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MEETING WITH REVD. DR. IAN PAISLEY, MODERATOR OF THE FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF ULSTER, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS, THURSDAY, 30 SEPTEMBER 1999 AT 3.30 PM.

Dr. Paisley was accompanied by Revd. G. Dane, Minister of Corragarry and Mr. William Nicholson and Mr. William Stewart, elders from the Republic, and Rev. J. Beggs, Deputy Moderator. The arrangements for the meeting were made by the Private Office, both with Rhonda and Ian Paisley (Jnr) and with Revd. Ian Paisley himself. The Taoiseach was accompanied by Mr. Paddy Teahon, Secretary-General of the Department, Mr. Joe Lennon, Government Press Secretary, and the undersigned.

Dr. Paisley began by saying that he was here to speak about religion and not about politics. The Taoiseach indicated his understanding of this.

Dr. Paisley said the Corragarry Church had been in existence for 25 years. While there had been a lot of small things over the years, but one would expect that in any country, there had been a very serious assault on the Church, with defacement of the notice board and the Church set alight at both ends. Damage was very extensive, and the insurance assessors had calculated the damage at £100,000. The money boxes had been left untouched, but the bibles had been defaced. A fire was started in the pulpit, but, he quipped, 'there should always be a fire in the pulpit'.

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The local Garda Superintendent had kept talking about vandals. He was very dubious about accepting that. There was no liquid involved. People knew what they were about. The Tullyvallen congregation had also purchased an old Orange Hall to use as a church, which was being worked on by young people and run from the other side of the border. There had been new windows and doors, and a tractor belonging to the building contractors had been burnt. He also referred to vicious attacks suffered by the local Church of Ireland with a tyre filled with petrol. The rector Rev. Alan Sinnott had written a letter to the Impartial Reporter in Fermanagh, a copy of which he gave to the Taoiseach. There was potentially a very serious trend developing, which was beyond vandalism. These were small churches along the border. There was a congregation of about 100 people at Corragarry, with normal attendance of about 70.

Insurance would cover the cost the first time, but there would then be a higher loading. By the third attack they would be uninsurable. There were clearly some, he claimed, in the majority community, who wished to see Protestants cleared out. He also referred to sectarian abuse at children on the school bus. There was an undercurrent of sectarianism there. He would have preferred the Gardaí to at least say they were keeping an open mind. People were trying to maintain it was not like the North, but what had happened was a very bad commentary. In some ways it was worse if it was unorganised. He would like the Taoiseach to face up honestly to the facts. He did not know whether the Government planned to provide compensation. (There was not the same criminal compensation scheme available as in the North). But in any case they would secure this. His Churches in the North would dip into their pocket.

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Other minority Churches had mostly not been prepared to speak out, on the grounds that people might 'pay for it'. He believed it was better to be open and know where one stood. It was a situation the Taoiseach needed to look at, and accept that there could be a problem.

Rev. Gordon Dane said it was not an easy thing to speak out in a community. Protestants tended to keep their heads down. They did not like publicity. It had been difficult to do, but there had been so much damage. It would be very helpful to the Protestant community, if the Government came out and condemned it, and expressed concern about what had taken place. He was grateful the Council had passed a resolution. Their congregation was not doing any harm. It was not a newly planted congregation. People had stayed on. A lot of Roman Catholics had rung him, and there were good community relations in and around the area. But somewhere in the community there was a minority who held a different view.

Dr. Paisley said there was a historical context to this. The Protestant population had declined to 2.5%, for, he accepted, a lot of reasons. The context was still in people's minds and memories. People tended to be reserved in what they said.

The Taoiseach responded by saying he was delighted to be talking to him as leader of his Church and to representatives of his congregations. He knew the matter would not have been raised, if Dr. Paisley had not been very concerned. He was appalled at the attacks on their church, and indeed on any church. Church worship should be carried on without interference. He condemned it strongly without reservation. He knew the Gardaí believed it was vandalism,

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but he accepted it might also be a more sectarian attack. He was asking the Gardaí to be especially vigilant about protecting church property in Co. Monaghan, with increased mobile patrols around places of worship. The meeting had value, in highlighting the issue. He condemned and deplored the attacks. He had talked to political representatives from the area. They were all working hard within the community to root this sort of thing out, and would go out of their way to confront people. He referred to some local gossip. He accepted that it might be vandalism with sectarian undercurrents. With regard to damage we would see if there was anything we could do. He understood the procedure was it would be assessed by the Council. The offer could be challenged in the courts. If the local Gardaí decided it was sectarian, a certificate could be produced with quick payment.

Dr. Paisley accepted the formula 'vandalism compounded by sectarianism'. He had continually condemned attacks on churches. Freedom of worship was an important principle. He had been the first to condemn the burning of a Catholic Church at Bushmills and vandalism of graveyard monuments. He believed in debate and forthrightness, civil and religious liberty for all within the law.

The Taoiseach indicated that we attached the same important to civil and religious liberty.

Dr. Paisley said of course burning a place of worship only strengthened people with convictions. People living in border areas had financial difficulties. In their Church, they had a system of tithing, 10% of income. They could manage £100,000, but not if it happened again.

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The Taoiseach referred to support ~~from~~ for the minority schools. There was a strong policy of positive discrimination to help such schools survive.

Dr. Paisley noted the Gardaí had arrested two people. What had led them to them? The Gardaí were quite satisfied afterwards that they were not involved. He gathered there had been a car stolen in Scotstown and found burnt out at Lisnaskea. Public representatives did not like the thought that there was anything of this kind in the community, and there was a temptation to bury one's head in the sand.

Rev. Beggs said the police seemed to be wanting to sweep things under the carpet. They had made an assessment too quickly.

The Taoiseach said normally vandals took candlesticks and broke into the money box.

Dr. Paisley pointed out that people from the other side of the border also worshipped in these churches.

The Taoiseach said it would not be right for him to just speak about the situation in Carrickfergus and Larne and not refer to any problems we had here.

Dr. Paisley referred to the amount of support he received from Catholics, especially on the subject of abortion to which he was totally opposed. He noted that while Rev. Sinnott had spoken out, the Church of Ireland Bishops remained silent. He would have liked it if Protestants in the South over the years had caused the Government a lot more trouble.

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I said not all Protestants kept their head down and there was no reason why they should (Paisley acknowledged the point). They were equal citizens, and should not be apologetic about speaking out. I also referred to our new DPP, who had been brought up in the Church of Ireland.

The Taoiseach said all parties in Monaghan had a common commitment, and would not be glib or try to ignore any threat of this kind.

Dr. Paisley said it had been a useful and helpful meeting. He was grateful for the Taoiseach's prompt response to this request. The Taoiseach, he said, had clearly been well-briefed, and any statement he could make in the Dáil would be helpful.

Dr. Paisley and the Taoiseach had some words in private. He then signed the visitors' book, and the Taoiseach accompanied him to the top of the stairs in Government Buildings.

1 October 1999.

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