



CNI

COMMENT -

How can we rid our society of our sectarian shackles?

Martin Magill writes.....

Recently Rev Dr Lesley Carroll and I were interviewed on BBC Radio Ulster's Sunday Sequence on the issue of sectarianism. Over breakfast together afterwards, we both acknowledged there were things we would like to have said had there been more time. This article includes some of those things I would have said.

The interview came on the back of a riot in North Belfast following the stopping of the anti-internment rally. I witnessed at first hand that riot which left me feeling shocked and saddened. I had the opportunity through the media to acknowledge these feelings and the sense of frustration and anger which some parishioners

and residents felt about the policing operation. In my imagined interview on Sunday Sequence, I heard myself recognise the very difficult role the police have at the time of contentious parades as they end up caught between different sections of our community. In the contact I've had since the riot with Assistant Chief Constable Stephen Martin, I was struck by something he said: "Nobody would be happier than the PSNI for parading tensions to be resolved".

I would have explained as I saw it how we as a society are showing signs of ridding ourselves of some of our sectarian shackles – I had all sorts of examples in mind – I regularly see politicians of different parties meeting and even eating together. I would have commented on some of the work which organisations like Intercomm were doing such as facilitating conversations with loyalists, unionists, republicans, nationalists and the faith community. I had wanted to acknowledge the comment of the Deputy Lord Mayor of Belfast at a meeting of young people saying how important he saw it that the Lord Mayor of Belfast (Sinn Féin's Arder Carson) and he Guy Spence (DUP) would stand together on International Day of Peace (Monday 21 September) at an event in Belfast City Hall. With more time, I would have referred to some of the "reconciliation" events that were part of this

year's Féile an Phobail programme as well as the valuable contribution of the Aperture festival in Corrymeela. I might even have talked about some of the encouraging feedback the organisers of Four Corners Festival, Belfast have been receiving as well as the requests for more of the same. In this "decade of centenaries" as it is sometimes called, I would also have pointed to some of the steps that are being taken to develop a shared understanding of First World War events and how some of the commemorative events have also been very helpful to peace making. I would have referenced especially the work of the Causeway Institute for Peace Building and Conflict Resolution International.

No doubt, for some reading this piece, this may appear to ignore some of the reality "on the ground". As it happens, I would have been pointing to some of the issues around sectarianism we need to address. I would have referred to a point made by Dr Paul Nolan in a peace monitoring report: "the war of the narratives has replaced the war of the weapons. Each side not only insists on the validity of its own narrative but also on the lack of validity of any other narrative". Alex Kane made a similar point in an excellent article entitled: "Northern Ireland is a better place than in 1994, but peace

is dropping too slow“. I would certainly have referred to the very insightful book I was reading at the time – Belfast: Toward a City Without Walls and some of the points which author Vicki Cosstick makes such as: “The Germans have a wonderful word: Reichtshaberein – the ‘need to be right’. There seems to be an awful lot of that about in Northern Ireland”.

When I talk about building a peaceful future, I would have raised the question how it would include those who were part of the anti-internment march and who are not currently included in any dialogue to the best of my knowledge. I would have pointed out how condemning and ostracising them would be unlikely to foster much peace. For those of us in the middle classes especially, I would have suggested some of the demonisation of loyalism might even be described as sectarian and patronising.

I was going to acknowledge there will be times when we feel down about the many ongoing issues that still remain unresolved; just a few nights before the radio interview there had been what seemed sectarian fighting amongst teenagers in North Belfast. Vicky Cosstick offers a very simple nonrocket science way of doing something about the walls issue and I would

suggest it is also relevant to sectarianism namely “relationships and conversations”. I would have shared a comment made by the Equality Commissioner Michael Wardlow speaking at an event during the West Belfast Festival about not being sure what is meant by “reconciliation” but knowing what generosity looks like and the need for it.

In the conversation with Lesley Carroll as we left the BBC, Lesley talked about “the architecture for reconciliation” or rather lack of it. On air, she had talked about the need for a “new scaffolding”. Had we more time, this would have allowed me to have raised other issues for example the need to fund adequately the “reconciliation” project if I might call it that. Peter Osborne, the chair of the Community Relations Council has pointed out again and again the inadequacy of funding and the very limited CRC budget. I heard myself call for substantial funding to undo the legacy of the past – not only decades but indeed centuries of mistrust and sectarianism. I might even have used the word “reconstruction”.

Lesley Carroll also pointed out the lack of a strategy to tackle sectarianism – I agreed with her and had there been more time, I would have returned to one of my “pet” themes which I’ve

written about before namely the lack of co ordination of the good work that is going on in many different places. Sometimes it is important that the right hand knows what the left is doing!

There were many other things I would like to have said in an interview, such as pointing out the slowly improving relationships amongst Christians of many different denominations. I could also have heard myself calling for developing the idea of a “compact civic body” even in the interim as our politicians work through the unresolved issues from the Stormont House Agreement. I would see value in a coalition of people from across the sectors, political, faith, academic, trade union, youth working together to build the peace and deconstruct sectarianism together.

Had I the time in this imaginary interview which is getting longer and longer, I would have shared a verse from the psalm in the common lectionary from the day when Lesley and I were interviewed seems relevant in a discussion on sectarianism and peace making “...keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn aside from evil and do good: seek and strive after peace” Psalm 33 (34).

August 24

Fr. Martin Magill is the Parish Priest at Sacred Heart Parish, Belfast. First published on Slugger O'Toole.