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An apology for Bloody Sunday

John Dear | Jun. 29, 2010 On the Road to Peace

The event last week -- an uncommon apology -- did not attract much notice in the U.S. media. And that is not hard to understand why. Our news agencies make their livings dishing up vengeance, retaliation, gossip and violence. They stir up fear and division, peddle half-truths and ruin reputations, and stir the fires of war. And it makes them millions.

But an apology? A step toward reconciliation? Not newsworthy to American editors. Europe certainly took notice. For the new British prime minister issued an apology for the massacre in Derry, Northern Ireland. The apology caught my attention, too. I spent a year in Derry, on Barry Street in the Pennyburn district -- and I well know its ways and customs, sorrows and hopes.

I was there from 1997 to 1998 during my Jesuit sabbatical year, attending classes on Ignatian spirituality, making the customary 30-day retreat, and helping out at a human rights center in Belfast. I also volunteered occasionally at the Community Care Center in the Bogside of Derry.

The massacre took place more than two decades before, Jan. 30, 1972. A gathering of nonviolent marchers filed through the streets in the Bogside part of town, just below the towering walls of the old city. People of all ages -- from children to grandparents, probably all of them Catholic -- set out holding signs asking for an end to the British oppression of Catholics.

What they didn't know was that the British solders standing atop the massive walls were under orders to discharge volleys into the crowd. Thirteen died then and there; a 14th died shortly afterward.

In memoriam. Paddy Doherty, 31. Gerald Donaghy, 17. Jackie Duddy, 17. Hugh Gilmour, 17. Michael Kelly, 17. Michael McDaid, 20. Kevin McElhinney, 17. Barney McGuigan, 41. Gerald McKinney, 35. Willie McKinney, 26. William Nash, 19. Jim Wray, 22. John Young, 17. John Johnston, 59.

Last week, 10,000 crowded in front of the Guildhall before a large screen as David Cameron issued his apology live. He endorsed the 5,000-page report by Lord Saville, which wrapped up a 12-year inquiry at a cost of $280 million.

The report confirmed what everyone in Derry already knew and what the British had long denied: British paratroopers fired the first shot. They aimed at unarmed civilians as they tried to flee. They shot people already wounded. And they went about it methodically and mechanically. And all the more treacherously for being state sanctioned.

"The conclusions of this report are absolutely clear," Cameron said. "There is no doubt. There is nothing equivocal. There are no ambiguities. What happened on Bloody Sunday was both unjustified and unjustifiable. It was wrong. What happened should never, ever have happened. And for that, on behalf of the government -- and indeed of our country -- I am deeply sorry."

Bold apologies are a rare thing these days.

During my sabbatical year there, I asked the locals about that awful Sunday. And soon they introduced me to many of the relatives of those who died. Most of them were standing right next to the brother, the son, the father, when he fell.

The apology prompted me to take another look at my journals from my time there. On the pages I recorded the raw pain of the survivors still festering in the spring of 1998. One had told me, the British fired deliberately. Another had said, "The whole massacre came from London." Another had added, "But the British won't admit what they've done."

As if the massacre weren't bad enough, indignities followed. The bodies lay in police vans for three hours. "We want to know how our relatives died." And before the slaughter, there were intimations on the street. One man had told me, as he passed a British soldier the night before, the soldier sneered: "We're going to sort you out tomorrow."

That spring, some of the survivors escorted me along the march route and pointed out where their relatives were killed and explained how the soldiers had arranged themselves high above, almost scientifically, on three sides. They pointed out the lingering bullet holes in walls of apartment buildings and stores. It was, for me that day, an Irish Stations of the Cross.

It had upset me to hear that, in the weeks after Bloody Sunday, nearly all the priests of the North in their homilies denounced not the British but the marchers -- particularly the murdered ones -- for being "violent," for "provoking." Many, including the relatives of the slain, never stepped foot in a Catholic church again. For the relatives I befriended, I was the first priest they had spoken with since 1972.

On the walk through Derry after my tour through the Bogside, I ran into the great politician John Hume, one of the early organizers of the nonviolent Catholic marches in the North, and in the spring of 1998, one of the key negotiators for the Good Friday Peace Agreement, for which he won the Nobel Peace Prize. We had met before; he had some of my books. He invited me to spend time with him at his cottage on the sea to reflect together on how to spread nonviolence. Reading those journal accounts, I was moved by the hope he gave me. I think of him gratefully for all his efforts to make sure there would never again be a Bloody Sunday.

And now, all these years later, with the report at hand and the apology of the British prime minister, the healing can begin anew for those relatives, and for everyone. I hope they will find peace, discover the power of forgiveness, continue to work for disarmament and justice, and build a new culture of nonviolence.

Bono made some remarks about the apology in last week's *New York Times*.

> If there are any lessons for the world from this piece of Irish history, for Baghdad, for Kandahar, it's this: things are quick to change for the worse and slow to change for the better, but they can. They really can. It takes years of false starts, heartbreaks and backslides and, most tragically, more killings. But visionaries and risk-takers and, let's just say it, heroes on all sides can bring us back to the point where change becomes not only possible again, but inevitable.

As for me, I think we need more public apologies. From presidents. From nations. From the church. From everyone. Some tentative steps have been made. But I want to hear a series of serious apologies -- to the Japanese for vaporizing them, to the Vietnamese for carpet-bombing them.

To the Latin Americans and Filipinos and Iranians and Africans for funding their dictators and supporting their

death squads. To the Iraqis and Afghanis for killing their children. To the world for threatening us all with nuclear annihilation and catastrophic climate change.

Of course, an apology means hard work. We must repent socially for the harm and violence we have done as nations, and take responsibility to end our violence, make restitution, create justice, pursue healing, seek reconciliation, and institutionalize new nonviolent ways for nations to coexist in peace. But we need to understand that publicly apologizing as a nation is not a sign of weakness; it's an act of strength and wisdom. It can lead to truth, reconciliation, lasting security, and a more peaceful society.

As I walked through the Bogside 12 years ago, I realized sadly that every day has become Bloody Sunday. Somewhere, some government is killing. And so, like John Hume, we need to do what we can to make sure there are no more Bloody Sundays anywhere.

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To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn. John will teach a weeklong course, "Gandhi, King, Day and Merton," Aug. 2-6, at Ghost Ranch Center, Abiquiu, NM, (see www.ghostranch.org.) John's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, or to schedule a lecture, go to www.johndear.org.

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