

A REPORT ABOUT WHAT I SAW, HEARD AND EXPERIENCED
IN WEST BELFAST 26 – 29 APRIL 1981

Some months ago I said that I would like to spend some days in West Belfast, to experience the atmosphere and to get my own impression of what is going on. Sean Nolan found a house where I could live and some persons who agreed to speak with me. Louis Boyle made some appointments and accompanied me one afternoon.

I was very fine lodged in the house of Mrs Reid and her daughter Patricia. With her and with her friend, we were at an evening together in a pub, I had very useful talks. I had a conversation with Willy McCarney, a senior lecturer of St. Josephs College. The next morning he spent with me in West Belfast, showing me flats, outside and in the houses, and different parts of West Belfast. Further there were conversations with Father McCorry and with Dr McAuley, a general practitioner. With Louis Boyle there were conversations with community workers and with the committee of the Divis Education Project. They all were very interesting and nice. I hope to see back in any case Mr McCarney and Dr McAuley.

It was only some days that I was in West Belfast, speaking only with some people. Moreover I don't have too much time to order my impressions. The report therefore can't be any more than a collection of impressions and of some thinking.

1. Beginning with the outside, there is the housing. Many houses are badly built. The ways, streets, are often awful. The very big flats are not seldom horrible. Refuge on the stairs and everywhere. On many places more or less dilapidated. Places for the children to play are absent; the places that are meant to have this function are mostly awful.

Vandalism is in many places high. A house that is left is broken out the same or the next day. Schools are damaged; the responsables try to protect them, putting very high fences around them, thus challenging the vandals.

In the house building there is much corruption, with the result that often the houses are bad, sewerage is missing also.

So very often things are pretty bad, but there is still another point. Since the quarters, the "communities", are either Roman Catholic or Protestant, in any case the Roman Catholic quarters have lost much of their structure. The Protestants had more social contacts and obligations than the remaining Catholics. The life of those who stayed is duller and lost more or less inner structure.

I have the impression that the authorities responsible for the housing do an awful lot, but too, that it has to do with wielding a stone against the slope of a mountain. In any case, I have the feeling that the whole housing situation has a bad impact on the inner strength of the people living in these quarters.

2. Speaking about the problems, nearly always unemployment is mentioned first. Unemployment rates are very high, for the youth in some quarters up to 60%. In some cases I asked if the unemployment-problem is not the only real problem, the political problems being used, because the former cannot be solved. In one case my partner agreed, in another, there were objections. In any case, so was it said to me, do the political

problems make everything worse, because anxiety, feelings of insecurity, stress are sharpened by the political-problem. That may be right, but I still have the feeling that the unemployment does in any case the same to the political problems and that, would it ever be possible to solve the unemployment-problem, political problems would be manageable too.

In some cases, when I spoke about the problems of Northern Ireland I got the answer: We have our problems, as you have them. Here too it becomes clear that the political problem is not an absolute problem on its own, but a relative, interrelated and sharpened by the others.

3. The problems in relation to the youth are very big and have many faces. Most of them are problems of the youth in other countries, but there are own features.
- 3a. Unemployment-rate is very high. That means that very many youths don't have fulfillment in their lives and often do things that are badly seen by the adults and by the responsables.

In a country as Northern Ireland and I suppose in nearly every country, it is necessary to bring up and teach youngsters so, that they can find fulfillment in their lives when they have and when they don't have work. This would mean a wholly other system of education, in which in every case it is learned to live with the feelings and not only learned to use and develop the intellectual possibilities and the skills. Schools and teachers are not equipped to do this and on the whole they neither willing to. They wish to have a good, old-fashioned school and all pupils who misbehave they throw out. For Roman Catholic pupils it is after that nearly impossible to get any further schooling. There are in this field very big problems: the mentality of the teachers and the questions about methods. The problem becomes worse, because most teachers only have a specialist and not, as formerly was common, a general education as a teacher.

