

CHURCH OF IRELAND PRESS OFFICE

Church of Ireland House, 61 – 67 Donegall Street, Belfast BT1 2QH

Tel: Belfast (028) 9023 2909 Dublin (01) 497 8422 Media Officer Brian Parker (m) 07775 927 807
Fax: Belfast: (028) 9032 3554 Dublin (01) 497 8821 Press Office (m) 07774 295 369

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Church of Ireland General Synod 2004

City Hotel Conference Centre, Armagh.

Tuesday 11 May 2004, 12 Noon

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

**The Most Reverend Dr Robin Eames
Archbishop of Armagh, Primate of all Ireland**

Members of the General Synod, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Welcome

I welcome you to this meeting of the General Synod of the Church of Ireland in Armagh and pray that Almighty God will bless and guide us in our work.

This Synod

This Synod is historic for several reasons.

It is the first time the supreme law-making body of our Church has met at the site of the launch of St Patrick's great mission to the people of Ireland. When we meet for worship in the Cathedral this evening we will kneel on 'holy ground' where our patron saint built his chief church in 445 A.D. It has long been my hope that one day I could welcome the Synod to Armagh and today that hope

becomes reality through the opening of this Conference Centre. On behalf of the Diocese and people of Armagh I welcome you and hope that you will enjoy your time in the Primatial city and orchard county.

A second reason for this being termed a historic meeting is the presence with us of my colleagues, the Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of all Ireland, Dr Sean Brady, the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Dr McKay and the President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, the Reverend Jim Rea.

In welcoming the leaders of the other three main Churches in Ireland to this Synod I want to acknowledge publicly the levels of genuine fellowship which has long existed between us. The image of our country abroad has too often been associated with religious intolerance and strife. It comes as a surprise to some when they are confronted by the co-operation and joint witness of the leaders of the Churches. Through years of darkness, uncertainty and suffering for members of all our traditions and now as we struggle to build a peaceful and just society Church leaders have been able to share, plan and pray together. My colleagues come as fellow pilgrims and friends together with representatives of their Churches, whose fellowship I greatly value. I also welcome Archdeacon Arfon Williams from our sister Celtic Church in Wales. In a short time we will have the privilege of receiving their greetings but please help me now to welcome them to the General Synod.

The third reason for the significance of this Synod is of course the fact that we have just witnessed the presentation of the Book of Common Prayer, 2004.

Since our disestablishment in the eighteen seventies there have been three editions of our Prayer Book. While the editions of 1878 and 1926 were revisions in a minor degree of the 1662 book this new edition represents revision which is the consequence of prayerful thought, careful research and discussion and is faithful to the practice and beliefs of the Church of Ireland. Within its covers we have the traditional and the contemporary. Language which has inspired generations of devotions is alongside contemporary wording which is the result of liturgical development. Gone are the days when we needed several books as a basis for our worship. Now we have one book of which we can be proud and for which we can be thankful. As far back as 1997 the General Synod requested our Liturgical Advisory Committee to undertake a radical revision of the Prayer Book and each year since then we have examined and legislated to enable this new Book to become a reality.

A Church is identified by its worship. A Prayer Book is the identity of the people of God in any tradition. When we are asked '*what is the Church of Ireland*' we can point to this Book – this is **who** we are, this is **how** we worship, this is **what** we are.

I pay tribute to all who over the years have played a part in the production of our liturgies and who have worked so long and so faithfully in the name of their Church. Members of the Liturgical Advisory Committee since 1997 have all played their part and we pay them tribute. There are some I want to mention in particular : Canon Brian Mayne, now retired from full-time Ministry, who has nursed this Book along to its completion : Canon Ricky Rountree, our Central Liturgical Officer, who has introduced the Book to our dioceses : Bishop Harold Miller, Chairman of the LAC and his predecessor, Bishop Edward Darling : the former Archbishop of Dublin, Dr Donald Caird : Dean Michael Burrows : Dean John Paterson. I also acknowledge the partnership we have forged with Columba Press who have produced a beautiful book for the Church of Ireland.

