


# Reconciliation in Northern Ireland: a Jesuit's personal experience

by BRIAN MAC CUARTA S.J.\*



As the Brexit negotiations between the UK and the European Union stumble towards some conclusion, the issue of the Irish border looms ever larger like a gathering cloud on the horizon. The frontier between NI, and independent Ireland, virtually ignored in English discussion of Brexit hitherto, moves centre stage. Let's hear what Winston Churchill said, a hundred years ago, just after the First World War, about the disputed Irish border:

'Then came the great War. Every institution, almost, in the world was strained. Great Empires have been overturned. The whole map of Europe has been changed. The position of countries has been violently altered. The modes of thought of men, the whole outlook on affairs, the grouping of parties, all have encountered violent and tremendous changes in the deluge of the world, but as the deluge subsides and the waters fall short we see the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone emerging once again. The integrity of their quarrel is one of the few institutions that has been unaltered in the cataclysm which has swept the world.'  
 [Winston Churchill, in Parliament, Feb. 1922]

I would like to share with you how I, as part of a small Jesuit community, tried to respond to the integrity of that quarrel. These are my personal recollections, largely from the years 1990-1995; I'm not speaking on behalf of Irish Jesuits; much less are they offered as a rounded, deeply researched record of events.

I begin with some personal background.

It was an August evening in 1969. Then aged 12, I was at home. We lived in a town in independent Ireland, but on the border with Northern Ireland, just twenty minutes distant by car. With my parents, we older children were watching the evening news on TV. In Belfast (about 90 minutes from where we lived), streets of small tightly-packed houses were in flames. A mob from the neighbouring Protestant areas had come to burn out those living in the small Catholic ghetto. The police of the NI government, under

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single-party rule since its establishment in 1921, were present at the scene. Clearly they were unable to defend those under attack. A forced displacement of a whole community was unfolding before our eyes.

We had been following the Civil Rights marches, underway in NI for the previous ten months. But the street burnings in Belfast that summer made a particular impression on me. For just two weeks before, I was in Belfast, in those very streets. I was visiting a grand aunt, and an extensive tribe of cousins of various generations. She and her husband had lived in this area for over fifty years. When their daughters married, they lived in a street around the corner. The young boy cousins – about my age - were technical. They had a Protestant granddad. On that visit, one of them showed me his homemade radio set. We could listen in to the police cars as they were patrolling around the neighbourhood.

So I became fascinated by the unfolding Northern crisis. On Saturday afternoons in our town's square we listened to fiery speakers from the emerging militant nationalist struggle against the NI state. There was the occasional riot. On 9 August 1971 we listened on radio to the reports of the security forces' dawn raids against Catholic homes across the north. Men were rounded up and interned without trial (hence the word 'internment'). The women rattled bin lids on the ground. At my school, there were collections for families of 'the men behind the wire', referring to the specially created internment camps. Internees carved Celtic crosses in wood. These were smuggled out, and raffled, as happened in our school. To give families a break from this tension, the teaching brothers organised a summer holiday scheme – my family hosted a boy from Derry NI for several weeks. The morning the hated NI regime collapsed, March 1972, our teachers disappeared for a lengthy coffee break. They were watching developments unfold on TV. These events helped nurture my growing interest in history. So as a 16-year-old, I made a special study of the emergence of the Unionist movement in British politics, a stance supported by most northern Irish Protestants.

