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**DEDICATION OF MEMORIAL WINDOW  
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND PRISON SERVICE**

**Belfast Cathedral : Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> September 1996 : 3 p.m.**

**ADDRESS OF THE MOST REVEREND DR ROBIN EAMES  
ARCHBISHOP OF ARMAGH**

This afternoon we have been privileged to witness the dedication of a memorial window in this Cathedral to all those who have served and those who continue to serve in the Prison Service of Northern Ireland. It has been a most moving occasion for all of us who live and work in this part of the world. But it has been of particular meaning for relatives, friends and former colleagues. No window no matter how beautiful can ever take the place of hallowed personal memories. Those memories will have abounded for many of you during this service. But this memorial placed in a Cathedral which has witnessed so many great state and church occasions speaks to all of us of our appreciation and respect for those whose lives have been and continue to be spent in the service of this entire community. Those who do a job not everyone would wish to do - but who provide us with an

often '*silent service*' as this society has struggled through its many ups and downs. To say we take the Prison Service for granted is surely something of an under-statement. The custody and care, the rehabilitation and the essential life of our prisons goes on day and night as society passes on to make its own judgements, its own mistakes and its own plans for the future. The special relationship of Prison Officer to those in their care calls for a degree of expertise, dedication and self-discipline rarely equalled in any other sphere of life. It calls for a special sort of person and it demands much in the character and resolve of those who serve.

Because of the particular circumstances of life in Northern Ireland society has placed a very special and onerous burden on its Prison Service. Because of those same circumstances special demands are made on those who serve. They are not called upon to judge - society through the Courts has already done that. They are not called upon to exercise punishment - imprisonment and the deprivation of liberty has already done that. They are not called upon to cure society's ills - we cannot expect something like the Prison Service to do that which the wider society has failed to do. They are called upon to work within a system which at its best is society's answer to wrong-doing. They are in their own way the protectors of society's freedom and society's life.

To study the history of prisons is to learn much about the nature of society. The dungeon-like conditions of Victorian times are far removed from the modern conditions so many prisoners experience today. For many the conditions in which they are detained are an advance on life outside prison. The emphasis today on education, rehabilitation and enlightened progress towards responsible citizenship is a far cry from the repressive regimes of other generations. But prisons remain a barometer of society. What we as a society consider as the appropriate response to legal judgement says much about our estimate of right and wrong : of punishment or retribution : of compassion or neglect. For annual reports may talk of facts and figures or statistics but in the end prison life is about that myriad of human emotions which make people what they are. Prison life is about detention and change. Prison life is about a fresh beginning. The human values of tragedy live side-by-side with those who appear to have little wish to reform. The human emotions of our reaction to the judicial system live side-by-side with psychological reaction to the removal of family support or family influence. For the period of a sentence those who work in the Prison Service will represent authority, society and the parameters of what is possible or impossible for the prisoner. It is indeed no easy job. But society would face a crisis of immeasurable proportions if it was not for those who work in our prisons.

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The window is a gift from the Northern Ireland Prison Service Central Benevolent Fund, an entirely voluntary organisation, subscribed to by prison staff. Ordinarily they support widows, retired officers, and serving staff during sickness. The Northern Ireland Prison Service is unique in the British Isles, not least for this specific after-care, providing holiday homes, rest and recuperation for not only staff but their families and widows.

Because of our 25 years of violence the Northern Ireland Prison Service has never "*gone public*" before, so much of their work has had to remain "*private*" to protect lives. This has meant that credit has not been given by the community to those dedicated officers, men and women, past and present, whom we commemorate today.

As a result of the "*peace process*" the future jobs of some officers may be in doubt and the future insecure, but we hope they will know that the community at large is grateful for their dedicated service.

The theme of this memorial is '*patience*'. As I prepared for this afternoon's Address I reflected on this choice.

*Patience* is a particular human emotion. It is not something we all exhibit in our lives. Impatience is a much more common characteristic. But as I thought of my many experiences of visiting in the prisons of

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Northern Ireland I began to appreciate something of its meaning in this context. You have chosen one of the great human virtues for this memorial window. It can be defined in many ways. Often it is obvious in human relationships not because of its presence - but because of its absence. We recognise impatience before we even begin to appreciate *patience*. In the context of the Prison Service it has something to say because of the need to recognise the complexities of the human character. *Patience* with anger, *patience* with the rebellious spirit, *patience* with remorse, *patience* with abuse, *patience* as all the human reactions to imprisonment are worked out. Each case will be different. Each person will react differently to prison conditions. The need to be pastoral as well as custodial has never been more obvious than in our day. But there must be times in your professional lives when it is not easy to feel let alone exhibit the gift of *patience*.

On this occasion of solemnity as we have dedicated a memorial of great meaning to those who have worked in the service and are still working for the good of the community in a way which that community takes for granted, let that wider society pause to realise that so often when the publicity has ended and a sentence begins it is the Prison Service which takes on the needs of that society on its behalf. Let us remember that each prison is its own community : a community of rules and discipline - but also a community of that precious human commodity - life in all its

shades of good and bad, evil and goodness, sadness and joy, strength and frailty. Our community owes so much to its Prison Service. Today is an all too rare occasion to express that gratitude.