



CNI

PRESS WATCH - As Stormont crashes another devolution deadline, can the Churches point a way to reconciliation?

The Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh, Dr Richard Clarke, and Dr Eamon Martin, his Catholic counterpart. make an unlikely stage act, and are unlikely to trouble the organisers of Glastonbury or the Proms, William Scholes writes in The Irish News.

Yet there they were, sharing the bill in the Market Place Theatre in Armagh on the eve of St Patrick's Day.

The duo in question was not exactly Ant and Dec or Morecambe and Wise.

They were talking about - unsurprisingly - Patrick. Specifically, they were reflecting on what St Patrick means in a modern world.

There is always the risk with these sorts of exercises of projecting on to a historical figure a series of revisionist interpretations, but the two archbishops were at pains to be faithful to Patrick's familiar story and his best known writing, his Confessio.

The man credited with bringing Christianity to Ireland, and who established his chief church in Armagh more than 1,570 years ago, was, they pointed out, an exile.

They noted that Patrick's experience of being captured from his native Wales and put into slavery in Ireland had parallels with the modern practice of human trafficking; and how the story of Patrick - the displaced and exploited migrant who went on to contribute so much to Ireland - should give us pause for thought about how we treat those seeking to make a home here in 2017.

The event was further enlivened by a tour de force contribution from Cardinal Timothy Dolan, looming over the theatre via a Skype link from New York.

Cardinal Dolan, the Archbishop of New York, spoke of how the main cathedral in his diocese is also named after St Patrick.

He explained how the history of the Catholic Church in the city is indelibly linked to the migrant Irish and, with Dr Martin, spoke of efforts to help the 'undocumented' migrants from Ireland and elsewhere living in the US.

As well as having something sensible to say, Cardinal Dolan has the natural advantage of being a very humorous speaker. The Church's gain is the stage's loss, and even occasional delays in the internet connection didn't detract from his Tommy Cooper comic timing.

But perhaps the most striking feature of the day was the easy rapport between Dr Clarke and Dr Martin.

Plainly, there are not insignificant theological differences between the Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland.

This is the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and the meaning of its central tenet - that individuals are made right with God by faith alone, by grace alone - will be a subject of renewed discussion throughout 2017.

And yet the two Archbishops in Armagh, as well as their congregations, have found common ground on which to stand.

The Churches have found ways of agreeing - and disagreeing - with integrity about matters of fundamental importance to them.

It is tempting to consider what the political class - sometimes indistinguishable from certain brands of churchgoing in Northern Ireland - can learn from the sort of mutual respect modelled by figures like Dr Clarke and Dr Martin.

As Stormont lurches with the decorum of a self-destructing clown car towards Monday and yet another deadline to save itself from itself, it is unclear how devolution that is sustainable in the short-term, never mind the long-term, can be achieved while relationships between the DUP and Sinn Féin are so poor and loaded with mistrust.

An outstanding feature of Martin McGuinness's tenure as deputy first minister was his willingness to step outside his constituency's traditional comfort zone.

The gestures and words are, by now, familiar - meeting Queen Elizabeth, condemning the dissident republicans who murdered PSNI officer Stephen Carroll as "traitors to the island of Ireland", visiting the Somme - yet for all that, reconciliation has yet to fully embrace our politics.

As Brian McKee, who works with the Passionists in Ardoyne in north Belfast, pointed out in this newspaper yesterday, reconciliation is a word that is so overused that we have perhaps lost sight of its real meaning.

Referring to the word's Latin origins, Mr McKee eloquently described that "reconciliation, then, literally means 'the act of bringing back into eyelash contact' - the ability to touch eyelashes with another person, to look into another person's eyes without barriers or obstacles".

That seems a distant possibility when so much of our political discourse seems to actively conspire to build barriers and create obstacles.

And in the post-McGuinness era, just how realistic is it to expect Sinn Féin and the DUP to touch eyelashes when they each seem happier to give each other black eyes?

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