In the mid-1980s I was teaching in the Jesuit school in Galway, on Ireland's Atlantic coast. After 15 years of violence and instability in NI, southern Irish society did not want to engage with the apparently intractable situation. While students were familiar with the nationalist and republican story of struggle against England, almost all had no experience of Northern Protestants; further, they had no direct exposure to the current conflict. Pedro Arrupe's vision of forming men and women for others inspired me. Together with another young Jesuit, we wanted to help the youngsters to engage with this part of our country's life. So travelling by minibus we brought groups aged 15-17 years for a weekend north. For most, it was the first time they met northern Catholics and Protestants, and heard the stories of these communities. They visited the graves of the 1981 hunger strikers. They saw the political murals honouring republican martyrs – long haired Bobby Sands, who had died on hunger strike just a few years before. Other murals proclaimed British identity – King William, Protestant victor at a battle of 1690,

on his white horse; young apprentices closing the gates of Derry city against the besieging Catholic army in the same war. And they met the security forces. In Belfast, returning to the minibus after a walkabout, a police patrol was waiting for us, flanked on either side by masked soldiers brandishing rifles. Our vehicle was parked beside a police station - as always, heavily fortified. One of the youngsters had taken fotos. The police were not happy. When questioned why he was taking fotos of the premises, the young fotografer gave the perfect answer - 'I have never seen anything like this building before'. We were let go - a particularly nerve-wracking moment had passed.

We visited various community centres, usually in working class areas which bore the brunt of the violence. I recall the quiet fortitude, and deep Christian faith, of the animators of these centres. They were people rooted in their communities, but radiating some sense of hope in the midst of chaos, anxiety, and communal resentment. On another occasion in a loyalist area, the lady in charge graciously made us at home; as we were sipping tea together, the door opened, three young men marched in, said nothing, kicked a few chairs, and walked out. The pursuit of dialogue and mutual understanding, I sensed, was not universally shared. At times, those who welcomed us were taking a risk. Visits such as ours brought some support and encouragement to envision and work towards a different future.

For the duration of the Troubles (late 1960s-late 1990s), the religious and political leader Ian Paisley was the personification of Ulster Protestant intransigence. To every political initiative, of whatever type, the answer seemed to be - 'Ulster says no'. On one of the school trips, we arranged to attend one of his habitual Sunday evening services. The ushers received us warmly. The modern church was packed. In his address, Dr Paisley acknowledged the group from the Jesuit school in Southern Ireland. In his brusque and colourful fashion, he hoped that we noted he had 'neither horns on my head, nor a tail out my behind' - that, in fact, he was not the devil incarnate. One of the boys fainted, and had to be revived. Eventually, over ten years later, Paisley became one of the pillars of the new shared government in the era of peace.

Weeks after being ordained priest in summer 1990, I was missioned to join the four-man Jesuit community living in a run-down housing estate. This address had among the worst social indices in NI (poverty, unemployment, health). The town, Portadown, lay on the ethnic fault line within NI, between the Protestant majority in the east, and the Catholic majority in the west. For two hundred years the town has been renowned as a flashpoint for inter-communal tension. A few kilometers away, in 1795 the Protestant grouping named the Orange Order was founded; it remained a significant force in the regions's political and social fabric until the reforms of the 1970s. It was partly for this reason that the Jesuit province opted for this location when it became possible to open a house in NI in 1980. In doing so the Irish Jesuits were inspired by the Church's call for solidarity with the poor, and by the emphasis on '*reconciling the estranged*' in the Society of Jesus' foundation document. The companions opted to live among those suffering not only socially and economically, but also in a situation where ethnic, denominational and cultural tensions were particularly in evidence.

By 1990, the Jesuit presence in this place had survived for ten years against the background of the Trouble. There was no prospect of peace. The Jesuits had arrived in 1980 at the time of the Hunger Strikes by IRA prisoners, seeking the return of political status. Fourteen young men from the closely-knit Northern Catholic community of about 600,000 were to die on hunger strike. The process involved a massive popular mobilisation - marches, black flags in public places, attacks on prison personnel (mainly Protestant), and highly political funerals. One prisoner, Bobby Sands, was elected as member of parliament; shortly afterwards he died while on hunger strike. The Protestant community viewed these men as terrorists who were bombing town centres, and killing their menfolk, members of the locally-recruited security forces. In addition, a murky loyalist (extreme British) campaign was also underway from within the Protestant community. Loyalist gunmen were killing Catholics, often at night; in some instances, rumours were rife of the covert involvement of sections of British security services, in collusion with these squads. Our area was part of the 'murder triangle', one of the three localities within the territory of NI which suffered most killings in the Troubles. As neighbour, work colleague, or family member, every Catholic, it seemed knew someone who had been killed in this way.

