

ARTICLE

“No Pope Here”: Britain, the Vatican, the IRA, and the Papal Visit to Ireland, September 1979

Martin Doherty

School of Humanities, University of Westminster, London, United Kingdom
Email: seamuslittle58@googlemail.com

Abstract

It is often assumed, particularly by outsiders, that the conflict in Northern Ireland—known euphemistically as “the Troubles”—in which some 3,600 people lost their lives, was an atavistic throwback to Europe’s religious wars of earlier centuries. In 1979, by which time some 2,000 people had already been killed in the Troubles, Pope John Paul II proposed to pay a visit to Ireland and perhaps to cross the border into Ulster’s sectarian cockpit. The idea provoked outrage from some Ulster Protestants and high anxiety for the British, concerned that the Pope might inadvertently inflame the situation or embarrass the British by raising difficult issues. But there were hopes, too, that an unequivocal condemnation of violence by the head of the Catholic Church might help to bring the conflict to an end. This article, based on extensive research in diplomatic archives, reveals deep divisions within the Catholic Church on the Irish question and points to the power and limitations of the British diplomatic reach into the Vatican. It reveals also, however, the powerlessness of prayer and pleadings in the face of terrorist violence.

Keywords: John Paul II; Irish Republican Army; UK Foreign Office; the Vatican

I. Ireland’s Troubles

In December 1978, Pope John Paul II was invited by the Irish Roman Catholic hierarchy to make a pastoral visit to Ireland. While no pope had ever visited that predominantly and fervently Catholic country, the new pope—only elected in the previous March—had already attracted great warmth and enthusiasm among Catholics everywhere. It was hoped that a visit could be arranged to mark the centenary of a supposed Marian apparition at Knock in County Donegal. In the 1970s, in any “normal” Catholic country, a visit by a new and already popular pontiff would have been a cause of untrammelled celebration. The proposed visit, however, was controversial from the outset and questions were immediately raised as to whether the pope would visit Northern Ireland, by then embroiled in a ten-year-old bloody conflict known euphemistically as “the Troubles.” Those who welcomed the pope’s visit hoped that a passionate appeal for peace from a man many regarded already as a living saint might persuade the overwhelmingly

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Catholic Irish Republican Army (IRA) to lay down its arms. Others, notably in the British government, feared that his visit would only inflame the situation since many Northern Irish Protestants regarded the possibility of a papal presence in Protestant Ulster as an impertinent and unwelcome intrusion. The public and private controversies which followed the announcement of the invitation reveal a good deal about Ireland, north and south, and about the nature of the conflict there. It is also revealing regarding the internal politics of the Vatican and the quiet power of the British diplomatic machine.

Ireland was not of course, a “normal” Catholic country. After centuries of half-hearted attempts by English monarchs to conquer Ireland, she was brought to heel in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the midst of Protestant England’s struggles with Catholic Spain. The Reformation, however, did not take hold in Ireland, despite the efforts of successive British governments to “plant” the island with Scots and English Protestant settlers. Protestantism was associated by the native Irish with foreign usurpation, and while they could not fend off the latter, they refused to accept the former. A French-inspired republican rebellion in 1798 prompted the British to absorb the whole country into the United Kingdom in 1801. However, the promise to incorporate Irish Catholics into this quintessentially Protestant state, by allowing their representatives to sit in Parliament, was broken. “Catholic Emancipation” was only granted in 1829, after the government was terrified into submission by Daniel O’Connell’s extraordinary mobilization of huge numbers of Irish Catholics in “monster meetings.” However, O’Connell represented only the peaceful, constitutional strain of Irish nationalism. The “physical-force” tradition remained alive and manifested itself in the Young Ireland movement in the 1840s and the terrorist Fenian organization from the 1860s onward. These were minority movements, however, and by the early twentieth century, Ireland was a relatively peaceful and prosperous part of the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, the desire among Irish Catholics for some form of institutional recognition of Irish nationality had not been extinguished and was embodied now in the “Home Rule” demand for devolution for Ireland within the United Kingdom. The stubborn resistance of Irish Protestants, however, to any constitutional innovations which might subject them to “Rome Rule” repeatedly thwarted accommodation or compromise. Ironically enough, the consequence was the outbreak yet again of violent rebellion in Ireland in the midst of World War I, and the rebirth of the republican demand for complete Irish independence. By 1921, after years of exhausting conflict, the British determined to solve the Irish problem by partitioning the island, creating the overwhelmingly Catholic Irish Free State (independent in all but name) and the statelet of Northern Ireland, two thirds Protestant and still within the United Kingdom but with its own devolved parliament and government. This “solution” lasted for fifty years.¹

Partition was supposed to have created a state in Northern Ireland with a sufficiently large Protestant majority to ensure stability. Nevertheless, the Catholic third of the population felt no allegiance to it, and the state made no effort to attract it. Proportional representation at local and regional electoral levels, intended by the architects of the 1921 settlement

¹There is a vast academic literature on Ireland’s tormented history. Older classics include F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine* (London: Fontana, 1973); and J. C. Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland 1603–1923* (London: Faber, 1981). R. F. Foster’s *Modern Ireland 1600–1972* (London: Allen Lane, 1988) caused quite a stir in Ireland, unusually so for an academic book, for its supposed “revisionism.” Other valuable contributions include Alvin Jackson, *Ireland 1798–1998: War, Peace and Beyond* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); D. George Boyce, *Nineteenth-Century Ireland: The Search for Stability* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2005); and K. Theodore Hoppen, *Ireland since 1800: Conflict and Conformity* (London: Longman, 1989).

to protect the minority community, was abolished. The Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act of 1922 gave the state draconian security powers, while there was systematic gerrymandering of electoral boundaries to ensure Protestant-unionist control even in Catholic-nationalist areas. There were also widespread allegations of discrimination against Catholics in public- and private-sector employment and in the allocation of social housing.

A campaign to protest against these conditions, inspired by the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, arose in the late 1960s, taking the form of demonstrations, sit-ins and other peaceful protests. The prime minister, Terence O'Neill—reformist in ambition—was unable to actually produce any serious reforms, opposed as he was by many within the Unionist Party and harassed as he was, unrelentingly, by the evangelical Protestant clergyman the Reverend Ian Paisley. The failure of the state to seriously address Catholic-nationalist grievances—other than with apparent and well-publicized police brutality—led to explosive street violence in the summer of 1969. The British Army had to be deployed onto the streets to prevent a civil war. In the political stalemate which followed, a faction of the hitherto dormant Irish Republican Army, styling itself “the Provisionals,” broke away from the organization and, in 1970, began a campaign of bombing and assassination of policemen and then of British soldiers. The Provisionals were often outmatched in their savagery by pro-British Protestant death squads, who ruthlessly targeted Catholic civilians for brutal murder. Between them, the terrorists and the intransigent majority of Protestant unionists managed to thwart British government attempts to foist a power-sharing settlement on Northern Ireland, and by the mid-1970s, the British had settled on a policy of containment.²

Part of this policy of so-called “normalization” involved the removal of “special category” status for convicted terrorists, which had hitherto accorded them prisoner-of-war status in all but name. In response to this, IRA prisoners in the “H-Block” wings of the Maze prison had begun a “dirty protest,” refusing to wear prison uniform or to leave their cells, instead smearing their excrement on cell walls.³ Over 350 IRA prisoners were living in these conditions by the summer of 1979, adding an extra level of toxicity to a situation which had reached a dreadful impasse.⁴ The murderous campaigns of the terrorists continued unabated, and the British Army was obliged to act as an army of occupation in nationalist areas. There were widespread and widely believed allegations that the police, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), routinely beat terrorist suspects to extract confessions. There seemed no hope of any political progress. In these circumstances, the idea that the pope might pay a visit to this sectarian cockpit was always going to be problematic.

