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## Dignity of Omagh relatives is a beacon of hope

([Roy Garland](#), [Irish News](#))

The collapse of the Omagh trial was devastating for bereaved relatives of victims of the Real IRA bombing almost 10 years ago.

Holding someone accountable might have brought some relief but instead relatives were thrown back on their own resources.

The trial collapse was particularly hurtful coming as it did within days of Christmas.

The rejection of the DNA profiling technique and criticisms of the PSNI's handling of the case seemed to feed into the puerile agenda of those who committed the atrocity a few months after the historic Good Friday Agreement of 1998.

Fr Kevin Mullan suggests that another way might have to be found to enable victims and relatives to find closure and move on with their lives.

I can't imagine he was thinking only of the civil action planned by relatives and his words led me to ponder a question posed by a lawyer many years ago.

He asked: "What has the law to do with justice?" and questioned the assumption that the legal system exists to obtain justice.

Instead he implied that lawyers fight to win cases on legal niceties even if some are motivated by a desire for justice.

It has also been suggested that the legal system exists primarily to prevent people taking the law into their own hands.

Taking revenge can provoke cycles of revenge particularly in tribal societies where the consequences can be utterly devastating.

As a consequence, establishing the actual guilt of the accused can be of lesser importance than maintaining the stability of society.

In order to prevent vendettas, the "legal system" would deliver resounding sacrosanct verdicts and define appropriate punishments, putting a stop to potential cycles of violence.

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This can only happen when people accept the legitimacy of the court's verdict – something that has been far from universal in Northern Ireland.

At times we can all feel sympathy for some of those punished by the legal system.

This is partly because we know that no person is an island and that crimes have complex origins in human relationships.

For example, many of the crimes associated with the Troubles would never have occurred had the context not been set over generations.

Sometimes this context was manipulated by those who sailed close to the wind or even managed to deliberately flout the law with impunity.

Others managed to avoid breaking the letter while flouting the spirit of the law.

The world we live in today is perhaps in some respects more just than in the past but justice can still remain elusive.

The old adage crime does not pay is, to say the least, questionable.

Given that the PSNI chief constable has conceded that convictions for the Omagh atrocity are now unlikely, what are relatives to do? Fr Kevin Mullan was, I believe, suggesting that victims need to find a way to let go of their sorrows.

Without letting go, none of us are likely to find freedom from past hurts.

The death of the one whose birth we celebrate at this time exposed the nature of much human justice.

By all accounts Jesus was an innocent victim in whose death most of those present colluded.

The mob bayed for his blood, his judges, though aware of his innocence, were reluctant to go against the demands of the crowd while most of his followers fled and the rulers seemed happy to be rid of a trouble-maker.

Yet in the midst of his suffering Jesus prayed: "Father forgive them, they know not what they do."

Stephen, the first Christian martyr, reacted in a similar way during his own martyrdom.

The violence of the RIRA at Omagh undermined whatever credibility that organisation might have possessed.

It was a tragedy but also an own goal and yet its primitive violence seemed to threaten us all.

In contrast the dignity, humanity and patience of the relatives of the Omagh victims stand as a beacon of light and hope in dark days.

This surely weakened the impulse to violence just as the words of forgiveness spoken by Gordon Wilson 10 years earlier, exposed the nakedness of the actions of the Enniskillen bombers.

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