I arrived in the Jesuit community, Portadown, in September 1990. Peace came exactly four years later, in 1994. Thanks to the contributions of the Jesuits, past and present, over the previous ten years, I realised that there were about three dimensions to our mission: 1) presence in the neighbourhood; 2) social and pastoral service largely within the Catholic community; 3) building relationships with the Protestant community, combined with theological and historical reflection on the ethnic and denominational tensions.

To the first dimension: Above all, we lived in the area. We were highly visible – I got a bike, and in a small town and even smaller neighbourhood, one soon became quite recognizable. Neighbours knew us – and they knew what we were cooking for dinner - and we became friends. Our door was always open. We were always ready to have a chat. A Jesuit brother in our group kept our feet firmly on the ground.

A second strand was social and pastoral service. The Jesuit priests helped out in the parish. One newly arrived man introduced himself at Sunday Mass – 'My name is such and such, Jesuit priest and recovering alcoholic'. He ran a well-attended AA grouping in our house. He inspired incredible loyalty among those whose lives he touched. Some people lived under enormous pressure because of the political and security situation. Men and women in vulnerable situations felt they would receive understanding, acceptance and guidance – including those with complicated relationship and family situations, and individuals and families facing anguish arising from the violence. In the parish, the week of guided prayer opened the scriptures for many. Evening adult education groups met in the kitchen. Through these experiences people grew in confidence and vision.

Faced with about 60% unemployment in the area, one Jesuit working with locals established the Drumcree Co-op It began with a chip shop; then, a local newspaper, and a simple hut for after school activities for kids. Not without growing pains, the small group continued, and developed in confidence. I recall a derelict factory site near where



we lived. Every year, on the anniversary of internment without trial (9 August), gangs of youths would riot on the road and petrol bomb the factory. Coinciding with the emergence of peace with the ceasefires of autumn 1994, the Co-op established a link with the business and civic community (largely Protestant). In this way the premises, with its broken windows and barbed wire, was transformed. A business centre for small enterprises emerged. Where once hooded youths threw firebombs, now 50-60 people hurried in and out every day to their place of work. In building peace, jobs are essential

A third strand was an openness, with regard to both communities, to engaging with the underlying issues. These included identity. Questions relating to a community's past: What's our story? Who are we? Where have we come from? What does our faith community hold dear? Jesuits had been willing to face the historic, denominational and political issues underlying the divisions in NI society. As a group, Jesuits valued the goal of seeking to understand the Protestant world view. For this, the Jesuit tradition of learned ministry was significant. A background in theology and history was particularly helpful. They were open to forming relationships with individuals and groups within the Protestant community. A grouping which had emerged in Portadown was the clergy fraternal – a social gathering of clergy, both Catholic, and those of the mainline Christian denominations. Over the years friendships developed. We used invite individuals to the Jesuit community for soup and sandwiches at lunch, always a time of fruitful and relaxed exchange.

A guiding insight was that of the double minority. Traditionally Catholics were a minority within Northern Ireland (about 35% at partition in 1921; today, about 50%). Protestants as a community however were more conscious of themselves as a beleaguered minority on the entire island of Ireland. The reflexes of both communities thus derived from a deep sense of insecurity. Based in Portadown, Jesuit Brian Lennon, among many other activities, was instrumental in bringing together several small reflection groups. The Faith and Politics group comprised a few people with a theological background, Catholic and Protestant. They met and prepared papers offering fresh theological perspectives on dimensions to the conflict. Brian ensured that these musings were issued as pamphlets. He followed a similar process, but at a popular and local level, with the Drumcree Faith and Justice Group. An annual ritual was the traditional Orange (militant Protestant) parade which passed through the Catholic area each July. The Orange festivities celebrated the victory of the Protestant King William over the Catholic King James, in 1690. This led to a long period of Protestant political and social supremacy in Ireland. With bands, loud drums, and large banners symbolising this historic victory, the annual event ritualised the humiliation experienced by residents of the town's Catholic ghetto. For the Orangemen, however, this was their traditional route to a church service, hallowed by use since the 1790s. Faced with the rioting provoked by this parade, the Faith and Justice Group offered alternatives: a team of international observers, and a tea party, to which the parading Orangemen with their musical bands were invited.