²There is a similarly vast literature on the nature of the Northern Ireland state and the outbreak and course of the Troubles. Useful, accessible sources include: Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles: Ireland's Ordeal 1966–1996 and the Search for Peace* (London: Arrow, 1996); and David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (London: Penguin, 2001). More scholarly sources include: Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, *The Origins of the Present Troubles in Northern Ireland* (London: Longman, 1997); Sabine Wichert, *Northern Ireland since 1945* (London: Longman, 1999); Marianne Elliott, *The Catholics of Ulster: A History* (London: Penguin, 2001); and Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (London: Macmillan, 2003). A very recent contribution focusing on the role played by the Catholic Church throughout the conflict is Margaret M. Scull, *The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Troubles, 1968–1998* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). The best autobiographical account of what it was like to grow up as an aspirational Roman Catholic in Northern Ireland before the Troubles is contained in Austin Currie's *All Hell will Break Loose* (Dublin: O'Brien, 2004).

³David Beresford, *Ten Men Dead: The Story of the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike* (London: Grafton, 1987).

⁴Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich: Personality Note and Briefing for the Secretary of State's Meeting on 9 July, 9 July 1979, NIO/12/121A, Public Records Office of Northern Ireland.

II. Invitation to the Pope

In fact, there was some concern in British official circles about the pope visiting any part of Ireland. In March 1979, before the Vatican had made up its mind about whether or not to accept the invitation, the UK's Minister to the Holy See, Geoffrey Crossley, wondered whether the British should consider "with the greatest possible tact, to discourage the idea." A papal visit to Ireland "would underline the division between Northern and Southern Ireland" and might increase "Catholic restiveness about the division."⁵ However, his instructions from London were to say nothing about it, as it was felt that there would be a "major row if word got around that HMG [Her Majesty's Government] had sought actively to discourage a papal visit."⁶ By mid-May, there was still no response from the Vatican to the Irish Roman Catholic hierarchy's invitation, despite intense speculation in the Irish newspapers.⁷

The source of the uncertainty can be found in Pope John Paul's personal impetuosity and unpredictability, which caused concern among the professional Vatican diplomats. By early July, he had still not made up his mind about a visit to Ireland. Audrys Bačkis (the Vatican's Deputy Foreign Minister) told Crossley that the diplomats were concerned that he might take them all by surprise by a sudden independent decision to go.⁸ More tellingly, in a private discussion in November 1977 with Crossley's predecessor, Cardinal Secretary of State Agostino Casaroli had complained about the lack of political awareness of many senior clergymen, saying: "Woiteva [*sic*] of Cracow was the most saintly man, but without an ounce of political sense."⁹

Crossley received his first strong steer that a visit to Ireland was on the cards from Substitute Secretary of State (Deputy Prime Minister) Eduardo Martínez Somalo on July 20. Martínez confirmed as true the rumors that the pope would address the UN General Assembly and that it was also probable that on his way to the United States, he would visit Ireland. Later that evening, news of the upcoming UN speech broke in New York, taking the Vatican by surprise. A hastily arranged press conference took place in the Vatican on July 21 to confirm the Irish visit. The premature disclosure of news of the visit meant that the trip to Ireland became public knowledge before an itinerary had been agreed, providing immediate scope for speculation and confusion about the inclusion of Northern Ireland in the visit. Cardinal Ó Fiaich, the Roman Catholic primate, held his own press conference at Maynooth the same day, and questions concentrated on the issue of whether the pope would travel over the border into Northern Ireland. This was an issue because, like all of the major churches in Ireland, the Roman Catholic Church was organized on an all-Ireland basis. The primate's see was based in Armagh in Northern Ireland, and many dioceses straddled the border. The papal nuncio, Archbishop Gaetano Alibrandi, had responsibility for reporting to the Vatican on issues affecting Catholics in Northern Ireland as well as the Republic of Ireland, and Cardinal Ó Fiaich was himself a native of Northern Ireland. Ó Fiaich effectively stonewalled. He said the bishops had not discussed the itinerary with either the British or Irish governments or the Northern Ireland authorities and that all

⁵Geoffrey Crossley to Philip Mallet, 6 March 1979, FCO 87/885, fol. 8, United Kingdom National Archives (hereafter cited as UKNA).

⁶Michael Newington to Geoffrey Crossley, 21 March 1979, FCO 87/885, fol. 11, UKNA.

⁷See *The Irish Times* and *The Irish Independent* on May 9, 1979.

⁸Geoffrey Crossley to Michael Newington, 3 July 1979, FCO 87/885, fol. 15, UKNA.

⁹"Extract from Letter of 28 November 1977," from Dugald Malcolm (UK Minister to the Holy See) to Sir David Goodall, CJ 4/4038, fol. 48a, UKNA.

discussions would be conducted through Rome. He also said that he had no information that Vatican officials were advising against a visit to the North on security grounds.¹⁰ However, Ó Fiaich did discuss the itinerary with the prime minister of the Irish Republic (Taoiseach) Jack Lynch at a meeting in Dublin on July 23, a meeting held at Ó Fiaich's request. Ó Fiaich said that he had been questioned about a visit to the North at the press conference the previous Saturday and had replied that "no place in Ireland was excluded." It was untrue, however, that Ó Fiaich had "no information" about what Vatican officials were advising, since he told Lynch that the impression that he and Dr. Ryan, the archbishop of Dublin, had gained on a recent visit to Rome was that the Secretariat of State were advising the pope to confine his visit to the Republic of Ireland. Lynch said that his recommendation would be that the North should be included as its omission would highlight the existence of the border and would be regarded as a victory for Paisley.¹¹

Ian Paisley, by now a senior member of the British Parliament, had indeed immediately launched what *The Economist* described as a "noisy campaign" to keep the Pope out of Northern Ireland. The magazine reported that: "Mr Paisley seized the news of the Pope's visit to quote from the Westminster conference of 1648, the Presbyterians' creed, which calls the Pope the 'anti-Christ' and 'a man of sin in the church.'" Paisley's campaign was widely reported in all the Irish papers and provided the main headline in the *Irish Independent*: "No Pope Here!"¹² However, as might well be imagined, in Northern Ireland the issue immediately became party-political, with Gerry Fitt of the Catholic-nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) taking up the cudgels on the pope's behalf. And much to its discomfiture, the British government was soon dragged into the affair, partly perhaps due to the inexperience of the new prime minister Margaret Thatcher. Fitt and Paisley had clashed in the House of Commons about the proposed visit, with Fitt declaring that Paisley's opposition was "driving people into the arms of the IRA."¹³ Paisley responded that "the gauntlet is thrown down to the Protestant people of Northern Ireland, and I am happy to take it up. Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster will win."¹⁴

But it was Fitt who first raised the issue of getting the pope to attempt to dissuade young men in Northern Ireland from supporting the IRA. He told Humphrey Atkins, the British minister responsible for Northern Ireland, that an intervention by the pope "might end the violence."¹⁵ He also told Prime Minister Thatcher that the visit was a unique opportunity for the Catholics in Northern Ireland to see the head of their church and that it would be widely felt that if the visit did not take place, it would be the fault of Mr. Paisley. The prime minister, with no understanding of the dangers that awaited those who carelessly ventured into the jungle of Ulster's sectarian politics, told Fitt that no request for a visit had been received from the Vatican, but if one were, the pope would be a welcome visitor to the United Kingdom. No doubt Mrs. Thatcher

¹⁰Walter Robert (Robin) Haydon to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (hereafter cited as FCO), 26 July 1979, CJ 4/2675, UKNA.

