

**REMARKS BY PRESIDENT McALEESE AT AN INTER-  
CHURCH CONFERENCE  
“COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY: CELEBRATING  
100 YEARS OF ECUMENICAL PILGRIMAGE.  
HOW FAR HAVE WE COME; HOW FAR CAN WE GO?”**

**DROMANTINE RETREAT CENTRE  
SATURDAY, 8<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2010**

Good afternoon and thank you both for the invitation and the welcome to this Inter-church conference, which celebrates a century of ecumenical pilgrimage. The beautiful sylvan setting of Dromantine, so familiar to me throughout my childhood probably has not changed that much these one hundred years. This anniversary gives us pause as well as an invitation to reflect on the changes wrought in one hundred years of ecumenical pilgrimage. Pilgrimages generally have a specific destination. Pilgrims do not generally expect to travel first class, in fact they usually expect to have to rough it. The company along the way and the excited yearning for the destination have helped many a pilgrim to endure hardship and self-doubt when the going became closer to penitential than presidential. The ecumenical pilgrimage is still a long way from its destination, there is still disagreement about where that destination might be, but it is after a century of tough going also a long way from its starting point. And because it is, and because progress towards Christian companionship has so often been made against the tide, it is important that we gather in celebration of the champions, the advocates who made the journey their life's work, especially those who knew that the long road was the only true short cut and that they were investing in a future they would help create but might not live to see.

One hundred years ago this year, the World Missionary Conference which took place in Edinburgh came to be seen as the start point for the Protestant Christian ecumenical movement

which was to culminate forty years later in the creation of the World Council of Churches. No internet, no computers, no air travel, just a determination to muster twelve-hundred delegates to deliver a ten volume report and most importantly to inaugurate a structured process, a road map to greater inter-church collegiality, mutual understanding, respect and unity.

A similar process was undergone in the Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council, with the publication in particular of the landmark Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* and the Decree *Nostrae Aetate* on the Church's relations with non-Christian religions. The immediate post-Vatican II era was characterized by huge optimism around the ecumenism project and in the initiation of the "novus habitus mentis" promised by Vatican II.

Those who journeyed to Edinburgh back a century ago could have been forgiven had they not foreseen just how critical inter-faith dialogue would become in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. By the mid-twentieth century however no-one could claim such ignorance and in our own century the fault-lines of geography and history are feeding manifest tensions among the great Abrahamic faiths. Our father Abraham's family shows signs of serious dysfunction, which simply cannot be left to fester. We have paid a dear price already for a world given more to death than diplomacy. The colossal and cruel bloodletting of two World Wars in the heartland of Christian Europe, where Christians killed Christians in their millions and virtually annihilated Europe's Jews, raised massive questions about the values that could or should underpin Europe's future. Ironically it was Europe's political leaders who relatively rapidly found their way to the political ecumenism that underpins the European Union. The seeds of that new culture of collegiality between once warring neighbours and nations grew in the unlikely soil of bitter conflict and the pragmatics of securing an economic prosperity that would not forever be held hostage to

the caprice of war.

Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman might not have considered that they were infusing Europe with the great commandment to love one another, to forgive deeply, to be reconciled even across the rawest of wounds but that is precisely the process these two laymen inaugurated. Thanks to them we are privileged to live in a new realm of hope and possibility, of equal citizenship and transnational partnership which though far from perfect is quite an advance on the world that was experienced by any of our forebears.

It is also thanks to them that the once skewed relationships between Ireland and Britain softened into an effective partnership and respectful friendship around the European Union table. From that altered relationship a friendship grew and a new focus and determination evolved which created the context for the specifically local political “ecumenism” we call the Peace Process. We can see in the Good Friday and St. Andrew’s agreements with their architecture of equal citizenship and shared government the basic elements of a journey designed to navigate differences with much greater sensitivity and to develop platforms of common interest and common beneficial outcomes – the very essence of the most basic notion of ecumenism though at work in the secular sphere.

The hands of Monnet and Schuman are visible in Ireland’s journey to peace, helping shift the fundamental political and social paradigm from winners and losers to winners and winners, from conflict over what differentiates us to consensus over what unites us which allows for intelligent and effective management of difference. There was also of course a relentless investment in peacemaking by, among others, ecumenists of all Christian denominations who in this generation turned the tide of history and revealed at last the transcendent power of love at work in unclogging hardened hearts and the blocked arteries of a history of sectarian hatred.

Those champions came from among the lay and the clergy, from believers and non-believers. They built the peace one heart at a time in painstaking and wearying and draining efforts that often seemed to advance one pace only to be shoved back two. The ecumenical space became colonized by many, not all moving in the same direction, or at the same pace or with agreed agendas. But here in Ireland, enough like-minded people were so affronted by the colossal failure to love one another and its atrocious downstream consequences that they became the persuaders to look more kindly at the otherness of others.