So on arriving in September 1990, I knew I was stepping into established furrows of ecumenical, social justice and cultural analysis, rooted in a particular local neighbourhood. I had just got off the train in this alien situation. It was my first time to live in NI, with a lowscale war underway; the next day my companions promptly disappeared, on

holiday. I was alone. While I appreciated their trust in me, I did feel nervous. In those early weeks I made several contacts with the Protestant community, contacts of a cultural nature. These proved to be enduring, and rich in potential for building bridges. I saw a news item in the local paper inviting new members to join the Men's Choir. On inquiring locally, I learned that it was, like almost all social life in NI at the time, in effect (though not intentionally) a Protestant grouping. They met in the local golf club. I had never been in a golf club before. I recall the British flag (Union Jack) outside. Walking through the glass door, with my Irish name and southern Irish accent, I felt (not for the last time) I was stepping out of conventional norms of behaviour. Over the years friendships were made, through singing at many church events, harvest thanksgivings, concerts across the country, tv broadcasts and carol services; each year we travelled to an International Choral Festival (we came first in an all-Ireland competition). I came to appreciate the wonderful suppers provided, a particular charism of the Protestant community. We supported each other in our bereavements; I got to know the protestant community from the inside.

Some events stand out. The British Legion (for former British soldiers and their families) invited us to sing at their event. I thought it would be a concert. In fact, it was a gathering for families of soldiers killed – not only in NI, but also elsewhere, in Afghanistan, and Iraq. In a secular liturgy, these men were remembered. Their mothers, wives, sisters were in the audience. Ending with a shower of paper poppies (the symbol of the British Legion) onto the stage, the common humanity of grief, loss and the supporting bonds of community came home to me. During my time in Portadown, the Choir was a constant, and ever-deepening point of contact with the Protestant community. The Irish national rugby team is supported by both North and South. At international matches, however, the Irish national anthem was a point of resentment. When peace broke out, a special rugby hymn was commissioned to replace the contentious anthem. Our choir was chosen to launch this song 'Ireland's Call' on national tv.

Travelling by bus to a choir event, I got talking with our chairman. We discussed possible future events. I suggested singing at the garden party of the Irish President, in her official residence, in Dublin. The choir committee agreed. So in June 2009 we – predominantly from the Unionist community – travelled south to sing for the Irish President, herself a Belfast Catholic. In the early 1970s a sectarian gang smashed up her family home. Now she and her husband welcomed their fellow-Northerners warmly. It was a small step in the new dance linking our once bitterly divided communities. Years afterwards, members recall that visit as the high point in the Choir's history.

Another contact made in those early weeks was with a group of young Protestant professionals. These wanted to form a citizens' group, dedicated to fostering the middle ground between the two communities. They invited me to speak to their group in a member's home. They formed what is known as a house church. This radical group had its origins in the main Presbyterian church in the town, well-noted for its conservative theological and political stance. These people and their young families had formed a break-away group. Now they wanted to move into the civic sphere. They needed a few likeminded Catholic allies. I arrived. Together our civic group planned a programme

which included public debates on contentious issues: (schooling – separate or together?); policing reform (membership then about 95% Protestant); and the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1986) between London and Dublin, establishing for the first time an official nationalist input on how NI was run. The Agreement was anathema to broad unionist opinion. We invited Garret FitzGerald, Irish prime minister who signed this accord with Margaret Thatcher, British prime minister, to address one of our meetings. Speakers from the floor heckled the Irish statesman. They stamped their feet so as to drown his words. But gradually they listened to his vision of an agreed Ireland. I salute the courage of the Protestant family who had us all to supper beforehand.