¹¹Note of a Meeting between the Taoiseach and Cardinal Ó Fiaich and the Archbishop of Dublin, Concerning the Proposed Visit to Ireland by Pope John Paul II, 23 July 1979," 2009/135/505, National Archives of Ireland.

¹²"No Such Thing as a Christian Terrorist," *The Economist*, 28 July 1979, 13–14.

¹³"No Pope Here!," *Irish Independent*, 23 July 1979.

¹⁴*Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th series, 25 July 1979, vol. 971, col. 759.

¹⁵*Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th series, 25 July 1979, vol. 971, col. 764.

¹⁶J. G. Pilling, "Note for the Record," 31 July 1979, CJ 4/2675, UKNA.

thought that her carefully chosen words about the pope being welcome to “the United Kingdom” would have satisfied Fitt without inflaming the situation. However, almost immediately afterwards, Paisley was on the telephone to exasperated British officials, complaining about reports that the prime minister had issued a statement to the effect that the pope would be welcome in Northern Ireland. A record of this conversation indicates that Paisley said that he was “deeply concerned” to hear that Mrs. Thatcher had made such a statement and he emphasized several times that the situation in Northern Ireland had become extremely serious as a result of these statements, likening it to “sitting on a powder keg.” If the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland could not be heard, he—Mr. Paisley—could not be held responsible for the consequences.¹⁷ Fitt gleefully made the most of the situation, telling the press that Mrs. Thatcher’s words of welcome were “a kick in the teeth” for Mr. Paisley.¹⁸ They were nothing of the kind, of course, but in the zero-sum game which was Ulster politics, whatever upset one side was guaranteed to delight the other.

However, it was not just the extremist Protestant element who objected to the possibility of a papal visit to the North, and it is a reflection of the realities of sectarianism in Northern Ireland that “moderate” Unionist political leaders also took exception. Jim Molyneux, leader of the Official Unionist Party (OUP), wrote to Atkins that any such visit would be “calamitous.” It would be “tantamount to treating Ulster in the face of the world not as a part of the United Kingdom, but as a part of Ireland. This demonstration by the Vatican, acquiesced in by Her Majesty’s Government, would give immense encouragement to the IRA and its supporters active and passive throughout the world, with a consequential cost in human life in the long run which it is not possible to estimate.” One official scribbled—presumably sarcastically—on Molyneux’s letter, “good moderate Prod opinion!”¹⁹

III. The Diplomatic Machine at Work

Despite what Mrs. Thatcher had told Fitt, however, Downing Street, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), and the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) *were* alarmed at the prospect of a visit to the North. Atkins told his colleagues that were the pope to decide to visit Armagh “it would be hard to do other than agree, notwithstanding the strong feeling this would arouse in part of the Protestant population and the possibility or likelihood of Dr Paisley leading a hostile demonstration.”²⁰ But in order to understand why the prospect of strong feelings being aroused should cause such anxiety in Whitehall, one needs to be conscious of the realities of daily life in Northern Ireland in this period. Statistics alone cannot convey the misery, suffering, and intercommunal animosities generated by the relentless cycles of violence. For instance, on February 4, 1979, Patrick Mackin, a Catholic former prison officer, was murdered at his home, along with his wife Violet, by an IRA gang. On February 14, Steven Kirby, a twenty-two-year-old British soldier, was shot dead by an IRA sniper. On February 24, sixteen-year-old Martin McGuigan and sixteen-year-old James Keenan, both Catholics, were killed by a remote-controlled IRA bomb hidden in a trailer and intended for British troops. On March 20, 1979, twenty-year-old Robert McNally

¹⁷“Northern Ireland: Record of Conversation,” 26 July 1979, PREM 19/128 fol. 62, UKNA.

¹⁸*Irish Times*, 27 August 1979.

¹⁹Jim Molyneux to Humphrey Atkins, 26 July 1979, CJ 4/2675, UKNA.

²⁰“Early Day Motion,” 26 July 1979, FCO 87/885, f33, UKNA.

died a week after a bomb exploded under his car. He had been a member of the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), a locally recruited regiment of the British Army. On March 30, Martin McConville, a twenty-five-year-old Catholic civilian, was beaten to death by an unspecified loyalist paramilitary group. On April 17, four members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, all Protestants, were killed when a remote-controlled bomb hidden in a parked van was detonated by the IRA as their mobile patrol drove past. On May 19, Jack McClenaghan, a sixty-four-year-old Protestant and former member of the UDR, was murdered by the IRA while delivering bread. The following day the IRA murdered fifty-year-old Stanley Wray, an RUC officer, as he was leaving church. On June 20, thirty-six-year-old Francis Sullivan, a Catholic civilian, was murdered by a loyalist paramilitary group in his own home. On July 19, shortly before the pope's visit was announced, thirty-one-year-old Protestant civilian Sylvia Crowe was killed when an IRA bomb hidden in a parked van exploded. It had been intended for members of a passing UDR patrol.²¹ In such circumstances, it is not hard to see how the prospect of a papal visit, with vast crowds of celebrating Catholics and Paisleyite protestors, gave rise to serious concerns.

Immediately, therefore, British officials began working on plans to make it clear to the Vatican, in the politest possible terms, that their "first choice would be that the Pope did not go" to Northern Ireland.²² Michael Newington, Head of the Republic of Ireland Department of the Foreign Office, suggested that the original plan to "smoke out" the Vatican be made "somewhat warmer," with some unsubtle hints about the security implications. Crossley was to say that HMG "would welcome the opportunity of considering a request informally so that they could consider and advise the Pope about all aspects of such a visit in terms of its effect upon the two communities in Northern Ireland and their security."²³ There was also a real concern, given the "barely credible" way in which the Vatican had failed to consult the Dublin government about the visit, that the Vatican might not consult HMG about a visit to the North. As Newington explained: "This would place us in a most embarrassing position, not least vis-à-vis Dr Paisley."²⁴

Crossley met his Vatican contacts on the evening of Thursday July 26 and was told that the pope did not intend and had never intended to visit Northern Ireland. The Duke of Norfolk confirmed that he had heard the same thing from Bruno Heim, the apostolic delegate to Great Britain, so "that was that."²⁵ However, the attention of British officials now turned to anxiety about what the pope might say and who he might meet on his visit to the Republic of Ireland, and their plans to influence him reveal a good deal about the workings of the Whitehall information-management machine.

