

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2011/39/1899
Creation Date(s):	10 May 1981
Extent and medium:	2 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Access Conditions:	Open
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PR. 9/81

10th May, 1981

Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs
Dublin

Fr. John Magee's mission to Northern Ireland

1. During a meeting of EEC Heads of Mission held at the Netherlands Embassy on Friday, 8th May, the Netherlands Ambassador asked the British Minister, Sir Mark Heath, if he would comment on the Holy Father's decision to send Fr. John Magee to Northern Ireland to visit Bobby Sands.
2. Sir Mark informed us that several newspaper stories had been seriously inaccurate. The initiative had come from the Vatican. Shortly before Fr. Magee was due to leave for London, Msgr. Silvestrini had informed the Minister that Fr. Magee was going to Belfast on an unofficial visit to undertake a personal mission to Sands on behalf of His Holiness. At London Airport Fr. Magee had had discussions with Peter Blaker, Minister of State, F.C.O. and Michael Alison, Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office and on arrival in Belfast was taken immediately to the Maze Prison. The Minister understood that Fr. Magee had pleaded with Sands to desist from his hunger strike but Sands had adamantly refused. Fr. Magee saw Sands and the other hunger strikers several times but had been unable to change their resolve. He had also had a meeting with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland but Sir Mark had no knowledge of the tenor of their discussion. The Vatican had indicated its appreciation of the co-operation the British authorities had given.
3. The British Minister went on to say that his Government regarded Fr. Magee's visit as helpful; they did not take the view that the Vatican was "interfering". Although Fr. Magee had not succeeded in dissuading Sands from continuing his hunger strike and while it did not now seem likely that Francis Hughes, who may not live very much longer, would decide to desist, there was a slight indication that the remaining two hunger strikers might abandon their fast. Furthermore, the British authorities believed that the Magee visit might be instrumental in preventing other I.R.A. prisoners from starting a hunger strike. There had been reports that some seventy prisoners would now go on hunger strike but the Government did not believe it likely that anything approaching that number would determine to fast.

4. Our German colleague remarked that in the Federal Republic a terrorist on hunger strike had died recently and there had been no Vatican emissary sent to try to persuade him not to starve himself to death nor, indeed, had any German bishop intervened in the case. For this reason, the German Ambassador continued, he regarded the intervention in the Sands instance as "political" rather than "humanitarian". The Belgian Ambassador was inclined to agree adding that he had been surprised to read that Fr. Magee had given Sands a crucifix apparently from the Holy Father and this gesture must have given many the impression the Church did not regard Sands as committing suicide. It was remarked (not by the undersigned) that Pope John Paul II had a special interest in Ireland and presumably did not consider an I.R.A. prisoner as being in quite the same category as a Bader-Meinhof terrorist.

5. Sir Mark then mentioned that Msgr. Silvestrini had been somewhat taken aback by the tone of "The Times" leader which had been sharply critical of the Magee visit. He (Sir Mark) had not been too surprised by Msgr. Silvestrini's reaction as he has long felt that the Secretariat of State officials were taking too "simplistic" a view of the Northern Ireland situation; partly, he suspected, because of what they hear from some members of the hierarchy and the Nuncio in Dublin. The British Minister referred to Cardinal Hume's comment on a hunger strike being a form of violence; this would be widely accepted in Britain. The British people were at a loss to understand how hunger strikers could continue to be permitted to receive the Sacraments. In reply to a question, Sir Mark thought the intervention by His Holiness in the Sands case could well have a negative effect on the public reaction to the Pope's visit next year.

J. J. J. J.
Ambassador.