We also held a joint carol service before Christmas. In NI, many Protestant denominations had theological difficulties with shared prayer with Catholics. To have any liturgical event together was problematic. The spiritual siege mentality was reinforced by the reality of ongoing political violence, in the form of bombings and killings. So the form of the liturgy, and the place, had to be trashed out in committee until all were content.

I recall vividly the carol service of December 1992. In that year about fourteen people in the surrounding area had been killed in political violence. In small tightly-knit communities, everyone was touched personally. In this situation we pushed the boat out, and had the service in the Catholic chapel for the first time in decades. The chapel was in darkness save for a huge number of candles. People were welcomed personally at the entrance. The town's Ladies Choir (again, predominantly Protestant) had agreed to sing. Their presence in the Catholic church was hugely significant. The young Protestant co-leader gave the address. He recited the poem, *Bear in mind these dead*. Then, in sonorous voice, he slowly read out the names of those killed. We knew these people, and their families : a young policewoman, one of 5-6 killed in an attack on a police station: two Catholic teenagers gunned down in the family kitchen, while watching TV; a group of three local members of the IRA (militant nationalist militia), tortured and executed by their peers, their naked bodies dumped on a small country lane. The parents of some victims were in the congregation. It was a liturgy in which people together faced the raw pain of their grief. The family huddled around the Bethlehem manger offered us some glimmer of hope for a different, better future.

Another initiative was to explore some of the historical resentment which permeates the NI landscape. Portadown lies on the ethnic faultline. The fissure goes deep. The Protestant community are descended from the colonists who arrived in the 1610s. After 30 years, the native Irish revolted in 1641. There was ethnic cleansing of the settlers. They were robbed, stripped and expelled. It was November. In long lines they walked towards the ports. One of the most iconic events has shaped Protestant consciousness down to our times. It occurred at the bridge over the river at Portadown (our town). Up to 80 settlers were drowned. Our small citizens' group decided to organize a conference on 'Reconciliation and Memory' based on this event. Renowned academics were invited. The town's mayor participated. Thanks to the PR skills of the Protestant co-leader, on the morning of the event a queue stretched along the streets in front of the town hall. Unusually, Catholic townspeople came to the Town Hall in significant number. In a soci-



ety where silence over divisive topics is the rule in mixed company, ancient grievances – Catholics as colonial victims; Protestant memories of massacre – were aired in public.

A follow-up historical publication, which I edited, is now in its third edition. The text I understand has been used in discussion groups in Orange halls across the region. The idea of the essay collection, entitled *Ulster 1641*, was to present the fruits of recent academic research in a popular and accessible way. In this it succeeded. Irish history was taught in Catholic schools. By contrast in the state schools (effectively Protestant in intake and ethos) only English history was taught. ‘We weren’t taught Irish history at school’, Protestant friends used say. ‘We want to know more’. A ground-breaking essay was on the violence against English settlers living in County Armagh (the town where the Jesuit community lived was in that county) in the native Irish revolt of 1641. The author provided a sober, comprehensive study of the evidence. Her conclusion was that about one in six of the settler population was killed – certainly less than some of the wilder guesstimates to be found in Protestant historiography over the centuries. But it validated historical Protestant victimhood in the face of Catholic denial. That essay has become a model of how to explore violence in the ethnic breakdown that occurred in 1641. The book marked the start of wide-ranging academic interest in the ethnic violence of that revolt.

Other encounters were more low-key and individual, but none the less real. Place assumes huge importance in ethnically divided societies. As well as cultural and interdenominational projects, a whole range of seemingly banal and inconsequential issues provided opportunities for engagement with what was known as ‘the other side’. A new radio antenna had to be installed on our roof. The technician belonged to a firm with links to the Orange Order. The young man arrived before breakfast one summer morning – he had installed the ariel, and left our neighbourhood, before our neighbours knew who was there.

