

GENERAL SYNOD 2007

STANDING COMMITTEE

Page 186 Section 29 Sinn Fein

SPEECH BY THE RIGHT REVEREND KEN CLARKE

This Synod meets at a time of unprecedented political progress on this island. It is not an exaggeration to say that we are living in a new dispensation. For some it is exciting. For others it is profoundly painful. For all of us it is different. How often have we heard from this General Synod, prayers for the bereaved and calls for a cessation of violence? How often have we met as a Synod after another year of atrocities, The Abercorn Restaurant, Bloody Friday and the Oxford Street Bus Station bombing, Darkley, the Dropping Well, Greysteel, Remembrance Sunday in Enniskillen, Omagh. Thank God those days are gone. How often have we heard from this Synod heartfelt pleas for our politicians to find a way forward. Now they have and what we witness this week in the newly formed Northern Ireland Assembly is the fruit of years of debate, discussion, long meetings, short meetings, behind the scenes activity, late night and early morning meetings, highs and lows, hopeful expectations and failed negotiations. It is always easy to knock politicians and public figures but surely a message of gratitude must go out from this Synod to all the politicians who have brought us to this point, DUP and Sinn Fein, Unionist SDLP and Alliance, the smaller Parties, British, Irish and American leaders, civil servants and negotiators, all of whom have brought us to this history breaking moment. They deserve our thanks for sticking at it and getting there.

What has been our role as a church during the "Troubles?"? Sometimes the church has been blamed for causing the problems. The reality is we are all part of the problem, Another reality is that in the most heartbreaking and shocking experiences of pain, suffering and bereavement the Church has been in the middle of it bringing comfort, care and prayer, hope and support. The clergy and laity of the church of Ireland have been faithful servants of Christ in the midst of bombs, bullets, sectarian activity and community division. Our gratitude to all who have cared selflessly and sensitively, sometimes at great personal cost, needs to be expressed and recorded. How many of our clergy, and the clergy and pastors of other traditions, have not only watched families weep but we have wept ourselves as we buried another policeman soldier prison officer or terrorist victim.

As we move forward what is the role of the Church in this new era?

We are called by God to be a voice of the victims.

We recognize the pain of the past, which never forget is still for many a pain in the present day after day.

We will pray for the terrorized and the terrorists.

We will fight for those who were bombed and we will pray for the bomber.

We will show outrageous grace because our God has shown us outrageous grace.

We will do battle for justice and we will be generous in forgiveness.

Members of this General Synod have lost loved ones. In one sense we are all victims. We have all suffered. But we are called to be peacemakers, dealers in hope and dreamers of dreams.

Let the message go out loud and clear from this Synod that we are fully and unreservedly behind the ongoing new paths of peace, the new patterns of political relationships, the DUP First Minister and the Sinn Fein Deputy First Minister, indeed every minister. With their views we may not agree. But in our pews and prayer desks we will pray for them. But far more than that, we will do everything we can to actively support every initiative political social and economic, which will deepen trust, strengthen new ways of doing things, and establish a fair and just society where Loyalist and Republican, Protestant and Catholic, people of other faiths and no faith will live together with respect and in peace.

Someone I met recently lost a best friend to a terrorist attack in the 1970's. He said that if he could find a gun and identified the terrorists he was so full of hatred he would have killed them. However he said this, "As I lowered my friend's coffin into the grave I also lowered my hatred into the grave...and it has been there ever since."

In this new phase of the peace process some of us, in our deep pain but with courage, need to bury some attitudes, and as we do, something new will be born. This is the Gospel way. We must never forget the pain of the victims and we must be so committed to the new Partnership Assembly that we do everything possible to ensure that in the future we have no more victims of terrorist activity and sectarian violence.