In early August, John Marshall of the NIO sent an intriguing memorandum to his superior Ken Stowe. In it, he urges action, "since no doubt drafts of speeches will already be gestating in Rome." Marshall argues that while it is unlikely that the pope will say anything touching on the political problems flowing from partition, "there must remain a possibility that, under the guidance of the Papal Nuncio in Dublin

²¹Malcolm Sutton, "An Index of Deaths from the Conflict in Ireland," CAIN Web Service, CAIN Archive – Conflict and Politics in Northern Ireland, <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/sutton/chron/1979.html>.

²²Michael Newington to Ewen Fergusson, 23 July 1979, FCO 87/885, fol. 23, UKNA.

²³Michael Newington to Ewen Fergusson, 26 July 1979, CJ 87/885, fol. 31, UKNA.

²⁴Michael Newington to Ewen Fergusson, 25 July 1979, FCO 87/885, fol. 29, UKNA.

²⁵David Brooker, "Note for the Record," 31 July 1979, CJ 4/2675, UKNA.

(or his own Irish assistant in Rome) he may be persuaded to use some carefully composed form of words which proves capable of being interpreted as in favour of Irish unity; and this could provoke Protestant feeling in the North. We must guard against this.²⁶ The pope's "Irish assistant" was Fr. John Magee, a native of Newry, a staunchly nationalist town in Northern Ireland.

Marshall's memorandum goes on to suggest that the one thing the pope is most likely to do is to condemn violence. Marshall argues: "We should consider if there is anything we can do to influence such a statement so as to make it positively helpful to us." He also expresses concern about what the pope might say that would be damaging to Britain's case and wants to seek ways to stop him, writing: "The most emotive area on which he might trespass is human rights. Allegations of ill-treatment by the RUC are credited in places other than Ireland; and the H-Blocks are always a good issue—and we know that Cardinal Ó Fiaich is less than well-disposed towards us on that problem. We therefore need to head off trouble." Marshall then goes on to set out a list of "important facts" about the Northern Ireland situation "to ensure the Pope (or his immediate advisers) do not slip, from ignorance, into saying unhelpful things." However, in addition to seeking to acquaint the pope with these "facts," Marshall goes further, suggesting:

If he makes any reference to the political scene, the Pope should bear in mind the likely reaction of the Protestants in the North. Thus, a plug by him for Irish unity could only set back the chances of achieving it. . . . If he condemns violence . . . it would be the more helpful the more he is able to sharpen and narrow the point of what he says. Thus, a condemnation of violence *engaged in for political ends* would be more valuable than a more general statement; and if he were willing to speak against those who help, assist, comfort, support the terrorist, *whether actively or by passively failing to co-operate* with those forces who risk their lives to protect all members of the community, that would be better still.²⁷

In short, the NIO was hoping that the pope would not just condemn terrorism but enjoin his flock to support the police and the criminal justice system, both of which they profoundly distrusted.

On the question of channels, Marshall agreed with Crossley's suggestion that the normal diplomatic channels should be used to convey "factual information." However, in his memorandum, he suggests using the apostolic delegate to the United Kingdom, Archbishop Heim, to urge the pope not to say anything in support of Irish unity and instead stick to condemning violence and, if possible, garner support for the security forces. Archbishop Heim, writes Marshall, is "a man very sympathetic to HMG on Northern Ireland."²⁸ However, other officials were concerned about what would happen should the public become aware of what they were up to. The FCO's Alan Free-Gore, for example, wrote: "A difficulty is that unless approaches were made with extreme care, they could backlash. If there were a leak that we were trying to influence the Pope over any statements he might make about Northern Ireland,

²⁶John Marshall to Ken Stowe, 6 August 1979, CJ 4/2675, UKNA.

²⁷John Marshall to Ken Stowe, 6 August 1979, CJ 4/2675, UKNA.

²⁸John Marshall to Ken Stowe, 6 August 1979, CJ 4/2675, UKNA.

we would be laying ourselves open to our critics throughout Ireland and in the United States.”²⁹

Anxieties continued to grow in the NIO and the FCO. Ken Stowe of the NIO described the pressure to arrange a visit to the North as being “uncomfortably consistent.” It became apparent that, while Crossley was able to get assurances from senior members of the Vatican Secretariat that the position had not changed, as Assistant Undersecretary for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Ewen Fergusson wrote at the time: “They do not themselves have complete control over what the Pope says and does!”³⁰ Similarly, in earlier correspondence, Crossley had told Fergusson of his growing impression that the pope “keeps the Curia guessing even at the very top, and I sense an uneasy feeling on their part that with this independent and unbureaucratic Pope, who sometimes disregards their rules and procedures, they are never absolutely sure that they are fully in the picture.” Crossley went on to state his concerns about the sources of the Pope’s information about Ireland, writing: “This leaves me with the unsatisfactory feeling that there can be no guarantee that the Pope might not occasionally strike off at an independent tangent and it is to be feared that he is exposed to an emotional and not necessarily unbiased view of Irish affairs in his contacts with Ó Fiaich, his private secretary, Magee (who comes from Newry in Northern Ireland), and the Papal Nuncio in Dublin, whose blinkered views are known to us.” Crossley also writes that a source of optimism for him is that his main contacts in the Vatican, Secretary of State Casaroli, Achille Silvestrini (the Head of the Council of Public Affairs of the Church), and his deputy Bačkis, “are all very sound on the Irish problem and are very good friends of ours.” Crossley had been assured that the pope would ask for briefs and would use them: “It is to be hoped that he will stick to them. It is here that the information fed in by the Apostolic Delegate Heim and this Legation should exert its influence.”³¹

IV. Heim vs. Alibrandi

The references to the papal nuncio, Alibrandi, in Dublin and to the apostolic delegate, Bruno Heim, are significant here, since the relationships between and activities of these two senior Roman Catholic diplomats undermine the common assumption that the Vatican is an ideological monolith with a single world view. Alibrandi was an experienced Vatican diplomat who had been based in Dublin since 1969. However, he had a very bad reputation amongst British diplomats and politicians who regarded him as anti-British and effectively pro-IRA. Back in 1976, Alibrandi had been described by John Hickman of the British Embassy in Dublin as “politically irredeemable,” “an unimpressive and (in English) extremely inarticulate Italian” with a “dim personality.”³² In May 1978, J. D. W. Janes of the NIO described him as a “card carrying member of PIRA.”³³ There were also concerns about Alibrandi’s closeness to supporters of the IRA H-Block protestors in the Maze prison and about the interpretation of the protest being transmitted by Alibrandi to the Vatican. For instance, in February 1978, he had received a delegation from the Relatives Action Committee from Belfast and had

²⁹ Alan Free-Gore to Ronald Nash, 6 August 1979, FCO 87/885, fol. 70, UKNA.

³⁰ Ewen Fergusson to Republic of Ireland Department, 29 August 1979, FCO 87/887, fol. 90, UKNA.

³¹ Geoffrey Crossley to Ewen Fergusson, 23 August 1979, FCO 87/887, fol. 92a, UKNA.

³² John Hickman to FCO, 29 September 1979, CJ 4/4038, fol. 16, UKNA.

