

*A statement made by
four Trinity College Dublin graduates,
published by The Irish Times and other newspapers in May 1977.*

‘The Role of the Church Committee’ of the Church of Ireland issued an important statement in February 1977. It ends with the words ‘Given penitence, honesty, realism and a determination to face radical change, there is still time for the Churches, Governments and others to make a positive contribution to the creation of a society for which we all long.’

In 1691, William of Orange concluded the war in Ireland with the Treaty of Limerick. He granted terms that were generous for the age. They included giving Catholics the same rights they had under Charles II and also permitted the defeated Irish to hold lands under certain conditions.

In 1692 the Parliament that met in Dublin refused to ratify the Treaty. In 1695 they set up Penal Laws with the aim of removing land and power from Catholics.

The Protestant Ascendancy that ruled the Dublin Parliament was the Ascendancy of the Church of Ireland. So the Penal Laws were to some extent applied to Presbyterians also. They, like Catholics, could not hold office under the Crown. They, like Catholics, were forced to pay tithes to help finance the Church of Ireland.

For these and other reasons Presbyterians migrated in tens of thousands to the United States. In the War of Independence they, through their sense of grievance, helped form the backbone of Washington’s army.

But what we, as members of the Ascendancy Church, did to the Catholics, was infamous beyond belief. As the Chief Justice of the day said ‘The law does not suppose any such persons to exist as an Irish Roman Catholic.’

By our studied and deliberate degradation of a proud and cultured people, we reduced them to a poverty stricken peasantry bereft of their natural leaders. We hounded their priests and denied them all possibility of education. We therefore set in train events that led eventually and inevitably to the starvation of the Famine years from 1845 onwards. This meant migration by the hundred thousand to the United States.

We are deeply sorry for these and many other such deeds, not in the

spirit of breast-beating, but in honesty and penitence. We know that we must realistically face them if we are ever to be trusted in the future. We know of many other situations in the world where an honest and penitent facing of the facts, instead of excusing ourselves, could lead to 'the creation of a society for which we all long.' It is to this end that we sign this document.

Each of us has lived in the North of Ireland for a number of years; was born in the South of Ireland; is a confirmed member of the Church of Ireland; is a graduate of Trinity College Dublin; believes we cannot expect our leaders to do and say what we are not prepared to do and say ourselves.

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