The technician’s prudence indicates that in the Troubles, negotiating travel was a life skill. Every Sunday at Mass from the altar I would see a family with a boy in a wheelchair – victim of a sectarian attack in the town some years previously. So, to the deep existential questions: Which barber would I frequent? As with many activities, one could stay within the ghetto. But I chose to cross the river to the east bank, the majority Protestant area. On my first visit I was laconic. The newspapers were different, English, not Irish. Conscious of my accent, I just pointed to my head, and indicated scissors. Over the years visits became more chatty. Gradually the barber and I discussed holidays, family, and discovered a common interest in cinema. When there was no one else present, we gingerly broached the current political situation. Similarly, when buying take-away food, I would cross the river, join the queue and deliver my order at the counter in a hushed voice.

Other moments were more painful. On a visit to a neighbouring town one morning, a road was blocked. Shortly after 8am, a businessman was leaving home for work. His car exploded near the driveway and he was killed. I made enquiries. He was a leading figure in the Orange movement, and had served a short while part/time in the security services. The funeral service some days later was in the main Presbyterian church. When I arrived, the church was already packed. I had to sit up near the family, in fact close to the victim-s mother. Leading political figures were present. The congregational singing



raised the roof. I had hoped to slip away unobtrusively. However, I had to wait until the entire congregation had filed out, before offering condolences to the wife, and the two teenage daughters. I had plenty of time to observe them, faces wracked in pain. I dreaded how I might be received. I mumbled my few inadequate words, saying who I was, and where I was from. Their faces at once brightened, they smiled: 'We're so happy you've come! Thank you so much for your support!'

After a long conflict – the NI troubles lasted about thirty years – violence ceases. More or less. Peace has to be built. Especially in its early stages, it involves compromise, ambiguity, resentment against perpetrators of violence, seemingly insuperable clashes over the place of former combatants in the new order. Yet there was a wonderful sense of relief in autumn 1994 as first the militant nationalists, and then the loyalist squadrons, declared ceasefires. A foto of a small boy playing with a ball in a Belfast street conveyed the mood – on the wall behind him was neatly painted 'Time for peace'. Some weeks later the British soldiers' exchanged their heavy helmets, which masked their features, for soft caps. For the first time, you could see their faces.

While politicians debated, we on the ground wondered what we could do to celebrate the long-yearned for peace. We had heard that for several years, in a village near Dublin the local community – Catholic parish, Anglican parish and Presbyterian congregation – together had worked all winter on a Passion Play. It was performed each year in Holy Week. We said to ourselves, something similar could take place in Portadown. Nothing similar had ever happened before. With peace, the space for doing things together was opening up. There was a sense that now it would be safe for people to cross into neighbourhoods which before were dangerous for their grouping. The pastors were responsive to the idea. So it was arranged that speakers from the village near Dublin would come and address congregations at the Sunday services of the different churches. People came forward to volunteer - all told, about a hundred became involved. The mix was amazing. There were young schoolboys whose fathers were in prison for republican activity; there were men who were pillars of the local Presbyterian business and professional community; working –class Protestants with family members in the security forces. For rehearsals, we moved across the ethnic and sectarian patchwork of the town, shuttling between the various parish halls. Towards the end we used the Town Hall, with the British flag fluttering overhead; it adjoined the fortress-like police station. Catholics considered this area as alien territory.

In the dark evenings of that winter and early spring, several times a week we met, as our young professional director coaxed us forward. People divided by fear and violence could at last relax. Space for conversation, impossible just a few months ago, was now emerging. Older people could reconnect with former neighbours and work colleagues - the abrupt and acrimonious population shifts of the early 1970s had ruptured relationships. The businessman, hitherto under pressure to contribute to paramilitary groupings, could exchange civilities with a youngster of a militant family. And in a deeper but unarticulated way, the drama, the tension and the suffering of Holy Week provided the

backdrop to our newfound coexistence and indeed collaboration. Every seat was taken when finally the curtain went up on the performance.

