so as to find what truth lay hidden behind their often violent impulses. It meant treating respectfully and listening with sympathy to Serbs, Croats and the suffering Muslims of Bosnia. And in the more recent situation of the Middle East, it means open conversation both with the current Israeli government and with Hamas.

This must, of course, be going somewhere. What I seek, in my conversation with such people, is to interpret, to understand what is going on. It will seldom much resemble what I am reading in the paper. I may not presume to offer the interpretation myself, but can only construct it in respectful conversation with all the players.

People in mortal conflict tend to live in their bubbles, unable to confer with anyone outside the choir. They are filled with negative stereotypes of their opponents, but still curious about what makes them tick. To take part in a conversation that involves those opposite numbers, even at third hand, is usually welcome to them, and may well lead to direct communication between them. But the interpretation that results, endorsed by all sides, will normally open up options that were not otherwise seen. It may be difficult to make alternative options genuinely convincing, but if they are, violence as an option can no longer be seen as legitimate.

My first intuition with the militants of Northern Ireland eventually proved itself, as these movements and organizations, the very ones most involved in the conflict, were themselves the ones that took the major initiatives toward the peace. I had had the experience for some six weeks during the hunger strike in the prison in 1981, of mediating between the IRA’s Army Council and Britain’s Northern Ireland Office. Part of my recommendation at that time had been that it be made possible for the prisoners to use the prison as a place to plan the peace. In later years, until the Maze Prison, Long Kesh, was emptied and torn down, I spent much time in its H-Blocks, conversing with prisoners from both sides in sessions that we dignified with the name of “seminars,” about a future of peace.

Decisions had to be made, of course, by the leadership of each organization outside the prison, but the thinking was done there in the cell-blocks. People on either side came to the recognition that neither would ever have a satisfactory life in Ireland unless they learned to accommodate the other side. Accommodation sounds a very meager form of reconciliation, but it had vital importance. The mantra of my own conversations in the prison was that both sides needed to become the guarantors of one another’s difference. It is from such thoughts as these that there came the cease-fires of 1994 and the process of negotiation that has led to the actual establishment of a functioning power-sharing government in Northern Ireland. The

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long delay, to a great extent, resulted from the fact that those who regarded themselves as the most righteous, who had never taken to the gun, were so slow to learn that the name of the game was now accommodation, but instead continued looking for victory over the other side.

One expects church to have been a factor in all this. In Ireland, the various churches were rather disappointing, and the protagonists, those who were engaged in creating the peace in their organizations and in the prison, had in many cases become thoroughly disillusioned with church. But it was their ingrained disposition of readiness to respect the dignity of the other, a most profound residue of their faith, that ultimately guided them past their apprehensions and enmity to that goal of accommodation.

If churches and their leadership had often seemed to have little more to say about the conflict than “Don’t blame us,” there were outstanding clerical figures, unfailingly critical but always respectful, who offered genuinely helpful advice and guidance to the militant groups. None was more important than Father Alex Reid of the Clonard Monastery off Belfast’s Falls Road, who gained the respect of the IRA and its leadership and became critically important to its planning of the peace. It is fascinating to learn that, through the mediation of his Redemptorist superiors in Rome and of then Archbishop Justin Rigali, Pope John Paul II kept constantly abreast of Alex Reid’s work.

On the Protestant side, Presbyterian Minister Roy Magee was of equal importance in his influence with the Loyalist paramilitaries, helping them to create openings for peace. It was he who discovered and encouraged the extraordinary work of prisoner Gusty Spence, convicted of multiple murders, who devoted himself to educating his fellows in the prison in their history, in the character of their own community, and in the opportunities to transform their society into one of peace. Gusty became an important catalyst both for Protestant and for Catholic prisoners.

This fascinating history of the prison in Northern Ireland has its counterpart in what happened on South Africa’s Robben Island, the prison located far out in the harbor of Capetown where Nelson Mandela worked with his fellow prisoners at developing the transformative ways of peace, of forgiveness and reconciliation for his country. We may very well be seeing, if we care to look, comparable things happen in the Israeli prisons where political Palestinians – one thinks of Marwan Barghouti – are building consensus now on how to achieve a just peace. If I may return to my Ignatian “Presupposition,” it is such as these who, “understanding [their] proposition rightly,” can become the initiators of the serious work for peace.

In what can I or anyone else root ourselves, then, in such work? The most basic recognition for me was that, in order to be friend of one side in a conflict, one need not become enemy to the other, but can be the partisan of the peace, a peace that will not cover over the wrongs either side has suffered. For the outsider to become the partisan of either side in such a conflict is to become excess baggage. There are plenty of partisans there already, and it is not the outsider’s conflict. The task is working for reconciliation. Once the third-party outsider has taken one side against the other his usefulness as mediator is gone.

That for the outsider. Where is the task for persons experiencing the conflict themselves with all its pain and trauma. Most useful is to sense in the other, especially in those from whom we have suffered most offense, the dignity of the human person. I can put that in religious language for those able to respond in terms of faith. Recognizing in the other

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the image of God acknowledges the common heritage of the three Abrahamic religions which unite in basing the dignity of all human persons on their creation in the image of God. It has always impressed me that the most prominent human rights organization in Israel takes the name *B'Tselem*, “in the image,” from the biblical phrase *b'tselem elohim*, “in the image of God.” This yields a basis for human rights broader than the purely individualist one that we have inherited from the 18th century Enlightenment.

In the heat of conflict people will commonly see the other in terms other than those of common humanity and dignity. It is then that we need most to concentrate not on the trauma, what has happened to ourselves, but on what has happened to the other, what experience of theirs has led them to act as they have toward us, seeing them in the rawness and hurt of their humanity, which is like our own. In seeing them so, we are able to break down the stereotypes, the negative images of the other that we have understood practically as loyalty tests for ourselves, revise the received version of history that sees the other only in terms of enmity and events only in terms of offense. We are then solidly on the road to reconciliation, to the restoration of our relations by which we can live in appreciation of one another, even in those differences that enrich our society.