



# CNI

---

## **FAITH FOCUS - The Church and the Rising**

**Most Rev. Diarmuid Martin Archbishop of Dublin comments on the book edited by Greg Daly for “The Irish Catholic”**

Earlier this year RTE transmitted a television series about 1961 called Rebellion. It was a fictional re-enactment of the dramatic events of Easter Week 1916. It included one scene in which a Bishop, who from the context it would be hard not to understand as the then Archbishop of Dublin, William J. Walsh, condemning the rising, calling the leaders “hooligans” and reminding a fictional priest that his main responsibility was simply to defend the interests of the Church.

Fiction is fiction and I respect the freedom of expression of the authors. But when the fictional presentation flies flagrantly in the face of easily verifiable historical records, then one would be reasonable entitled to wonder if the search for

truth might be being second-guessed to partiality.

Archbishop Walsh was a strong nationalist. He never condemned the Rising. Though seriously ill at the time he followed the events up to and during the Rising with attention. Many of the leaders were in regular contact with Archbishops House. Indeed in military orders of the time, Archbishop's House was one of a small list of buildings to be placed under direct surveillance by the military. You will find some details in Noelle Dowling's article based on the Dublin Diocesan Archives on page 64 of the book.

The book edited by Greg Daly painstakingly tells of acts of great courage and human sensitivity by priests taken from the archives of the time and the personal memoirs of individuals. Yet the book does not fall into any simplistic one-sided view on the role and the attitude of the leaders of the Catholic Church towards the rising. The book does not attempt to hide the general condemnation of the Rising by most of the Catholic Bishops – and the same could be said about the leaders of the other Churches. The book (in an article on page 110) honestly illustrates the negative reaction to the 1916 Rising of The Irish Catholic itself. The book brings together much material about the work of

the priests in Dublin during and after the Rising. Some of the material has been in the public domain for some time. What emerges is a unique record of personal contact and spiritual support, but also an insight into the feelings of the leaders, based on personal conversations as they faced their final moments.

The book recognises the faith of the leaders – but also the anti-clerical views of some of them and their feeling of abandonment by the Church of the national cause.

There are more touching moments which reveal even the surprising respect the military officers came to have for the individual leaders of the Rising during their imprisonment. There are examples of tenderness shown by the young soldiers to whom the terrible task was assigned of blindfolding and executing the leaders.

There are the final conversations: the courage in facing death, but also the questioning and doubts of some of the leaders about the loss of life that was involved. There are descriptions of James Connolly making his peace with God and Pearse's happiness of receiving that news.

The book also takes up the question of the justification of violence and the complicated task

of making a judgment on events at a time when there was widespread frustration with the consistent undermining of attempts to introduce Home Rule. Archbishop Walsh himself had lost all confidence in the Redmondite process – even though that RTE fiction would appear to affirm the opposite.

History cannot be re-written, but all written history is interpretation and it is important that history always be written well away from prejudice and that history never be distorted later with motivations for which it was never written.

It is easy, as some do today, to say that the 1916 Proclamation was an affirmation of unrealisable and misguided idealism. But there is also the idealism of a dream and it would be equally unhistorical not to recognise the idealism of the 1916 Proclamation to attain a Republic which would be a very different kind both to the harsh realities of Dublin in 1916 and sadly to many aspects of the Republic that emerged in the subsequent years and the realities of today.

One-sided history is prejudice. Truth must be based on the inevitable subtleties of history and must try to understand the varied dimensions of any event. History is a history of light and

shadows, of ideals and mistakes. History must be sensitive to the frustrations which led to violence, and the hopes of a different future, without idealising violence or denying the honesty of the hopes.

The Irish Catholic book gives a unique human insight into the minds and hearts of all those who found themselves in that enclosed world of the final days in Kilmainham and Arbour Hill. The stories of the priests of 1916 as we find them recorded in the archival material of this Church and of the Pro-Cathedral and James Street and of Aughrim Street are stories of the extraordinary courage and impartiality of ordinary priests. Their activities were not politically inspired. They were humanitarian of the best kind and pastoral care which never sought any personal recognition.

The book catches touching glimpses of humanity amid all the brutality of those days in Kilmainham and Arbour Hill. This humanity contrasts with the calculated brutality of those who took political decisions which, in the end, had exactly the opposite reaction to what was intended. One-sided understanding of reality misses the subtleties of reality and rebounds on its authors.

The men and women of 1916 were men and women with ideals and a deep personal spiritual inspiration. Being true to the dream of 1916 today means fostering in Ireland a new pluralism, not a one-sided one of confrontation, but one where people of different backgrounds and faiths and political views learn to work together for the common good.

It is not enough in 2016 to commemorate and celebrate an historical event of one hundred years ago. We have to ask how those who fought in 1916 for Irish Independence would judge us and our society today. Theirs was a dream for very different Ireland. How successful the dream has been realised cannot be measured just through parades and celebrations, through dramas and books and television documentaries. The success will be measured in terms of what kind of society we have.

One final note and challenge! The theme of how the dream of 1916 has been realised over the past 100 years has been developed in many of the speeches of President Michael D. Higgins in these days. In these challenging speeches he has made reference on a number of occasions also to the negative role played over the past

100 years by an at times narrow and over dominant Church within Irish political culture.

Like every other component of Irish society, the Catholic Church in Ireland also is called to carry out an honest appraisal of its place in Irish society in the future. Seeking power and privilege and narrow judgementalism is not the way to a true witness in society of the message and teaching of Jesus Christ. Perhaps we should be looking more closely at quiet and unsung and yet extraordinary, sensitive, caring and courageous work of those Dublin priests of 1916 and I thank the authors of this book and The Irish Catholic for recording their memory so well.

*Most Rev. Diarmuid Martin Archbishop of Dublin  
was speaking in the  
Church of Saint Mary, Church Street, Dublin,  
31st March 2016*

**GET CNI HEADLINES EACH DAY**

**Facebook and Twitter**

**Click on logo at CNI Home page**

**[www.churchnewsireland.org](http://www.churchnewsireland.org)**

**+ Please share CNI with your friends**  
**[www.churchnewsireland.org](http://www.churchnewsireland.org)**