

ANNIVERSARY

Northern Ireland, 25 years later peace is still fragile

POLITICS

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Good Friday 1998 was an important one on the island of Ireland, finally bringing to a close the 30 years of sectarian violence known as 'The Troubles'. After approximately 3,600 died and 47,000 more were left with life-changing injuries, the Good Friday or

Belfast Agreement initiated a new period of fragile peace. This year marks the 25th anniversary of the momentous agreement, with parishes around the country, and even the Pope, praying for true and lasting peace in Northern Ireland.

In a statement to mark the anniversary, the Church Leaders' Group – comprising the Catholic Church, Church of Ireland, the Methodist Church in Ireland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and the Irish Council of Churches – described the signing of the historic accord as “not the end of the journey to peace in Northern Ireland but marked simply the first faltering steps down a very long road to a new, brighter, and shared future”.

The agreement did not change the shape of the two states on the island of Ireland, established when the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland gained independence from Great Britain in the 1920s, while the six counties of the northeast remained part of the United Kingdom. The region's Catholic minority at the time, who wanted Northern Ireland to unite with the rest of the island and form one country, faced discrimination in terms of voting rights, housing allocation and fair employment.

The Protestant-dominated parliament in Belfast rejected calls for reform in the 1960s, and violent attacks on Catholic civil rights demonstrators by security forces sowed the seeds of 'The Troubles' conflict that began in 1968. What made the Good Friday agreement so momentous was that it acknowledged that the right for the region to remain part of Britain or to join a united Ireland were equally valid political aspirations. It committed all sides to pursue their ends by purely peaceful means. No longer would the future of the North be determined by the gun; the ballot box had been given its proper place, presaging 25 years of fragile peace. The agreement also established a cross-community power-sharing government, which is obligated to make decisions supported by the majority of both the Protestant and Catholic communities.

However, as the Primate of All Ireland Archbishop Eamon Martin wrote in *The Irish Catholic* on April 13, there “remains too much anger, resentment, pain, distrust and blame within and between our communities... In neighbourhoods with multiple deprivations, including the highest levels of child poverty and destitution, self-harm and suicide – those very communities which were most impacted by paramilitary activity and security force presence during the conflict – there is little to celebrate by way of a peace ‘dividend’”.

The Good Friday agreement laid the foundations for a peaceful resolution to the problems posed by the North's political divide, between 'Republicans' who favour joining

the Republic of Ireland and 'Unionists', who cling on to its place in Great Britain. But it did not solve the problems sown either by the violence of the previous 30 years, or by this unique political situation.

As it stands, peace in the North is fragile. On the ground, this Easter week has seen dissident republicans bomb a police van. On the other side, every summer, unionist parades and bonfires proclaim a sectarian mantra, with controversies surrounding the burning of the Irish tricolour, images of politicians and even the Pope. A thousand sectarian crimes are reported every year in the region, while attacks on churches of both denominations number in the hundreds.

At the political level, the waters are equally murky and tense. The North's parliament – called the Northern Assembly – has yet to sit after a vote earlier this year paved the way for a Sinn Féin (the main republican party) first minister for the first time ever. However, after the vote, the main unionist party, the DUP, boycotted the assembly, refusing to take its seat.

This leaves the North effectively without a government at a time of economic and political stress as the destabilising effects of Brexit on the region continue, coupled with a fallout from the pandemic. With fears of a hard border being established once more between North and South, the North has become a sticking point in British-EU negotiations. The DUP in particular has taken a hard line on any compromises and stoked the fears of its unionist base.

Meanwhile, efforts to address the crimes perpetrated by British soldiers and others during the Troubles has been ineffective, with more than 1,000 killings remaining unsolved. A bill going through the English parliament last November caused uproar, with former Northern Ireland secretary Lord Hain accusing the government of trying to make "some of the most heinous crimes disappear". The legacy of these unsolved killings and of the more than 20 'disappeared' victims of the Troubles – men and women who are presumed to have been murdered, but whose bodies are yet to be found – leaves deep scars in the North's communities, republican and unionist.

The political and cultural landscape is slowly shifting, however. As I mentioned, a vote at the start of this year ensured that Sinn Féin – once the political front for the Irish Republican Army – is now the North’s largest party. Meanwhile, the North’s census for 2021 revealed that for the first time in the state’s 100-year history, Catholics now outnumber Protestants. The margins are slim, but in a state designed specifically to oppress the minority of Catholics, it is a remarkable turn of events.

But as it stands, the reunification of Ireland North and South remains elusive.

Recent polls indicate there isn’t much appetite in the South, while the North remains sharply divided. All these anxieties and tensions raise fears of a return to violence. But thus far, the Good Friday Agreement, whatever its faults, has maintained a tenuous hold on peace in the North – and for that reason, we join with the Holy Father in praying lasting peace may be the result.

*** *The Irish Catholic***