³³ “Lunch with Apostolic Delegate,” 10 May 1978, CJ 4/4038, fol. 72, UKNA.

promised to deliver a petition on their behalf to the Pope.³⁴ However, Alibrandi was also a source of embarrassment for the government of the republic. One Irish diplomat (assumed by British officials to be David Donoghue of the Irish Mission to the Holy See) apparently said that Alibrandi was an “out and out Provisional” who had played a key role in the appointment of the unashamedly nationalist Archbishop Ó Fiaich.³⁵ According to former Irish diplomat Sean Donlon, Alibrandi had been in contact with leading IRA men and had even given sanctuary to IRA members “on the run” in his nunciature. Representations were made to the Holy See about moving Alibrandi from Dublin, but to no avail.³⁶

Bruno Heim was a very different character and had long since been regarded as a useful ally by the British. Along with Crossley, and to a lesser extent Cardinal Basil Hume, Heim was regarded by the British as their key link to the Vatican. Heim, a Swiss national, was a highly experienced diplomat who had been appointed apostolic delegate in London in July 1973. At this time, the United Kingdom did not have full diplomatic relations with the Vatican, so Heim did not have the status of an ambassador. Nor did he have any responsibility for ecclesiastical matters in any part of Ireland. However, he had already proved useful to the British in the past. Heim had three times met Atkins’s predecessor, Roy Mason, first with Cardinal Basil Hume on July 6, 1977, again—this time alone—on February 15, 1978, and then a final time with Hume and other Catholic worthies on April 26, 1978. The first meeting followed the death of Cardinal Conway (in April 1977) and was arranged to enable the British government to informally convey to the Roman Catholic Church their views on the qualities they thought were needed in a new archbishop at Armagh “and to seek to influence choice.”³⁷ However, Ó Fiaich was appointed by the Vatican in August and quickly irked the British with his outspoken support for a British declaration of intent to withdraw from Northern Ireland. Heim told Mason that, while he had formed a favorable impression of Ó Fiaich in human terms, “he had been distressed by the intervention into the controversial, political sphere.” Heim offered “to help in any way which HMG thought would be useful” and later told an official that he was “concerned to brief the Holy See fully on HMG’s views, since it was his impression that the Papal Nuncio in the Republic inevitably saw the situation from the perspective of Dublin.”³⁸ And while there was some anxiety in the NIO that Alibrandi and Ó Fiaich might take exception to the NIO setting up Heim as “an alternative channel to the Vatican,” the prevailing view appeared to be, in the words of Janes of the NIO: “We owe nothing to Alibrandi. We need have no qualms about cooperating with Heim if he is willing to be helpful. The Irish exploit the situation.”³⁹

There was further trouble in August 1978 when Ó Fiaich visited the Maze prison and expressed publicly his revulsion at the conditions there without making it clear that the prisoners themselves were responsible for them. The NIO sent briefings prepared for

³⁴“Lunch with Apostolic Delegate,” 26 April 1978, CJ 4/4038, UKNA.

³⁵P. J. Goulden, “Extract from Note of Meeting with Dennis Kennedy – Diplomatic Correspondent of the Irish Times,” 1 March 1978, CJ 4/4038, fol. 60/2, UKNA.

³⁶Catherine Pepinster, *The Keys and the Kingdom: The British and the Papacy from John Paul II to Francis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 144.

³⁷“Meeting with Apostolic Delegate,” 15 February 1978, CJ 4/4038, fol. 56, UKNA.

³⁸“Note of a Meeting between the Secretary of State and the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Heim – House of Commons,” 15 February 1978, CJ 4/4038, fol. 57, UKNA.

³⁹Geoffrey Cowling to A. P. Wilson, 24 February 1978, with marginalia by J. D. W. Janes, CJ 4/4038 f58, UKNA.

members of Parliament on the prison protest to Heim since, as Private Secretary M. W. Hopkins explained: "Mr Mason is most anxious that the Roman Catholic authorities should be fully aware of the true position regarding the situation in the Maze Prison."⁴⁰ Heim passed these to the Vatican and claimed to have "twice recently informed the Vatican of the true state of affairs and that the situation in the Maze was created entirely by the men themselves." He claimed also that from time to time pressure was applied on the Vatican to intervene in the prisons issue and that they invariably sought advice from him. He had consistently advised them not to become involved.⁴¹

But now because of the pope's visit and what the British regarded as the malign influence of Alibrandi and Ó Fiaich, Heim was needed more than ever. Moreover, the concerns of British officials were not assuaged by an August 9, 1979 press release from the National Organising Committee for the visit which referred ambiguously to a "working hypothesis" that the visit would include a "site in the Armagh province," which of course, straddled the border.⁴² According to a letter from Crossley to the FCO, there was even greater alarm later in the month at the reported comments of Cardinal Alibrandi on the lines that it was "more than probable that the Holy Father will visit Northern Ireland. As a Pole who has suffered so much, the Pope is interested in the suffering of others and wishes to give encouragement to all people suffering from oppression." Crossley reported that he had immediately made contact with the Vatican foreign minister, Monsignor Achille Silvestrini, who was reportedly "extremely angry" at what he heard, saying that, if such a statement had been made as reported, it was "incredible and a stupidity." Silvestrini had apologized to Crossley for the fact that a diplomatic representative of the Holy See had made an unauthorized statement outside his competence on so delicate an issue. Crossley reported in the letter that he had told Silvestrini that the parallel with Poland was totally misleading since one of the basic facts of the problem in Northern Ireland was that the majority there insisted on the British presence. Silvestrini had "agreed entirely" and had asked Crossley to refrain from communicating with London until he could find out the result of Casaroli's discussion with the pope the previous day (August 23). Two hours later, however, the situation was more fluid. There was a feeling in Ireland, Silvestrini had said to Crossley, that for the Pope to go to a point in the diocese of Armagh without going to its seat would be like going to Ostia without going to Rome. Moreover, an invitation for the pope to visit Armagh had that morning reached the Vatican from the Anglican bishop of Armagh. Silvestrini had said that he thought this curious, but it did seem to indicate that there was almost an agreement on the spot between Anglicans and Catholics. Silvestrini had stressed that the visit to Ireland would be on the religious plane and would urge pacification and reconciliation. In response, Crossley had expressed hope that there was no danger of an announcement of any wish to visit the North without prior consultation with the British government. Silvestrini had agreed and said Casaroli had instructed Ó Fiaich to make no statement. He had repeated that, up to the previous day, he had had no inkling of any change "but that he had not expected the Nuncio in Dublin to twist the Vatican's elbow." Casaroli had indicated that he would be reprimanding Alibrandi. "But," Silvestrini had said, "given the climate in Dublin the Vatican must study the situation with Ó Fiaich and Crossley would at

⁴⁰M. W. Hopkins to Bruno Heim, 1 August 1978, CJ 4/4038, fol. 75, UKNA.

⁴¹J. D. W. Janes to Private Secretary/Secretary of State, 2 August 1978, CJ 4/4038, UKNA.