With Louis I visited the Divis Education Project, which tried to teach youngsters who have been thrown out of Roman Catholic schools. I was very impressed. Naturally, this work is "symptomatic", but in any case young people are really helped. I try to find some money for the project in the Netherlands.

- 3b. There is very much joy riding, with big risks, for the riders and for those whom they "meet". There are many accidents; there are now and then awful punishments by the IRA. Everybody possessing a car or only driving in these quarters feel insecure.
- 3c. There is a complicated drug problem. Use of alcohol, of drugs. Valium is cheap, is in most houses ("Most women are on valium"), Valium with beer provide an excellent drug. There is glue sniffing. The stuff is not forbidden. The sniffing is done outside; in meadows also control is difficult.
- 3d. To steal is quite common. The IRA, who tries to prevent this, gets the answer that they are stealing too. Later at night people are robbed or molested.
- 3e. The IRA uses the youth for rioting. Because there is so little to become enthusiastic, the youth like it fairly well, but without understanding the why, they have again to stop it

when they are said to do so. How they get along with the frustrations is not the problem of the IRA.

The problems are manifold and complicated. For the youth and for them who wish to cope with them. Youth who have difficulties tend to have them with everyone, with the school, the police, the IRA, their parents, with ... there are in such situations hardly ways out.

There are still some aspects, which are of interest:

- (a) There is little professional youth work. Although I congratulated the man who told me, saying that our experiences in the Netherlands are not too good, nevertheless it is a drawback. I saw a youth apprentice centre for Roman Catholic and Protestant youth, which was showed me by the parish priest, but of course it has limited possibilities. The same priest told me that the community centre in his parish was very bad.
 - (b) The youth learned, not to have any fear for the police. Hundred against one. They experienced that the risk for the one (or even the two, three) are much bigger than those for any of the hundred.
 - (c) The grip of the clergy, in any case of the Roman Catholic clergy but I suppose of the Protestant clergy as well, on the youth is diminishing. They, the priests, are always in the defensive, building fences, threatening with hell on every occasion young people are doing things they don't like. There is no creative response. It is clear this is not everything that can be told about Roman Catholic youth in West Belfast. There are, sure many many who don't have or give problems in the above mentioned sense. But when we spoke about the youth, I heard these things.
4. And what about the grown-ups? Here again I give impressions, which in any case are not valid for everyone. It is to be remembered that the problems mentioned above, the housing, the unemployment, the youth, are on their shoulders, but there is still more:
- (a) The structures are crumbling away, the structures outside and the inner structures. About the structure in the "communities" I wrote already. It is to always endangered by the IRA, who destroys all possibilities to have real human structures. I deal with that aspect further on. Naturally when the situation outside is so complicated and so difficult, the inner, mental structures too are in danger. One of the men I spoke with said to me: all these people are staunchly Roman Catholic, but they don't have Roman Catholic morals. If they can get stolen goods, they keep them, saying: Otherwise they will be destroyed also. Another said to me: Marriages are breaking down. Wives of men, who are in prison live with other men. The neighbourhood accepts them as such. Understandable, because quite often the men were not good husbands, and nevertheless.

That most are "staunchly catholic" I saw walking through the streets, the flats. And I suppose I understand. In all misery, it is their only identity. When they lose it in the present situation, they are lost. In the same time, in this situation they can't get along with the things their priests try to learn them, words out of another world.

- (b) There is much resignation. Probably there is no solution for the never ending suffering and violence. Those who engage themselves deeper are too in a vicious circle: how it is

possible that the English did so many awful things, during centuries, to the Irish people? How to live with them? With ourselves?