As a token of our welcome to the Synod the Diocese of Armagh has made a presentation of a copy of the new Prayer Book to each member of the Synod. I hope this copy will be a memento of your visit to the Primatial See.

St Patrick's Vision

It is inevitable as we meet in Armagh that we reflect on our past ...

The Church of Ireland has always placed great emphasis on the Celtic traditions of worship, the mission and vision of the Saints and our roots in the deep spirituality of learning, teaching, worship and disciplined prayer life of the golden age of Irish mission and evangelism. Those roots are reflected yet again today in our new Prayer Book. Those roots have been obvious in our witness as Catholic and Reformed through the generations. Through the ups and downs of Irish history our forefathers have maintained the traditions of the spiritual richness of those early days. Today we meet deeply grateful for that ethos which must influence what we seek to be and to do. The three-fold vision of Patrick – prayer, devotion and evangelism is a constant reminder of what we should contribute to the Christian pilgrimage in a **new** Ireland, a **new** Europe and a **new** world order.

In his Confession of Grace Patrick writes of *'The Voice of the Irish'* contained in the letters conveyed by Victorinus:

'We beg you, holy youth, to come and walk once more among us.'

That call today sounds ever more loudly from the Christian community of this island. It speaks to a people coming to terms with **this** new Ireland, **this** new Europe and **this** new world order. Yet the *'newness'* calls even more clearly for a fresh vision of the Gospel to be proclaimed and for a renewed Church faithful to the truths once delivered to the Saints.

This Church which places its trust in the General Synod this morning may reflect on the inspirations of the past. But there are reports before us this week which compel questions :

- what direction should our Ministry take in the next few years? Yesterday the Bishop of Meath posed the question : *can western Churches seek together ways of revitalising Ministry for the right reasons and not just to buttress institutions?*
- what is the Christian understanding of marriage and how can we protect Christian marriage as an institution of stability in Irish society?
- why are there not more candidates coming forward for ordination?
- what is our Church saying about the major social, political and economic dilemmas of today?
- a Doctrinal Commission has been established to advise the Bishops : what should be its priorities?

In your places this morning are copies of a Research paper on attitudes within the Church of Ireland in Northern Ireland. This document is a joint project of two Universities and is launched today. Bishop Mehaffey in retirement and Professor Gillian Robinson, a devoted member of the Church of Ireland, have been closely involved in its production.

Look at what it says about the spiritual life of the Church of Ireland:

- 30% of the respondents attend Church every week while 17% never attend
- one in ten pray every day and 17% call themselves very religious.

Can any of us doubt we need the faith and vision of St. Patrick to '*come and walk once more among us....*'

New Europe

Recently the continent of Europe has taken a major step forward through the accession of ten new member states to the European Union. It is not without significance to this Synod that this enlargement has taken place during the period of the Republic's Chair of the Council and I pay tribute to the way the government

of the Republic of Ireland has exercised leadership and influence in this critical period. As my colleague the Archbishop of Dublin has said the enlargement of the EU has allowed the people of Ireland

“the opportunity not only to bring their own distinctive contribution into a greater entity but also to benefit from the experience and rich diversity that these new members will bring to the European Union.”

Members of Synod, let us not forget with gratitude to Almighty God the changing face of Europe. Despite all the problems integration brings in these days the new Europe is pushing further and further back into history the horrors of two World Wars and the Cold War. As one newspaper headline put it we have moved *“from Auschwitz to Dublin in just 60 years.”* The challenge to the Christian Churches of Europe is to foster reconciliation and proclaim the Christian ethos to the diversity of nations. For Anglicans its places even greater importance on our conversations with other traditions. As we read on pages 227 and 228 of the Book of Reports the Church of Ireland recognises the guaranteed role for the Churches in the proposed Constitution of the EU.

