



CNI

COMMENT - Fr Gerry Reynolds created an aura of peace

I met the word ‘peace’ for the first time in mid-1988 a few months after I got out of prison. In terms of my life’s experience up to that point I did not know what the word actually meant. How could I? - Jim Gibney writes in the Irish News.

I was 34 years of age. I had spent the previous 19 years living in war-like conditions. My normality, and that of other republicans, was friends dying in the ranks of the IRA; friends going to prison; friends forced to live in exile; neighbours being assassinated.

I grew up with war. Peace was just a word. It had no practical meaning beyond that.

But something happened to the word when my colleague and friend Tom Hartley introduced me to Fr Gerry Reynolds of Clonard Monastery in 1988.

It was the first time I had been back to Clonard since the hunger strikes of 1980-81. Then in the company of Gerry Adams, Tom Hartley and Danny Morrison, we met, in a parlour of the monastery, the late Fr Alex Reid and Fr Brendan Maher, both Redemptorist priests, deeply involved in the hunger strikes, trying to prevent the prisoners from dying.

In 1988, the war waged outside the monastery, just as it did in 1980-81. But the conversation inside its parlours was different. Sinn Fein's mission to Clonard had changed to that of 1980-81 and the priest we met was different – Fr Gerry Reynolds.

Tom Hartley led Sinn Fein's new mission: to engage with those with a different political view of the world. (The first SDLP/Sinn Fein talks also took place in 1988).

Fr Gerry's mission was peace. And for the first time I heard the word peace being seriously discussed with republicans.

Fr Gerry was the first person I had heard speak directly and politely to republicans about the need for and importance of peace.

At the first meeting with him I was struck by his serene composure and gentle and persuasive manner. His sincere words created an aura of peace around you. In his presence, in his private space you felt a great ease.

I recall as we left that meeting Tom saying to me that republicans should not be afraid of the word “peace” and that we should not allow our opponents to claim the word as theirs.

From 1988 until 1994 when the IRA called their first ceasefire I met Fr Gerry many times. I always left him with his simple message firmly planted in my head, “We need peace, Jim”.

In his homily at Fr Gerry’s funeral mass last week, a former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Reverend Ken Newell, a friend of thirty years, said that Fr Gerry “turned strangers into friends”. He described him as a “radical saint” who challenged the conservative orthodoxy of the Church establishment. He said he was a champion of the unity of Ireland’s Christian faiths and actively engaged with other denominations. He held a “distinguished record” of being in more Protestant churches than any other Catholic priest in Ireland.

I met the Rev Ken Newell through Fr Gerry, as did the leadership of Sinn Fein. Like the priests of Clonard, who opened their doors to republicans when all other doors were closed, he opened the doors of Fitzroy Presbyterian Church to us.

At Fitzroy we listened to and spoke with people from a unionist and Protestant background who lost family members or were hurt by the IRA. Rev Newell always gave republicans a robust, frank but friendly view of the consequences of the war on his parishioners. Their story was similar to that of republicans and nationalists: a tragic human story of loss and pain.

There were several tributes to Fr Gerry. I was struck by one from a member of the Travelling community, a woman, who thanked him for his help and generosity. We learned about his love of Limerick city where he was born; of poetry, hurling, rugby, long walks, of conversation. Why use one word when fifty will do said the poet Pádraig Ó Tuma of him.

But for me it is his work for peace that sets him apart. He and Fr Reid lived to see their dream of peace forged in the midst of war become a reality.

***First published in The Irish News December 9,
2015***