- (c) There is still another thing, about which I hesitate to write. I think about the very difficult situation, in which many roman catholics find themselves. One of them said to me: Naturally I only wish Northern Ireland to become Irish, when the Republic fulfils my conditions. More or less I heard that often and I suppose too, now, that very many don't wish one Irish state at all. It could be that there are many who for one reason or another need the problem, but don't wish a solution at all.
5. A very big problem, about which I spoke with nobody, but which hit my eyes quite often is the birth control. A parish priest showed me very proud "his" primary school with 1200 or 1400 pupils. I had the impression that he himself was not quite sure about the number. In any case, I was flabbergasted. It seems clear to me that, if things are going on in this way, if birth control will not be practiced very consciously by the Roman Catholic part of the people, they will make life wholly impossible, not only for the protestants, who naturally are enormously threatened, but for themselves too.
6. Much is spoken about IRA. Some said to me, trustworthy for me, that the influence of the IRA is diminishing, although it is impossible to say how the situation in the future will be. In any case, diminishing or not, I suppose the IRA is a very big problem, because it corrupts the society and destroys all values of them, living in its sphere of influence. That many ordinary criminals join the IRA, may be partly out of the wish to find their own place in a sort of shadow society, makes things probably worse, but even if this was not the case, the problem is very serious.

Naturally, here as everywhere the things I heard are haphazard, but even so it is enough to form an opinion. I enumerate the following aspects:

- (a) The youth is misused for rioting. The IRA uses them as mere objects, pretending that they are doing for this youth and its future, but in fact frustrating and demoralizing the often-compelled young people.
- (b) The IRA gives youths and adults the example of robbing and theft.
- (c) This is more demoralizing, because the IRA presumes to maintain order in the same regions, using awful punishments, invalidating or murdering, without the possibility of any public control.
- (d) Just as e.g. in Naples the underground, the IRA is protecting shops and so on, forcing the owners to pay and, if necessary, by showing that protection is necessary.
- (e) There is much corruption, in the house-building sector and elsewhere, provoked by the IRA, which is benefitting.
- (f) The IRA keeps the inhabitants of the region under constant pressure, the inhabitants working actively or passively together with the IRA, often out of fear, partly because she agrees, now and then, with certain actions or wholly, with the IRA.

I did not speak with IRA people. I am sure that some of the men I spoke with know some of them, although one of them denied it. Another said that everybody he knew is dead or in jail. In any case I did not meet trustworthy real political aims, but naturally I can't deny that there are IRA men who have them.

7. Which are the persons or the groups of persons, able to help this people out of the deadlock? Persons who live, more or less, between them? Naturally again here, I don't have a real insight, only impressions.

(a) The clergy. I spoke one afternoon with a parish priest. After a not too easy beginning, we could speak well with each other. Afterwards he drove me through his parish. During this tour I said to him that I had the impression to drive along with the Queen. Everybody was kindly greeting smiling, waving hands.

The big problem he said to me is that there are not enough priests. Since Vaticanum II the callings have diminished. Now things are going better, but the gap stays. Each parish priest is in fact responsible for much to many people.

On my question what he is doing he mentioned rather impressive community work in the field of improving the housing. On my question if it is tried to build up a social system in the parish, the answer was negative. The problem, in the eyes of my partner is: Lifting people up to their problems. I suppose that this is a real goal, but I don't see how it is reached.

I have and had the impression that the clergy has big interests in the status quo and that it only can lose when a political solution would be achieved. The situation of the clergy is now more or less unique.

It seems however, and sadly, that the possibilities, which the clergy has are generally not (very) well used. It keeps its eyes shut for the real problems, which are either condemned or declared as non-existent. The church, its system, morals and so on, the own position, have priority. This does not mean that I don't think that more of these men are doing their work as well as they can. Naturally too, there are exceptions. But on the whole I suppose that the clergy as its functions now is not a clear factor for the future. I think that I understand that the risks for the clergy are enormous, when they change their minds and goals. The need much courage, cleverness and fantasy. Their parishioners need badly all these things, and their examples.

(b) With Louis Boyle I visited two agencies of community workers. In both cases the meeting was very agreeable. I meet people, when I rightly understood, who are doing their best or even their utmost. In the same time, thinking it over, it is rather depressing. Not in the first place, because it is on the whole work on the fringe. Maybe there is not any other possibility but working on the fringe or even further off. More depressing for me is, that the philosophy of the work makes any real result hardly probably. Working in the "we – they scheme", always knowing which is the worth of "the others" and from that position fighting or neglecting them cannot possibly promote a new society.