Language was yet another neuralgic point. Until the great famine of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Irish was the language of the poorer Catholic population across the country. Thereafter use of the language declined steeply. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century language revival was a professed aim of Irish political nationalism. In NI, Nationalists (largely synonymous with Catholics) resented that their ancient language was neglected if not despised in the British state. Unionists (overwhelmingly Protestant) feared that in a militant nationalist victory, Irish would be used to penalize their community. As they saw it, the language was another front in the ethnic war. Placenames would be changed. Irish would be compulsory for public sector employment. Culturally as well as militarily, their dread was expulsion from the only homeland they had ever known.

In war, the space for exploring cultural ambiguities and the rich tapestry of any community's history shrinks. The memory that Belfast Protestants had contributed to the Celtic revival was erased. With town centres being ripped apart by bombs, the rich Presbyterian links with Gaelic Scotland lay dormant and unexplored. With peace, however, cultural space was emerging. My schooling was in Irish and I used Irish in ministry. Within a few weeks of the ceasefires, I organised the first public Irish-language forum on the peace process. Among the audience were men who had learned the language while in jail for militant activity. Political representatives were invited to speak. Among those was a speaker from a liberal unionist grouping, a protestant who was capable of giving a speech in Irish. He put his party's viewpoint, including the phrase in elegant Irish, to the effect that he was loyal to the Queen – I drink to the health of the Queen! We had never heard this type of discourse before.

He shared the panel with a grandson of Eamon De Valera, a military leader in the 1916 revolt against Britain, who for 60 years remained at the centre of nationalist Irish political life - the personification of the threat of a united Ireland, the Northern Protestant nightmare. Another event was the presence of the Anglican Archbishop of Dublin, himself a fluent Irish-speaker, as guest speaker at an Ulster Irish-language dinner. In such small ways the cultural glaciers were beginning to move.

With peace, the Church of Ireland (Anglican Communion) in NI, too, was beginning gingerly to reconnect with its more inclusive dimension. About ten years after the ceasefires, the official Irish translation of their liturgy was published. This was the occasion of a launch at their Cathedral, outside Belfast. The bishop, in a gracious and light hearted way, used a few words of Irish; while an Anglican prelate born in Belfast gave a fluent address in the language. A Presbyterian Gaelic choir from Glasgow, Scotland, sang the psalms. Before our eyes and ears, the Protestant Gaelic heritage was being reclaimed.

Working on the frontiers in Northern Ireland in those years, I felt sustained by the support of the Jesuit community, and the trust of superiors. The Jesuit tradition of scholarship in the area of Irish studies has always been an inspiration. The Society of Jesus's engagement with ecumenism and reconciliation in recent decades has also provided a horizon. Friendships in various forms have been sustaining – evening chats in the home

of a local self-taught Irish speaker; a small prayer group meeting in an Anglican couple's sitting room; sharing in a tour of WW1 battlefields in Belgium with a Unionist cultural group, led by a friend from university days; coming to a better understanding of the Presbyterian story through a lengthy bus trip across Scotland with the same group. I recall two women, one Catholic, the other Anglican, who shared this passion of building bridges between the communities. They were always ready to welcome and explore apparently crazy proposals. They led by example. During the Loyalist workers' strike in 1974, the Anglican lady climbed over parked cars to defy the blockade. On another occasion, when the security forces blockaded the Catholic estate one Sunday during a standoff regarding a loyalist parade, Mass was held in the open air. At the sign of peace, the Catholic mother walked over to the ranks of soldiers and shook hands, to her neighbours' fury. In these and similar ways people took risks for peace, and new relationships; at times they faced incomprehension and disapproval. I feel privileged to have shared a part of that journey.