As peoples of many ethnic origins move more freely through Europe and settle in other countries they again challenge the definitions of pluralism. Already Ireland as part of the global village has seen freedom of movement from beyond Europe. Immigration, asylum seekers, the nature of citizenship and integration are all key aspects of the removal of barriers to human movement today. The face of Ireland north and south is changing as other cultures, other religious traditions and other nationalities arrive in our midst. How those newcomers become integrated in our society holds the key to much more than social engineering. It will challenge traditional Irish values and Irish problems in new ways.

Undoubtedly the aspect most urgent of solution at present is the sinister rise in racially-motivated attacks. In both our jurisdictions racial attacks on people and homes are sinister and threatening for the future. Let this Synod condemn without reservation such attacks on people because of class, colour or creed.

I welcome the recent announcement that asylum seekers will no longer be detained in Maghaberry Prison. This is something I have personally urged for several years. A prison is no place for people in that category. But I pay tribute to the prison staff who have done all they could to meet the particular needs of asylum seekers.

Anglican Communion Problems

We are passing through times of great challenge and heart-searching within the world Church family of which the Church of Ireland is an integral part. Recent events in parts of the Anglican Communion have produced divisions between Provinces and within Provinces and dioceses. The Consecration of an openly

gay bishop in the diocese of New Hampshire in the United States and the practice of blessing same sex relationships in parts of Canada have provoked sharp exchanges in the Communion.

As you are aware the Archbishop of Canterbury has asked me to Chair the Lambeth Commission set up to examine ways of helping our different Provinces to address differences and divisions. I want to thank the members of our Church who have sent me messages of prayerful support for this difficult task. I am working with an extremely gifted international team and we hope to produce a Report to the Anglican Communion in the autumn. I believe our recommendations must help the world family not just with the immediate problems but with any differences which may arise in the years to come – so our task is formidable.

The Lambeth Commission is not mandated to express opinions on sexuality – but while that issue has brought divisions to the surface our diversity demands that ways are found of encouraging the highest possible level of communion and understanding between the various parts of the Anglican Communion. Differences are not new to Anglicanism. Not so long ago we faced divisions on women in the Priesthood and episcopate : we expressed different views on economic and cultural issues : we differed on when and how violent opposition to oppression was justified. The diversities in culture and outlook appear in many forms - yet the Anglican Communion has survived those diversities.

While I must be careful at this stage as Chairman of the Lambeth Commission in what I say about our work there are a few comments I would share with the General Synod of my own Church this morning.

Fundamental to the current situation is what sort of Anglican Communion do we want?

We are not bound to each other by rigid rules or regulations. We share fundamentals of belief, doctrine and practice. We subscribe to '*bonds of affection*' with each other rather than seeing the Church of England or Canterbury as some sort of central curia. We bear one another's burdens and in the Church of Ireland reach out to our brothers and sisters of the global south through our excellent missionary societies.

Second, we share together in the mission of the Church which is to preach Christ crucified to the world. Sadly I feel the current controversies have the potential to damage that mission by diverting us from our main task. We may well ask – *are these the sort of issues we really want to divide us or to weaken our mission to suffering humanity? Where should our priorities lie?*

Third, we hold as a priority the centrality of Holy Scripture to our witness, worship and life. The fact that pilgrims on the journey of the Church can differ on the

interpretation of that same Scripture has produced much of our present crisis. So we need guidance on how we interpret Scripture.

Finally, I want to make plain to this Synod and to the wider Anglican Communion that without prejudice to the final report of the Commission what the media likes to term *the conservative view and the liberal view* are being listened to, noted and taken fully into account. It is wrong for anyone to conclude that the Commission is listening only to one or the other. It is wrong to think that the Commission is more sympathetic to one view rather than to another. I have seen myself the pain of Anglicans who feel alienated by the actions of others within their own or other Provinces. I have seen the anxiety of those who feel alienated in their Province but want to remain in the Anglican Communion. This was presented to me in stark terms in the United States. No voice or cry is going unheard. We are meeting with some but listening to the many. The report next autumn will be as honest and as definitive a document as it is possible to present. But if we wish to maintain the Anglican Communion as a vibrant and faithful unity symbolic of the unity of Christians in Christ decisions on how we relate to each other will have to be made and we will need courage, vision and sensitivity.

