

CHURCH OF IRELAND

PRESS RELEASE

All correspondence to:

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H-Block

The Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, the Most Rev. John Armstrong has today issued the following statement on the developing situation in H-Block:

The proposed hunger strike is a calculated form of moral blackmail. And yet, as Christians, we must examine the self-imposed degradation of these men with Christian compassion, Christian understanding and Christian hope that they will turn away from this death wish device to gain a political end. But this has to be set in the general context of the human suffering continuing to be inflicted on a whole community. Violence is not and never has been the answer in the present situation. To begin a hunger strike now would be a deliberate escalation of violence. In spite of the strength of their feelings, I would urge those contemplating this action to think again. Government policy both North and South has been in the past to resist any coercion from hunger strikers. This is as it should be.

The European Commission on Human Rights' report has ruled that there is no entitlement to political status in this case, which is the declared aim of the protest. However there was also the criticism in that report of the authorities' "inflexible approach". I would therefore hope that a way might be found to offer some further improvement in prison rules which could ameliorate conditions. This was also reiterated in the Ballymascanlon Inter-Church Talks in a call to look at the whole penal system both North and South affecting all prisoners. And the interim Irish Council of Churches' report on H-Block also pointed out that the present rules were not really designed for the situation that has arisen in H-Block. The recent Justice and Peace Commission statement is also encouraging the same kind of movement towards a review of the rules.

There seems little doubt that there will be consequences to a hunger strike. There always have been. An escalation of street violence and heightened terror displays are possible. So is renewed support for the whole campaign of violence. And it will be those same people who have always suffered most who will again have

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the most to endure from the "hard" men on both sides - and all this in some of our blackest unemployment spots.

Further, all the forces of propaganda will inevitably be put into top gear by the sponsors of the hunger strikers, aimed at playing on the natural human and Christian sympathy for the imagined under-dog, with those sponsors realising that they have an ally in the scant knowledge of the whole scene existing amongst the vast majority of people outside Ireland especially. In the process truth will be the victim. Forgotten will be the deeds of the hunger-strikers and their colleagues - deeds that have shamed and blackened the name of Irishmen throughout the world. Let us all be clear in our minds - the prisoners in the Maze have been convicted for some of the most dreadful crimes imaginable, committed without a shred of pity for the victim or his family. Those victims had no choice. The prisoners do have a choice. This is incontrovertible.

So, what is to be done? It is my Christian duty to implore these prisoners and their sponsors to call a halt to any move to escalate the violence by hunger-strike or by any other device. Enough desolation has been perpetrated on Irishman by Irishman. Any escalation can only be futile. I would hope that prayers would be said in all churches this Sunday that God might guide all concerned in this situation to find a way forward without recourse to added violence.

We in the Church of Ireland propose to bring this whole matter before the inner councils of the Church for further consideration.

WITH THE COMPLIMENTS OF THE PRESS OFFICER

23rd October 1980.

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Statement by the Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Henry McAdoo

The rights and wrongs of the projected Hunger Strike by H-Block prisoners cannot be judged by Christians out of the whole context of the situation. That situation seems to most people to involve Christian compassion for anyone who feels obliged to take this course. It also involved compassion for the victims of terrorism, and it involves respect for the rights of the community as a whole to live out their lives without fear of injury or intimidation.

The question for Christians to answer is: has anyone the right deliberately to use the termination of his own life as a lever to force his will on others and to pressurise the community, many of whom may not accept his views in the first place? People's actions are not just determined by their upbringing, but have to be guided by their moral sense and evaluated by the motivation and intention of the act. Whether some adjustment of prison rules may be a possible compromise solution or not, a hunger strike is by definition self-inflicted and should not be used to take the matter out of its whole moral context of aim and intention and out of its setting of the deaths and sufferings of so many of all political persuasions during the past decade.

We would plead with those involved not to place this further burden on the Irish people. It can ultimately do nothing but harm to their cause and create further antagonisms and bitterness.

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