Just as with the foundation of the EEC there were pragmatics involved. Living within a culture of constant conflict is demoralizing and dehumanizing. It offers nothing uplifting to the heart or soul. It makes the economics of prosperity difficult. It encourages people to leave or to give up and some it encourages to take up cudgels and keep on fighting. The peacemakers knew that whatever about the differences of political ambitions and perspectives, the underlying sectarian fissures were toxic, cancerous cells which were hollowing out the very integrity of the Christian gospel. Making peace made sense if religion was to have a more profound meaning and effect beyond pinned-on label and superficial identity, indeed if it was to survive at all in the longer term.

Churches and people of faith played a considerable part in the difficult process of individual and communal conversion to change which distilled into the peace process which is still in its opening and early chapters. It would be churlish to ignore the prayers, the community work, the cross-community work, the persuasion, the courage and the sacrifices which to paraphrase John Hewitt, “filled the centuries arrears” for this pilgrimage towards reconciliation, which has both secular and ecclesial components, is at least in part reliant on the impulse towards ecumenism

Equally it would be foolish to create the impression that we have arrived at any kind of a satisfactory destination either in terms of peacemaking or ecumenism. But we have arrived at a place where the growing praxis of ecumenism, both formal and informal, has become sufficiently robust to allow people, even tentatively, to re-imagine once fraught relationships, to use new more affirming language when speaking of the other or to the other. It has given active leadership in challenging cynical stereotypes and knocking down old demarcation lines. It has allowed people who disagree on doctrine and dogma, on practices and customs, to engage with each other respectfully, to befriend each other without fear of being proselytized, to benignly interrogate each others perspective and to come to fresh understandings about the things which unite and the things which divide.

The structured and steady pursuit of ecumenism allows us to hope for step-by-step progress in building healthy inter-church relations and eradicating sectarianism. Like all long journeys there have been times of exhilaration and excitement when great leaps seemed possible and there have been times of disappointment and frustration as the realization dawned that this process is more “slow burn” than spontaneous combustion. Among ecumenists there are those who think the ecumenical journey has been too slow and others who think it has moved too quickly and some who think it has lost momentum and is becalmed. Yet the spirit of reconciliation that is abroad in Ireland today is a showcase of what is possible when the peacemakers, the reconcilers, the ecumenists do not give up no matter what, no matter how bogged down discussions get, how marooned they become on the mudflats of dogma and doubt.

It is an important message for the dynamics of the journey are changing all the time. The ecumenical pilgrimage in Ireland today as elsewhere has to take account of a changing local and

global environment for the cosy Christian homogeneity of the past, which was neither cosy nor Christian in its outcomes, has given way to a rapid multi-culturalism in which well-educated citizens of all faith perspectives and none argue their corner in the civic space where all are entitled by law to dignity, respect and the right to exist. Ireland's complex narrative of Christian heritage is set to become considerably more complex and no longer truthfully amenable to the exclusive label of Christian.

Today our society and our world are seeing with new eyes the urgency not just of ecumenical dialogue among Christians but of interfaith dialogue especially among the great Abrahamic faiths where those fault lines of geography and history are dangerously unstable. Are they impossible to bridge? Is reconciliation a pipe dream? The ecumenist must emphatically lay claim to hope progressed through the action that is dialogue, dialogue and more dialogue. The ecumenist must lay claim to a vision for humanity that allows us to believe there is room around God's table for all God's children. The ecumenist must be offended by the effort wasted in sectarian conflict, by the potential lost through failing to collaborate and pool our strengths, by the problems of poverty, disease, oppression and underachievement that demand the attention of people of faith but which suffer from neglect when they are distracted and absorbed by jealously policing their differences.

The ecumenist is a true missionary in today's world, like those who gathered in Edinburgh, or those who trained here in Dromantine for the African missions - they are called to be men and women who are prepared to be uncomfortable for Christ. They have to create and sustain very difficult conversations about cherished beliefs and perspectives with people who will argue back and state an altogether different case. They have to go into those dialogues offering a respectful willingness to listen and engage. They have to emerge from them, no matter how unsuccessful with a determination to avoid breakdown and a

willingness to try their best to re-engage. The most important thing on this pilgrimage is to keep the conversations alive for in that lies our hope that the slow burn will some day fan to a flame and to quote Teilhard de Chardin “Some day after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity [we] shall harness.... the energies of love. And then for the second time in history we shall have discovered fire.”

The energies of love are the fuel of ecumenism. They are a fully renewable and sustainable source of energy. We do not yet have the technology to fully harness and utilize them but the ecumenists, whether they are scholars or church officials working on ecumenical dialogue at the highest level or christifideles of all denominations reaching out to one another as neighbours and friends, they are the design team whose genius will one day allow us to rediscover fire. In the Irish language there is a proverb - giorrian beirt bothar - two shortens the road. There is no ecumenism without at least two, no ecumenical journey without company, no ecumenism without companions on the road. I hope your companionship of one another at this conference will take us closer to a world where love triumphs and arrives at its pilgrim destination.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.