Please continue to pray for the work of the Lambeth Commission.

Church of Ireland and Sexuality

As the Synod knows the bishops of the Church of Ireland have issued a Pastoral letter to the Church on issues of sexuality and we have invited submissions and opinions from clergy and laity. We continue to receive those submissions. We have encouraged a period of listening as we seek the path God wants this Church to follow. Listening is not the cover word for any period of predetermined attitude nor is listening commensurate with inactivity. Irrespective of their individual thoughts at this stage the bishops want to hear the views of the Church. This process is entirely in line with the much quoted Lambeth Conference resolution 1.10. There were two parts to that resolution. This is sometimes ignored. While stating what a majority of the Lambeth Conference saw as the norm for relationships it went on to call for listening, openness and prayerful consideration of opinions contrary to our own. That is precisely the spirit which is indicated by the Church of Ireland bishops in their approach at this time. Unfortunately listening and creating space to exercise sensitivity to others is not always a dominant priority in Church life. Let honest principle be expressed in Christian charity. Let the hallmark of this Church's reaction to the debate be a willingness to listen to "*what the Spirit is saying to the Churches.*"

Political Process

As we meet Northern Ireland awaits the outcome of the latest attempts by our two governments and party leaders to find a political way forward and the re-establishment of devolved government for the Province. Those efforts have extended over a long period and the political temperature of this community has risen and fallen with monotonous regularity. The in-phrase must often used by the media is *'political deadlock'* as the long-suffering people of Northern Ireland have got on with their lives with varying degrees of interest. The truth is that while the political process is a vital part of the peace process it is only a part. Few parts of the western world have been so subjected to political analysis, comment and scrutiny, few places have been made as politically aware and yet few places have endured as much political frustration.

It must be a matter of concern when we are confronted with evidence of public disenchantment with the political process. Figures of those casting their votes at an election, the results of independent research into attitudes and opinions expressed particularly by young people, indicate a weariness with that part of the Peace Process which concerns political agreement.

Last Friday the *Irish Times* reported the findings of the National Youth Federation survey of teenagers in the Republic on political attitudes. Those findings have added to my anxiety. Nine out of ten teenagers were unable to name an M.E.P. from their area. Half were unable to name a local T.D. three-quarters agreed that politicians *"do little to improve the lives of young people"* and only forty-seven admitted to having an interest in politics. The Chief Executive of NYF was quoted as saying the poll:

"clearly indicates that young people want to engage with local and global issues but find the political process and their links with politicians to be of little relevance to their daily lives."

How often in another context have we listened to similar views by young people on the life of the Church? Is there some sort of parallel here?

Understandable though this attitude is as the apparent speed of political progress has varied it is a dangerous and regrettable aspect of community life here at present. It further illustrates the urgent need for political progress to replace growing disenchantment on the part of many.

I do not doubt the efforts being made by politicians to make progress. It is nothing short of amazing the amount of effort being devoted to our problems by the British and Irish governments but the fact remains perceptions become

realities. Today there is a perception that the political peace process could remain in a vacuum for a long time – and equally, could become more and more irrelevant to the lives of ordinary people.

I cannot over-emphasise how dangerous I feel such a situation could be. If we reach a point where a large proportion of our population becomes alienated from or disenchanted with legitimate politics then other influences will gain influence in society.

Can any doubt what those influences are?

In many aspects of life we have moved on as a community. Compared with that dark period when hundreds of lives were lost each year through terrorism we have come a long, long way. Compared with those days when communities felt totally isolated from each other and suspicious of each other, we have come a long, long way.

But today there are areas of this Province where life is dictated by and controlled by the god-fathers of paramilitary organisations. It is their laws and their concepts of *'justice'* which hold sway. It is their protection rackets which dominate local businesses. It is their will which determines the lives of young people. It is their drugs which ruin young lives.

