



DRUMCREE – GARVAGHY ROAD

Personal Statement by the Most Reverend Dr Robin Eames Archbishop of Armagh

During the past 12 months I have engaged in prolonged and serious dialogue with the officers of Portadown L.O.L. No 1. That dialogue has had two main purposes : first to explain and examine with the Lodge the position of the Church of Ireland in relation to the loyal orders and second, to attempt to move forward a solution to the divisive Drumcree/Garvagh Road issue.

In the first instance I have explained that the Church of Ireland does not own the Orange Order nor the Orange Order own the Church of Ireland. I have recognised and accepted that there are many members of this Church living in Northern Ireland who are sincerely loyal in their membership of both the Church of Ireland and the Orange Order and that they see no conflict in such joint allegiance. I consider that this dialogue has been entered into with sincerity and honesty on both sides and this I welcome.

In an attempt to move towards a permanent solution to the Drumcree issue in addition to the Portadown lodge I have met the Parades Commission, politicians, representatives of both the British and Irish governments, the spokesman for Northern Ireland of the Conservative party and the leaders of the Garvagh Road Residents Coalition.

In all these discussions I have seen the efforts at first hand of the Orange Order to offer a solution. I have recognised that there are many forms of engagement other than face to face meetings. I am fully aware of the feelings of the nationalist community in Portadown.

At all times I have sought to emphasise the teaching of Jesus Christ, the principles of the Christian Gospel and the integrity of the Church of Ireland as a whole.

It is a cause of intense sadness and disappointment to me that successive efforts by many people have failed to produce agreement on the Garvaghy Road impasse. I continue to offer any assistance which is acceptable in reaching agreement.

I recognise that there is no easy or short term solution but as I have commented in the past a solution to this problem could help to solve many other divisive issues in Northern Ireland. While the problem concerns the Orange Order and the Garvaghy Road Residents I accept fully that the Church of Ireland parish of Drumcree cannot be isolated from the issue. The Church of Ireland has not walked away from this question. It has chosen to seek a solution which is fair, honourable and permanent through patient persuasion. It also recognises that this problem is at variance to the widespread reconciliation work the Church of Ireland is engaged in across this Province and to which I am fully committed.

I have also to recognise and state that the Rector and Select Vestry find themselves in a position few if any other churches of the reformed tradition would welcome.

As Sunday 7 July approaches speaking not only as a Church leader but as one who feels keenly the depth of feeling on all sides of this problem through close contact and many hours of discussion, I appeal to the Orange Order in Portadown to act with extreme dignity and caution following their attendance at the service in Drumcree, to abide by the law and to recognise the awesome responsibility on any organisation which engages in public protest in Northern Ireland at this time. I ask them to respect the dignity of worship of Almighty God at all times. I believe and accept the assurances they have given to me in this regard. I also appeal to the Residents Coalition of the Garvaghy Road to recognise their opportunities to help even now to solve this problem and I do so in full knowledge of their stated position in the past and the apprehensions within their community.

Given the tensions elsewhere in the Province this summer I appeal earnestly for a peaceful expression of protest at Drumcee and urge on a basis not only of moral authority but in the light of my own efforts to seek a solution that there is a complete and absolute absence of violence.

(The End)
2.7.02.