⁴²David Blunt to UK Embassy Dublin, 10 August 1979, FCO 87/885, UKNA.

once be given priority access to the Secretary of State to hear the outcome.” Crossley’s letter to the FCO concluded: “It seems likely in my view that we shall be asked to agree a visit to the town of Armagh.”⁴³ Thus, despite the influence of the diplomatic machine, the mercurial John Paul had made up his mind to visit Armagh, and there was to be no question of prior consultation with the British authorities.

So great were the anxieties of the British at their failure to dissuade the pope from traveling to the North, that serious consideration was being given to withholding permission entirely, despite the inevitable diplomatic fallout. After all, the pope had even been permitted by the communist government of Poland to visit his native land the previous June. However, part of the problem for the British was the unwillingness or inability of the Vatican to be clear about what was intended. If all that the Vatican had in mind was a symbolic gesture such as a quick in-and-out helicopter visit to pray at the grave of Cardinal Conway for peace and reconciliation, then there might be comparatively few problems, and it would present no insurmountable security issues. However, if, on the other hand, the pope was contemplating an open visit—allowing himself to be seen by and to bless thousands of people, perhaps from the steps of Armagh Cathedral—part of the problem for the British, as was made clear in a paper by Joe Pilling (private secretary at the NIO), was that “that would present security problems so severe that it might be necessary for us to tell the Vatican that a visit in these terms could not be contemplated at all. The risks if a spectacular visit of this type were contemplated would certainly go much wider than the Pope’s own safety. Intercommunal violence would be a much stronger possibility and one tragic incident could have an incalculable effect on hopes for both peace and political progress.”⁴⁴

On Monday August 27, two tragic incidents did occur, but not of the type which British officials had in mind. On that sunny holiday morning, an IRA bomb tore apart a small pleasure craft off the coast of Mullaghmore in County Sligo in the republic. The queen’s cousin Lord Mountbatten and two teenage boys were killed immediately, and the eighty-three-year-old Dowager Lady Brabourne died the next day. Later that same afternoon, eighteen British soldiers were murdered in a double IRA bomb and gun attack at Warrenpoint in County Down in Northern Ireland. Ó Fiaich, in Rome to agree to details of the pope’s itinerary, received the news with mounting horror. He later recalled: “At one point it came through that there were six dead and there were ten dead and there were twelve dead. . . . I could just feel the ground crumbling under my feet.”⁴⁵ On August 29, Crossley was informed by Casaroli that later that day the Vatican Press Office would make an announcement indicating the towns that the pope would visit in Ireland. It duly appeared at five o’clock. The statement explained that while initially a visit to the North had not been considered, in response to numerous requests from various groups—both Catholic and Protestant—a decision had been made in principle to incorporate a visit to Armagh in the trip. It then concluded: “But with deep regret due to the dreadful murders of recent days it has now been decided not to include a venue in Northern Ireland in the papal itinerary.”⁴⁶

⁴³Geoffrey Crossley to FCO, 24 August 1979, FCO 87/887, fol. 99, UKNA.

⁴⁴J. G. Pilling to Bryan Cartledge, 24 August 1979, PREM 19/128, fol. 28, UKNA.

⁴⁵Patrick Bishop and Eamonn Mallie, *The Provisional IRA* (London: Corgi, 1996), 354.

⁴⁶Geoffrey Crossley to FCO, 29 August 1979, FCO 87/887, fol. 101, UKNA.

V. Influencing the Pope and Avoiding Embarrassment

Dreadful as the events of August 27 were, at least for the British Government, they removed the security and political difficulties of a papal visit to Armagh. Their attention now turned back to what the pope would say in one of the several speeches he was due to make in the Republic of Ireland and to try to ensure that no “embarrassment” arose from any of them. This was a real issue for the British, since as one official put it back in 1978: “An international embarrassment for example with Irish Catholics in the States can mean funds and arms for PIRA.”⁴⁷ Once again, the government looked to Archbishop Heim as “a most valuable medium through which to make an attempt to influence any public statement on Northern Ireland by Pope John Paul II.” A meeting between him and Humphrey Atkins was arranged for early September, to give time for the Vatican to see Heim’s report before the pope left for Ireland.⁴⁸ The meeting took place at the NIO’s London office on September 4. Heim immediately said that the decision to cancel the visit to the North had no doubt been a major disappointment to Cardinal Ó Fiaich, who, according to Heim, had earlier told the pope that there “was a holy war in Ireland.” He also told Atkins that he was “continually trying to counter-balance the Cardinal’s message to the Vatican.” Atkins expressed hope that while the pope was in Ireland he would “not be declaring support for Irish unity, since the Protestant community would see this as a threat and it would cause political difficulties, if not violence.” Atkins told Heim that he was anxious to encourage political progress in Northern Ireland but quickly turned the conversation to eliciting from the pope an appeal to those who used violence—supposedly for political ends—to “abandon this hopeless course.” The archbishop said that “he would see what could be done” and promised that he would “try to help on the question of the Pope’s statements during the visit. As for the long-term, both he and Cardinal Hume would continue to try to curb Cardinal O’Fee’s [*sic*] nationalistic behaviour.”⁴⁹

Another avenue of influence on the pope arose in mid-September in the person of Roy Jenkins, then president of the Commission of the European Communities and a former British Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer. Jenkins was due to have a private audience with the pope and quietly approached the FCO to enquire whether there were any points “which it would be helpful for him to make.” Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington was keen for Jenkins to remind the pope that if he were to say anything publicly which could be interpreted as support for Irish unity, there would be a danger of Protestant extremists using the pope’s words as a pretext for anti-Catholic violence. Carrington also urged Jenkins to suggest to the pope that it would have a profound effect—not only in Ireland but also in the United States—if he were able to speak out not only against terrorists but also against those who help, assist, comfort, and support them, whether actively or passively. Better still—although Carrington conceded that it might be too much to hope for—would be a condemnation by the pope of terrorist organizations by name, both Republican and Loyalist.⁵⁰

Jenkins duly met the pope in mid-September. Their meeting—conducted in both French and English—was less than satisfactory, since according to Jenkins, the pope was not at ease in either language. After a discussion of such matters as the

⁴⁷“Lunch with Apostolic Delegate,” 10 May 1978, CJ 4/4038, fol. 72, UKNA.

⁴⁸Alan Free-Gore to Hilton, 17 August 1979, FCO 87/887, fol. 84, UKNA.

⁴⁹“Note of Meeting between the Secretary of State and the Apostolic Delegate at NIO(L) on 4 September 1979,” FCO 87/887, fol. 110, UKNA.