Whatever the real problems may be which confront politicians as they seek solutions to political difficulties the reality is that for people in many of their constituencies and in many of our parishes those are the realities they face day by day.

The majority of Church of Ireland members in Northern Ireland would claim to belong to the unionist or loyalist community. From within that community there are frequent calls for a declaration from the republican tradition that *"the war is over"*. While there is mounting pressure for such action and the current political impasse concerns such desires the community which makes this plea must also recognise realities within its own ranks. Loyalist paramilitarism cannot be excused simply because of republican paramilitarism. Loyalism cannot demand actions by republicanism while remaining ambivalent about loyalist paramilitaries. Armed gangs and so-called punishment beatings exist within Protestant areas. Roman Catholics continue to be attacked by thugs under the guise of loyalism simply because of their religious identity. Protestants are attacked because of their identity.

Is that the way ordinary decent Protestants or Roman Catholics want to be represented?

Neither community can allow itself to be misrepresented. Neither community should allow elements within it to dictate its life through threat or intimidation.

For the vast number of Church of Ireland members in Northern Ireland loyalist paramilitaries do not speak for them. Let both communities speak up : Roman Catholics demand the end of paramilitary activity claiming to speak for them : let Protestants demand the end of paramilitary activity claiming to speak for them. Let criminal activity of whatever identity be seen for what it is : nothing to do with legitimate politics, nothing to do with protection of religious or political identity – and nothing to do with a stable, just and forgiving community for the future.

So, let the mounting calls for an end to all paramilitary activity grow and grow. From within the Protestant community let us say to all loyalist groupings – **stop and stop now ...**

Dealing with the Healing of Memories

It has often been said that how we deal with our memories dictates in large measure the sort of people we are. Those memories can be a source of joy, satisfaction and encouragement. Equally they can be painful, negative and a source of grievance. Memories speak of experience and though the passing of time can dull the edges of pain thoughts of the past can dictate our personal freedom to address opportunities or fulfil positive action in the present. Pastoral ministry has taught clergy how powerful the force of individual memories can be. There is a definite spiritual dimension for the Christian in how memories are regarded.

Now, when we turn to the wider canvas of a community the same factors confront us as we deal with the past. The history of how communities have suffered or reacted in the past to real or imagined hurt or injustice can be a constant encouragement or sadly, a constant inhibitor to its present. *“Living in the past”* is a frequent comment on others – rarely about ourselves.

Recently there has been renewed debate on how communities and individuals in Ireland deal with their past, and their memories. I welcome that debate. It is in particular concerned with how what the media calls *‘drawing a line in the sand’* can be produced after years of sorrow, loss and suffering during the Troubles. Omagh, Enniskillen, Monaghan, Belfast, Dublin, South Armagh and many more are labels for atrocities which have marred and destroyed lives. Then there are that host of tragic deaths individualised to families or smaller groupings of people. The question facing society is how do we deal with memories of such a past so that human history and human dignity can move on.

In recent days several suggestions have been put forward as to how this process can become a reality. I feel it is important to make a distinction at this point. Unsolved crimes or unsolved injustices to communities or individuals is a part of this debate – but only a part. It must not be confused with that other aspect which is reconciliation of attitudes towards the past. There is certainly an overlap between the two but I have to say that some recent public statements

have spoken of unsolved crimes as though they can be equated with a generalised process of reconciliation. There is a danger in this to my mind.

Attention has been focused on the South African process of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It has been asked if such a process would be appropriate in Ireland. Through my friendship with Archbishop Desmond Tutu I have acquainted myself with details of that Commission and I have read the material in depth. It is easy to forget that apart from South Africa there have been over a dozen similar efforts, notably in South America.

I have to conclude that the South African model would not be applicable to the situation in Ireland, particularly in Northern Ireland. My reasons for this opinion turn on the differences of the South African situation compared with here. There are fundamental differences – but chiefly my reservations concern how such a system would adapt to this community.