(c) Another group of key persons are the teachers. I mentioned them already. I have the impression that very much must be done, before a real contribution can be expected.

8. The whole picture, I agree, is not an enjoyable one. I must repeat that I came to a party of a city with big problems and naturally I saw these problems, more than everything, and everybody, that/who is going well, nor did I speak with many, many people who are working in the region to improve the situation.

Taking the risk that I make at least the impression being still more pressing I must say that rather quickly I got the conviction that the situation is thus complicated, that every time anything is better somewhere, things will be worse elsewhere. The circles and the balance are so to say wholly complete.

9. Because I thought about it, I will be so audacious to go a little bit further on. Of course again with the knowing that I saw little and that the encounter is very superficial.

Which are, so I asked myself, the political consequences of my impressions? Which are the main political tasks? I agree, again, I am making phantasies, and yet I try.

Above I stated already that every time you are ameliorating something, somewhere else things get worse. So it is clear that only long termed planning on the main tasks will do any good. Further I have now the impression, if not the conviction, that Northern Ireland is an entity of its own. Maybe one time or another there will be other solutions, whichever, but now politics are only possible with the existing entity. Thirdly I am convinced that the real problems don't have primarily to do with the splitting of the population in protestant and Roman Catholic. Naturally there are problems in this field, but it is necessary to solve them in the context of the other problems, which endanger the future of the country.

When I enumerate the political tasks, there is the difficulty, which is the order I have to choose. Not only because it is difficult to know, which problem is the biggest, but too, because it is possible that the biggest problem can be solved, solving the minor. With these reservations I try.

- (a) First of all, there is the omnipresent IRA, always bringing insecurity, stress, anxiety, damaging and destroying the inner structure of the population, with naturally, the protestant counterparts. I don't know how to tackle the problem, but I suppose that the only real possibilities are, either to overrule it, solving the next mentioned problems or, and I think that would be much better, finding paradoxical ways of getting along with the problem. Maybe that it costs days of fantasizing and brainstorming to find good possibilities, but I am very sure that there are good possibilities. The task is to find them.
- (b) The biggest problem for the future is the birth rate and so, politically, birth control. It seems to me that for a Northern Ireland government it is impossible to make propaganda for birth control. I ask myself if it would be a possibility to lance very regularly publications in the sense: It is very fine to have children. What happens in the future? How will they get work? Happiness? Things like that have to be written very sophisticated, but they will do their work.
- (c) A very important point is the (social) pedagogical sector. How to bring up youth, how to educate them, that they can live in this world of Northern Ireland, sharing in the responsibilities, having the possibility to be and make happy? The schools,

colleges and so on have an immense task, but I have the impression that a wholly changed training of the teachers is primarily necessary.

- (d) Adult education, community building too is very important. Here I have the impression that the first steps for a real strategy are still to be found, but nevertheless, there must be huge opportunities.
- (e) The macro-political and economic problem of unemployment puts its own very big problems, about which I can't say anything. Only, if nothing is done on the points a – d, mentioned above, I suppose everything will be useless.
- (f) The same is true, I suppose, of the housing problem, macro and micro. It is clear that much has to be done in this field, but everything is, at least spiritually and emotionally already destroyed before it is ready, when nothing is achieved on the human field.
- (g) Only in the context of the points a – f there can be done useful work to achieve that Roman Catholics and Protestants can live together. Only them, I suppose Northern Ireland can be a real partner in the negotiations with the Irish Republic about the future of the whole island.

10. Is there any possibility for our committee to do something? I would like to speak about it together. In any case, maybe there are possibilities in the point 9(d).

At the end again, I am very grateful for the days and for everything I got to think and feel about. Thank you very much everybody.