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Saturday, March 14, 2009

Grief brings solidarity and pledge to save the peace

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GERRY MORIARTNorthern Editor, in Banbridge

The show of unity at yesterday's funeral spoke of a deep desire to move forward in the North, but all the tributes told a story of families stricken by unspeakable grief

IT WAS the most representative congregation one could ever imagine at a police officer's funeral in Northern Ireland.

The hundreds who travelled to Banbridge did so to show solidarity with Constable Stephen Carroll's family. But to dissident republicans they were also sending a message – from the North and South, from the British and Irish governments, from the PSNI and Garda, from republican, nationalist and unionist politicians – that they would not succeed, they would not wreck the peace.

It was a family funeral, a police officer's funeral, but inevitably there was a political dimension to the sad occasion too. What was unusual was that the political message came not from the Sinn Féin politicians in the church, or from UDA leader Jackie McDonald who was there as well, or from Minister for Justice Dermot Ahern, or Northern Secretary Shaun Woodward, or from any of the other politicians present: the political message came from the officiating priest, Canon Liam Stevenson, a man who does not mince his words.

"We will not lose the peace because so many people are determined to move forward," he said just a few sentences into his homily. He prayed that the Continuity IRA members who had killed Constable Carroll and who had abused the word "patriotism" were "brought to justice".

And he added, in comments that might not have been made some years ago, "An attack on the PSNI is primarily an attack on the whole population of Northern Ireland." Three floral displays in the hearse parked outside St Therese's Catholic Church in Banbridge yesterday in the most simple but effective human terms reflected what was destroyed and who was most deeply hurt when a gunman shot dead Constable Carroll.

"Uncle", "Son", "Brother", said the floral tributes. Husband, father, grandfather, they could also have read if there had been room in the hearse.

"To big bro'," said one of the cards, from his sister Julie and brothers Martin, Andrew and Simon. "Miss you and love you always; you will always be in our hearts."

Constable Carroll's wife Kate, dressed in black, entered the church flanked by his mother Margaret, with their son Shane close by. The card on her main floral spray read, "To the love of my life. I will never forget you. I love you now and always."

There was a wreath too from the London family of Patrick Azimkar, the British soldier gunned down by the Real IRA with his colleague Mark Quinsey at Antrim British army base last Saturday night.

All these tributes told a story of families stricken by unspeakable grief. There was another family represented too, the police family supported by fellow officers from the Garda and forces from across the water in Britain.

Constable Carroll was given a full police funeral. His coffin draped in the PSNI flag, his cap, glove and police medals atop, were carried by uniformed officers into a church led by a lone piper.

The PSNI chief constable Sir Hugh Orde paid a moving tribute to his officer at the end of the funeral Mass. The news that Constable Carroll had been murdered was the "phone call as chief you never wanted to hear".

He said Constable Carroll would have realised the danger of answering the call for help from the member of the public in Lismore Manor in Craigavon on Monday night because police "were going to a place where people sometimes try to hurt us".

But police went and dealt with the call nonetheless. They went from a "sense of duty, a sense of professionalism, a sense of pride in our organisation that makes ordinary men and ordinary women do that extraordinary job".

"He will never be forgotten, Kate, I promise you that," he said quietly, his voice quivering with emotion.

"This is a police family, it is a family that is immensely proud of every single one of its staff. We promise we will not forget you," he added, to loud and warm applause.

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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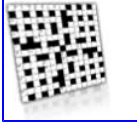
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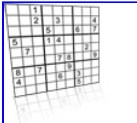
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