In South Africa the conflict was over. Major political steps had been taken and acknowledgement given to a totally “*new era*”. Immunity from prosecution opened the door to freedom of confession. The legal system had been reformed to allow immunity on a wide scale. There was definite acceptance that the Commission would permit individuals to speak freely without legal or non-legal retribution. But most important there was almost universal desire to make the process work. There was a new desire to trust each other ...

Can we say in our current situation that those conditions already exist in Northern Ireland today? At the root of our current political impasse there is the question of the on-going activities of paramilitary organisations within the Loyalist and Republican communities. There is also the key issue of an absence of trust that the ‘*ceasefire*’ status means a complete end to violence.

Archbishop Brady has recently termed Northern Ireland to be “*a society pervaded with distrust*”. I agree with those words. The real legacy of our past 30 years has been the absence of trust. Slowly we are beginning to build that trust – but we have a long way to go.

Today there is also a great deal of anger in this community. That anger is shared by individuals and communities. That anger stems from memories of the past as much as from so-called ‘*unsolved crimes*’. While we **have** come a very long way in many instances as a society – we still have a long way to travel before a Commission precisely along the South African pattern would ‘*draw a line in the sand*’.

If the way forward is to be a Northern Ireland or indeed an Irish version of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission then it needs to be a particular effort geared to our actual conditions. In fact it may not be a Commission at all. Both parts of Ireland have seen a multitude of Tribunals lately. It may be a structured

means of basic story-telling could have a powerful impact on reconciliation. People need to unburden their memories and that is not always appropriate for a tribunal or a Commission.

The question of immunity from prosecution which is a very divisive and emotive element would require legislation. But no legislation to that effect would work unless there was a widespread and accepted acknowledgement and willingness to accept that witnesses would be immune from prosecution. This society would need to be prepared to accept the consequences of that. Second, people talking openly of their past actions would need a guarantee that they would not be subject to attack or intimidation for speaking openly of the past. *How would such a situation be guaranteed?* Third, there would have to be a complete, open and transparent end to even the threat of paramilitary activity. Verbal assurances would not be enough.

Reconciliation is too often viewed here as a weakness not a strength., Forgiveness is seen by too many as a failure rather than an act of generosity. Individual acts of forgiveness have amazed us all – but it is still a rare commodity.

What people who have lost most yearn for is simply the knowledge of what happened to them or their loved ones – and why.

It is possible that at some point some structure could help the process of healing here – but much needs to happen first if it is to have any hope of success. Chiefly we need to recognise what it is we want such a structure to achieve and we need to recognise how much memory of the past dictates the present and future. Without a great deal more thought to progress along such lines now would probably open more wounds than it would heal.

Let us be honest with society as to what memories of our Troubles involve.

As we look back to those dark days of widespread violence and terrorism we are beginning to see the real damage they did to the fabric of this society. The violence destroyed lives, seared bodies and minds and the statistics of death and injury tell their own tragic story. But much more was being forced on the community beyond the toll of death. Trust was shattered. Deeds were done in the name of political aspiration, religious identity and institutional reaction which rewrote the rule book of what was morally and legally acceptable. Now we can and do ask questions about who did what or why? Then the cauldron of violence pushed moral issues aside in the process of dealing with situations for which we were not prepared. Undoubtedly actions were taken, individuals reacted in certain ways which in the cold light of today were morally wrong and unjustified. Actions were taken by individuals or groupings which are a shame to

the conscience of both communities here – and also on the collective conscience of governments.

When we talk about the past and its memories those are the realities to which we refer.

A process of reconciliation and forgiveness is not for *'the other side'* – it has to search **us** out too ...

I am sure that the Churches have a role as they have always had in the process of such reconciliation and would be willing to play that role once the time was right. Until then the slow and often painful path of reconciliation must go on and political progress must be made.

A BREASTPLATE

So we turn to our business in the shadow of the *'hill of St Patrick'*. How else can we witness as the General Synod to the Faith once delivered than to take to ourselves a breastplate of truth which must be as alive this morning as it was when Patrick walked on this soil:

*“Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ where I lie, Christ where I sit, Christ where I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of every man who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.”*

God bless you all

Ends