

MEETING THE OTHER SIDE

May 1993

My family went to Dublin for a holiday in 1961, I think it was, and one of my sisters got lost in Cleary's store. My mother's first thought was; the nuns have got her.

My grandfather signed the Ulster Covenant in 1912 and my mother said of him: "He would have been a Liberal if it hadn't been for Home Rule". I remember my aunt in Newcastle saying: "The Catholics are moving into the area"; yet she was a good neighbour to the Catholic family living down the street. I remember a Catholic friend talking about her father being a commander in the IRA in the 1920s; at least one of my relatives was a 'B-Special' at the same time. I remember talking to a Catholic priest who comes from the same town as I do. We worked out that we must have travelled on the same bus to school. I have no memory of him, but I can remember the Catholics on the bus crossing themselves when they passed Holywood Chapel and wondering what these strange people were doing. These people did not belong to me. They were not part of my religious or political community.

When I went to school in Belfast in the 1960s I used to see buses that said "Ballymurphy" on them. I had no clue where Ballymurphy was. The only contact I had with Catholics in school was through playing chess. The things that struck me about Catholic education – learnt from this contact – was that pupils could smoke and they got beat. Thick hedges screened us from each other.

Things only began to change with my involvement in Corrymeela in the late 1960s. Corrymeela was still very much a Protestant world at that time but at least there were a group of people who were seeking to face the divisions in Northern Irish society and were open to meet the 'other sort'. If they hadn't yet fully connected with the Catholic community they were preparing themselves for what was to come in the 1970s.

During the early 1970s I worked, along with other students, in the Catholic Markets area of Belfast. I remember the decency of many ordinary people. I remember the Sunday-like silence of the 12th of July. I remember the expectation of violence on some Wednesday afternoons when we went down – the area was simply crackling with anticipation that something was going to happen. One Wednesday I was standing at a street corner beside a man on a ladder and he said to me "Sonny, I would move from there, if I were you. There's going to be a hijack in five minutes". I moved to a safer spot.

I remember looking after children from Andersonstown in a Cushendall school after Internment in 1971 and a parent talking of seeing bodies in the street – "The Army were treating them like bags of meat", he said. You could feel the radicalising going on.

In the later 1970s I became involved in a community work project that employed a number of neighbourhood workers in six Protestant and Catholic working class areas in

Belfast. The Hunger Strike period was a particularly traumatic period. One of the workers was gradually drawn into the protest. He was picked up by the RUC and held in Castlereagh. I remember talking to him afterwards about British 'justice' and thinking: how could any conceivable solution meet his distrust?

In 1983 I became a member of the Inter-Church Group on Faith and Politics which brought together a number of Protestant and Catholics – from North and South – to explore the Irish situation from a faith perspective. The Group was an exercise in frustration until we sat down and explored together our own fears and enmities concerning the 'other side'. It was a revealing exercise and gave us a basis of trust to move forward to produce "Breaking Down the Enmity". The fears and enmities we had explored together became a central part of the document. The Group is still together after ten years. We don't have to be 'polite' to each other. We have instead learnt to listen – which is often a lot more difficult than being 'polite'.

On the more narrowly ecumenical front I made contact through Corrymeela with the Jesuits in the early 1970s. I met highly intelligent – as well as highly spiritual – people. I began to grasp that Roman Catholicism was highly diverse – everything from papal loyalists to a Dutch Dominican on a bike who talked about "that clown the Pope".

I have learnt a number of things journeying over the last 25 years. Yes 'they' are human like me. Yes 'they' are Christians, too. But 'they' – Nationalists, Catholics – often see things very differently. And these differences are real and there is easy transcendence of that reality. This was particularly painfully evident during the Hunger Strike period when even in somewhere like Corrymeela the Protestants and Catholics did not feel the same on this issue.

I have also learnt, similarly painfully, that I am not superior to the 'bigots' in my own community. Their bigotry is in me, no matter how many encounters I have had with the 'other side'.

I well remembers a role-play which involved three Protestants (I was one) and two Catholics. We knew each other well and regarded each other as liberal and ecumenical. It was agreed that the Protestants would go away and agree an offer of a settlement of the Northern Ireland problem which would then be put to the two Catholics. The three Protestants first of all discovered that they felt that no credible offer could be made which the Catholics would accept. However, eventually a proposal was put together and the three participants came back into the room and put the proposed settlement. Immediately the two Catholics, without consultation, divided. One became an SDLP supporter; the other a 'Provo' supporter. As the role play advanced one of the Protestants became a Loyalist paramilitary. Agreement within the groups was impossible and we were just like everybody else in the Northern Ireland situation.

So, I am a bigot too. I remember a member of the Columbanus Community, from a conservative evangelical background, talking about her experience of attending a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity service in St Anne's Cathedral at which members of the Free Presbyterian Church were demonstrating. She said: "I felt I was half out there with them". I have to recognise my communality with the Shankill Road butcher. He is part of my community too, part of me. So we have to face the fear and enmity in ourselves.

Meeting the 'other side' can be painful. Breaking through the politeness barrier of not talking about religion and politics brings the fear that you face the possibility of free fall without a parachute and there is nothing to hold us from plunging into the vortex of antagonism, conflict and ultimately violence. It can also bring trust and more open and honest relationships where we face the reality of who and what we are. Therefore, I am glad to have had all the encounters with the 'other side' over the last 25 years. It has sometimes brought pain and hurt, but it has also brought richness, surprise and variety.