

MESSAGE

of the Conference European Justice and Peace Commissions

Belfast, 26th September 2006

Introduction:

The Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions is a Catholic network dedicated to the promotion of Human Rights, Peace, Reconciliation, Integrity of Creation and Justice. At this time the Conference is made up of twenty-nine national commissions from all over Europe.

We are present in Belfast to learn from and be exposed to the effects of the long lasting conflict which has been lived in Northern Ireland. During these days we have met victims, community and church leaders and listened to their experiences from their different perspectives. As a church body it is important for us also to reflect on the particular impact of religious organisations in this conflict. In order to give a clear sign of peace and reconciliation we joined with the Methodist Community in Forthspring for an ecumenical prayer service at the close of our meeting. We also celebrated with the Catholic Community here in Belfast by sharing in the Sunday Eucharist at St. Peter's Cathedral. We will link all the experiences we have had with the local contexts in our home countries and therefore we make commitments for on-going action which are stated below.

Our intention has been to give a concrete sign of solidarity to all those in Northern Ireland who are committed to a peaceful settlement of the conflict, especially to the victims of that conflict. Our hope in organising this meeting has also been to make a contribution to the peace-process in Northern Ireland and to live out our identity as a learning community.

Our experience in Belfast in terms of the lessons we have learnt and the challenges that we have heard:

Religion and Conflict

The conflict in Northern Ireland is about territory, social injustice and inequality in participation in the political process. It is a sectarian conflict. It is not about religion, but there is a very religious dimension to the conflict. Religion is part of the problem. Belonging to a Protestant or Catholic group seems to be a key factor along with political aspiration in building identity.

But religion is also part of the solution, offering a resource from within the community of Northern Ireland on its path to sustainable peace. There is a specific role for religious leaders as well as community based actors. As churches we have the possibility of exploring a 'new body language', in other words, a way of relating that cannot be expressed in words alone but emphasizes the warmth of community. This might enable a more direct communication based on inter-personal relationships and not on the orchestrated interaction that too often characterises the political discourse.

Reconciliation is at the heart of Christianity. It is a gift of God to all people because all are created in His image and likeness without exclusion. As Christians we too must reach out to all people. But we have also learned that it is of tremendous importance to develop a nuanced language of reconciliation. We are convinced that a prescribed approach which limits the understanding of reconciliation is counter-productive and tends to underestimate the experience of victims. There is a need to seek a deep understanding that is not based on a false 'agreement' but rather on mutual respect. Although truth may be hard to find in conflict, it must be acknowledged in the pain and loss of those who are victims. In hoping for a new future we must be confident in our faith which affirms that 'Christ takes the inevitability out of history'.

We were impressed by the many activities in the communities and across the communities; opportunities for dialogue, healing and reconciliation. People want change. There is still violence and hatred, sometimes obvious, sometimes hidden, but it has been encouraging to meet so many people with a passion for peace.

Overcoming Segregation

We have learnt that violence has been reduced in Northern Ireland. But it may be that it has only been translated into a political framework that does not reflect the day to day reality of people's lives. They therefore live segregated lives separated by the so called "peace walls". Possibilities to get to know each other and to correct stereotypes are limited in this situation. It is easier to project feelings of frustration and anger on our neighbour when we do not have the chance to build personal relationships. In this reality both sides feel victimised by the other.

As part of this dynamic identity is defined by reference to 'conflictual otherness'. This means that the other is viewed as an enemy and not as a neighbour. Thus group identity is confirmed by difference – different religion, church, symbols, traditions, songs, sports, colours, pictures, 'histories' – rather than the hope of a shared future where our symbols are signs of unity.

The first step to overcome segregation is the willingness to take the inner journey of reconciliation, also with the other whom we have seen as 'enemy'. Peace comes from the relationships we build, especially when we look beyond our own mindset. Education for example can be an opportunity for such broadening of perspective. There is a high cost in maintaining the status quo of segregation; friendship cannot be built, the values of others cannot be appreciated, respect for diversity does not grow to enrich our lives. Social and economic growth is also impaired in a segregated society. Walls can bring a ceasefire, but not peace and development. People have to overcome walls also in their minds and hearts.

Migration in the context of sectarianism

Many of those to whom we listened highlighted both the dangers and opportunities presented by the new diversity resulting from migration into Northern Ireland.

There is a danger that sectarianism can turn into an 'ugly racism' as those who are accustomed to separating from the 'other' turn their frustration on the new communities who are often the most vulnerable in society.

We believe on the other hand that migration can offer an opportunity to broaden our view and free us from the narrow vision of sectarianism that divides and excludes. Recognising the human face of the 'stranger' is essential to the Christian call of hospitality.

The commitments we are compelled to make in solidarity with those with whom we have met in Belfast:

- We will work for honest and real dialogue between communities, from a faith perspective that is unafraid of acknowledging the unhelpful role that we may have played at times in the past.
- We will call for continued funding to cross-community action projects and communities especially at the European level
- We will continue to work against segregation in each of our countries and societies especially speaking out against all walls that are erected, symbolic and otherwise.
- We will emphasize and promote understanding of difference and giftedness of the 'other', especially the migrant communities that come to live in our countries
- We commit ourselves to pray for the victims and perpetrators of each community that they would discover the opportunity and courage to build new relationships that are based on and are the fruit of mutual respect.

We would like to express our gratitude to all those who have facilitated our encounters in Belfast especially the Irish Commission for Justice and Social Affairs, those groups who have taken the time to meet with us and share so profoundly their often painful experiences and those speakers who have shared with us their insights.