⁵⁰FCO to UK Minister Holy See, 10 September 1979, FCO 87/887, fol. 110a, UKNA.

development of the European Community and international human rights, Jenkins broached the subject of Northern Ireland. The pope said that there were undoubtedly “people behind” such terrorist organizations as the IRA, although he expressed unqualified condemnation of the activities and methods of terrorists. He went on to say that he would shortly be going to Ireland where his purpose was to promote the spirit of reconciliation. Jenkins replied that in the republic the great majority were against violence, but there was a minority which gave passive support to it. It was this minority which it was worth seeking to persuade otherwise. The pope agreed. He repeated the phrase “minority which gives passive support” and seemed to register it.⁵¹

In addition to trying to influence what the pope would say, the British were very keen to influence what he would not say, and they specifically wanted to suggest that he should make no reference to the prison protest. Again, the activities of the nuncio Alibrandi in Dublin were causing concern. Back in July, Provisional Sinn Féin, the political mouthpiece of the IRA, had invited the pope to meet the H-Block protestors in the Maze via a letter to the papal nuncio.⁵² Alibrandi, it seems, was willing to help them. He had met a delegation from the Belfast Relatives Action Committee at the papal nunciature in Dublin on July 30 and had apparently assured them that the pope would “indicate concern” about the plight of the men “on the blanket.”⁵³ Moreover, in mid-September, the Gardaí, the Republic of Ireland police, informed the RUC that the nuncio would be seeking to arrange for “suitable parties” of H-Block protestors to get useful publicity by being enabled to meet the pope and be seen publicly doing so. Alibrandi’s plan was to get his party into the group who would definitely or possibly get to meet the pope.⁵⁴ The British were swift to act to head him off. Carrington instructed Crossley to “let this information slip to the authorities in the Vatican,” adding that Alibrandi was “notorious for his Provo sympathies.”⁵⁵ Crossley immediately telephoned Monsignor Bačkis, the deputy foreign minister, stressing the “difficulties” of the Maze prison problem, implying that it would be a dangerous subject for the pope to touch upon. Writing about the call, Crossley concluded: “I feel sure that Bačkis needs no persuading on this. I only hope that his briefing will successfully persuade the Pope.”⁵⁶ Bačkis later assured Crossley that the Vatican had decided “at the highest level” that there must be no contact between the papal party and relatives of the Maze prisoners. The pope, he said, was writing his own speeches on the basis, of course, of official briefs and was sending his texts down for official scrutiny. Crossley commented: “Since I have confidence in the soundness of the briefers, the only danger lies in ad libs and there we are in the lap of the Pope.” His view was that the pope would doubtless be subjected to pressures by Ó Fiaich and Alibrandi, but he would be accompanied by Casaroli and Bačkis and therefore, Crossley said, “it is to be hoped that their influence will prevail.”⁵⁷

The British were also able to make use of Gerry Fitt MP to help steer the Vatican away from the H-Block issue. In a meeting with Lord Privy Seal Ian Gilmour on September 26, Fitt said that any such references could do irreparable harm in the

⁵¹UK Representative Brussels to FCO, 13 September 1979, CJ 4/2675, UKNA.

⁵²*Irish Times*, 25 July 1979.

⁵³Eamonn McCann, “Pope to Speak on H-Block?,” *Sunday World*, 9 September 1979.

⁵⁴NIO to FCO, 19 September 1979, FCO 87/887, fol. 118c, UKNA.

⁵⁵FCO to British Legation, Holy See, 24 September 1979, CJ 4/2675, UKNA.

⁵⁶Geoffrey Crossley to FCO, 19 September 1979, FCO 87/1125, fol. 122, UKNA.

⁵⁷Geoffrey Crossley to FCO, 25 September 1979, FCO 87/887, fol. 126, UKNA.

delicate Northern Ireland situation. He thought that Cardinal Ó Fiaich, who came from Crossmaglen in the border area, did not really understand the situation in Belfast, and recent remarks by the cardinal had been extremely unfortunate. Fitt suggested sending a private and confidential message to the Vatican through FCO channels to plead with the pope to make no mention of the issue.⁵⁸ Atkins and Gilmour agreed with Fitt's plan, and Carrington instructed Crossley to pass on his message.⁵⁹ It read: "I wish His Holiness the Pope a successful visit to Ireland. I hope this will lead to a cessation of violence. In all humility however, I must urge His Holiness to make no mention of the 'H' Blocks, the Maze Prison, Long Kesh. This is an explosive issue in Northern Ireland and touching on such a sensitive question would alienate the Protestants and divide the Catholics."⁶⁰ The words were Fitt's own, but the actual telegram to the Vatican was drafted by Alan Free-Gore of the FCO and approved by the NIO.⁶¹

VI. Mission Accomplished

The pope arrived in Ireland on September 29, 1979 to a tumultuous welcome, with enormous and overwhelmingly positive media coverage in both parts of Ireland and abroad. The most politically significant of the speeches that he delivered was the one at Drogheda, a city in the diocese of Armagh and yet in the republic. It was effectively the closest the pope could get to crossing the border without actually doing so. The pope acknowledged and gave thanks for his invitation to Armagh and especially noted the fact that the invitation was taken up by representatives of the Anglican Church of Ireland and others. However, he made no mention of the events which had led to the cancellation of the visit. The nearest that he came to any comment on the political situation in Northern Ireland were remarks to the effect that Christians could not close their eyes to difficult human problems or to neglect and refuse to see unjust social or international situations. He spoke of human rights which could not be set aside by the state, not even for security or in the interests of law and order. He said that wherever social, political, or economic injustices existed, true peace could not exist and that Christianity understood and recognized the noble and just struggle for justice. He asserted that people must call by name "those systems and ideologies that are responsible for this struggle." But, he argued, Christianity was decisively opposed to fomenting hatred and to promoting or provoking violence or struggle "for the sake of struggle." Peace, he went on, could never be established by violence. Violence was a lie which destroyed what it claimed to defend, and he prayed that no one in Ireland "may ever call murder by any other name than murder." These remarks were clearly and specifically aimed at the IRA and their ongoing campaign for "political status" for their members in the H-Blocks. The IRA in their own propaganda referred to their terrorist campaign as an "armed struggle." Their victims, they claimed, were not murdered, but were instead "legitimate targets." The pope is unlikely to have been personally aware of this, and several sources have ascribed this and other sections of his

⁵⁸Record of a Meeting between the Lord Privy Seal and Mr G Fitt MP, SDLP on Wednesday, 26 September at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office," FCO 87/887, fol. 128, UKNA.

⁵⁹FCO to Geoffrey Crossley, 27 September 1979, FCO 87/887, fol. 131, UKNA.

⁶⁰FCO to Ambassador, Holy See, 27 September 1979, CJ 4/2675, UKNA.

⁶¹Alan Free-Gore to Private Secretary/Lord Privy Seal, 26 September 1979, FCO 87/887, fol. 129, UKNA.

speech to Cahal Daly, the bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise and the most outspoken critic in the Irish hierarchy of the IRA.⁶²

The most famous passage of the pope's speech at Drogheda was also directly addressed to terrorist organizations and their supporters. "On my knees I beg you," he said, "to turn away from the paths of violence and to return to the ways of peace. You may claim to seek justice. I, too, believe in justice and seek justice. But violence only delays the days of justice. Violence destroys the work of justice. Further violence in Ireland will only drag down to ruin the land you claim to love and the values you claim to cherish." The pope also appealed to young people not to listen to voices which speak the languages of hatred, revenge, and retaliation. "Do not follow any leaders who train you in the ways of inflicting death. Love life, respect life; in yourselves and in others," he urged them. And to parents, he said: "Teach your children how to forgive, make your homes places of love and forgiveness; make your streets and neighbourhoods centres of peace and reconciliation." And finally, addressing political leaders he said: "Have the courage to face up to your responsibility, to be leaders in the cause of peace, reconciliation and justice. If politicians do not decide and act for just change, the field is left open to the men of violence. Violence thrives best when there is a political vacuum and a refusal of political movement." And he concluded with a prayer:

Christ, Prince of Peace,
Mary, Mother of Peace, Queen of Ireland,
Saint Patrick, Saint Oliver, and all saints of Ireland,
I, together with all those gathered here and with all who join with me,
invoke you:
Watch over Ireland. Protect humanity. Amen.⁶³

The Pope's remarks throughout his trip, and particularly his speech at Drogheda, had a profound impact upon all those who heard them. Newspapers in Northern Ireland, as well as in the Republic of Ireland, carried saturation coverage. The speech at Drogheda was the centerpiece and some important developments were anticipated. "He went to Drogheda," said one editorial, "and spoke words there which cannot be ignored for they enshrine sentiments which we will never be able to allow to move to the back of our minds. . . . Pope and people united in telling the men of violence to lay down their arms. We wait for the answer to this joint plea. After it, the face of Northern politics must change."⁶⁴ The British government was also cautiously optimistic that there might be some positive political consequences from the pope's visit, which as Atkins told his colleagues, might prove to be "significant and beneficial." He said the government needed to be ready if faced with a situation they had not discussed—namely an IRA ceasefire or offer of a ceasefire conditional upon certain responses from HMG—"so that we are not exposed to the criticism that we are losing the opportunity which the Pope has, almost magically, created."⁶⁵ NIO officials were also expecting "activity by intermediaries both on the possibility of a ceasefire and on the H-Block

⁶²Pepinster, *Keys and the Kingdom*, 142; and Maria Power, "Daly, Cahal Brendan (1917–2009)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi-org.ezp3.lib.umn.edu/10.1093/ref:odnb/101596>.

⁶³"Pope John Paul II in Ireland," *Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society* 9, no. 2 (1979): 247–248.

⁶⁴*Irish Independent*, 1 October 1979.

⁶⁵"Possible PIRA Reaction to the Pope's Visit," 1 October 1979, FO 87/887, fol. 144, UKNA.

question, although PIRA themselves are unlikely to attempt an approach, at any rate on the first issue.” The officials did, however, detect a “weakening of morale among the H-Block protestors.” It was also noted that the pope’s remarks about a political vacuum were “bound to stimulate pressure in the Republic and the USA for an initiative by HMG. . . . It strengthens the argument for our pushing ahead with our own plans for restoring some measure of political life in the Province.”⁶⁶

In the event, Atkins need not have been concerned about being “exposed,” for the leadership of the IRA, via Provisional Sinn Fein, rejected the pope’s plea at a shambolic press conference in Dublin on October 2. The IRA in Belfast issued a rambling statement on the same day which amounted to no more than a grim litany of grievances and a perversely selective reading of Irish history.⁶⁷ On October 28, the IRA murdered a policeman and a British soldier in an attack on a joint patrol in Belfast. Equally perverse was the reaction to the speech from some Unionist politicians. Paisley again repeatedly referred to the pope as “anti-Christ” and claimed that his suggestion that injustices and social discrimination should take precedence over the interests of law and order had “given fuel to the IRA and their violence.” His colleague Peter Robinson announced his intention to write to the Director-General of the BBC “concerning the saturation coverage being given to the events in another state. . . . It is disgraceful that Roman Catholic indoctrination should be given through the BBC.”⁶⁸ The government’s plans for a cross-party conference to promote political progress in Northern Ireland fizzled out without issue in March 1980.

So, despite the hopes some vested in the pope’s visit that it might persuade the IRA to call a ceasefire or persuade the British government to make some concessions to the H-Block protestors or do something to break up the political logjam in Northern Ireland, it did none of these things. But it was a revealing episode, nevertheless. As this study has shown, the British were able to exert considerable “soft power” in the Vatican via their network of close contacts at the highest levels, despite the absence of formal diplomatic relations. And through quiet but firm diplomacy, they achieved their objectives. One official remarked that: “We have good reason to feel satisfaction with the way in which he [the pope] said nothing which directly or indirectly afforded HMG embarrassment.” This, he argued, was a clear indication that the Vatican, from Secretary of State Casaroli downward, had “a full knowledge and understanding of the facts of the Irish problem” thanks to the efforts over many years of the British Legation to the Holy See “and of our good ally, the Apostolic Delegate in London, Heim.”⁶⁹ Michael Newington at the FCO stated: “From our viewpoint it might all have gone a great deal worse!”⁷⁰ Sinn Fein and the IRA appear to have had their own “good ally” in Archbishop Alibrandi. But he was a political pygmy in comparison to the power and reach of the British diplomatic machine. However, this most unpredictable of popes had the British on tenterhooks for a time and it was only the atrocities of August 27 which averted for them the diplomatic embarrassment of banning John Paul II from a part of the United Kingdom.

⁶⁶T. H. Gee, “Papal Visit,” 1 October 1979, CJ 4/2675, UKNA.

⁶⁷The statement can be found in FCO 87/877, fol. 158, UKNA.

⁶⁸J. E. Hannigan to FCO (Washington) and NIO (London), 2 October 1979, FCO 87/887, fol. 151, UKNA.

⁶⁹Ivan Callan to FCO, 15 October 1979, FCO 87/887, fol. 161, UKNA.

⁷⁰Michael Newington to UK Embassy Dublin, 26 November 1979, FCO 87/887, fol. 163, UKNA.

Furthermore, as has been shown here, there were deep divisions in the Vatican over Ireland which were entirely political in nature. Heim and Hume were Catholics, but any fellow feeling for their coreligionists in Northern Ireland took second place to their support for British Government policy, to the extent of their actively working to undermine Ireland's Catholic cardinal and the representative of the pope in Dublin. Alibrandi appears simply to have been motivated by anti-Britishness.

However, the episode is revealing also about the true nature of the conflict in Northern Ireland, which is too often seen from the outside as an atavistic throwback to the religious wars of the past. For Paisley and his supporters, evangelical Protestantism in Ulster was under attack from treacherous local adherents of the Vatican in the IRA. But on his bended knee, Pope John Paul pleaded with the Catholics in the IRA to give up their campaign of mayhem and murder. This had no more impact upon them than had the mass excommunication of the Fenians by an earlier pope, Pius IX, in 1870. Like the Fenians, the IRA took their religion from Rome and their politics from home. Theirs was not a religious war but the same Fenian war: to drive the British out of Ireland once and for all. It reveals a misunderstanding of the nature of the conflict in Northern Ireland to have assumed that anything the pope could say would have made very much difference to gunmen and bombers motivated not by religion but by a furious and unyielding nationalism. And so great was their dedication to their nationalism that within two years of the pope's visit, ten of them would starve themselves to death for political status. We need, perhaps, to move on from a historiography of the Troubles which presents them as an intercommunal struggle fuelled by religious bigotry and see them for what they really were: the consequences of the actions of a small number of ruthless fanatics in the IRA and their murderous loyalist counterparts. John Paul II shook communism to its foundations. In 1979, he wasted his breath on the IRA.

Dr. Martin Doherty recently retired from his position as Principal Lecturer in History at the School of Humanities, University of Westminster. Martin Doherty taught Irish, British, and European history for nearly thirty years and was Head of the former Department of History, Sociology and Criminology. He maintains an active interest in history, politics, and propaganda.

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