A Good Thing in Northern Ireland

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A small Roman Catholic girl called Mary, from one of the ghetto areas of Belfast, was playing with a friend near the seaside on a sunny day in spring, far away from the troubled streets near her home.

"I know what's wrong with Northern Ireland," said Mary in that matter-of-fact tone all children use when they believe they have discovered one of the great secrets of life. "My mother told me what was the matter in Ulster. It's all the Protestants' fault." There was a long silence. Her friend Betty finally spoke up. "Well... I'm a Protestant." There was another silence. Mary hesitated, and then said slowly. "You are not a 'Protestant' at Corrymeela. You're a nice person, and I like you."

That simple and true story about two Belfast children illustrates the kind of communication that is being encouraged in Northern Ireland by a remarkable group of Irish Christians calling themselves the Corrymeela Community. It consists of a small number of Roman Catholics and Protestants who have been attempting to give a practical application to their common Christianity. Such people would not regard themselves as remarkable, but it is a formidable achievement to develop and sustain a program of practical and ecumenical Christianity in the climate of hatred, mistrust, and violence that prevails in Northern Ireland.

The Corrymeela Community began as an idea in 1964, long before the present wave of the Irish troubles began to layer its hatred over the green and pleasant face of this land. A number of Protestant students from Queen's University, Belfast, about twenty in all, and some older advisors and friends were concerned that the searing challenge of Christianity was being hidden under mounds of conformist, traditional worship and ecclesiastical verbiage. Led by the Reverend Ray Davey, then in his early fifties and the Presbyterian chaplain at Queen's University, the students visited centers in Europe and the British Isles to find out what practical Christianity in the world might involve. They went to the Iona Community in Scotland and to Taizé in the Burgundy region of France. The group was also profoundly influenced by Pastor Tullio Vinay and his youth village of Agape in the Italian Alps on the French border. They were also deeply impressed by his work for Servizio Cristiano at Riesi in Sicily among some of the poorest people in Europe. The Irish visitors took home with them vivid memories of Tullio Vinay and his most challenging philosophy: "We must incarnate the problems, the difficulties of men, be they hunger or unemployment, in order to bring them the message of the Kingdom of Christ, which is a message of reconciliation, of service, and of love."

Back in Ireland, the group bought a large holiday-type house situated near the edge of a beautiful clifftop in a townland called Corrymeela, and it became known as the Corrymeela Community. By a curious twist that is as Irish as the Blarney Stone itself, Corrymeela in Gaelic means "Hill of Harmony." And harmony was the theme of the community from the beginning.

Soon after its inception Corrymeela broadened its base to include Roman Catholics. No one had to belong to a particular denomination to qualify for membership. All Corrymeela required was a basic faith in Christ and a willingness to try to put his commands into action.

In 1965, when the Community was officially established at its base near Ballycastle about sixty miles northeast of Belfast, the idea was to promote reconciliation between all kinds of people, and not just between Roman Catholics and Protestants. Corrymeela symbolized reconciliation at all levels, between young and old, employer and trade unionist, Christian and non-Christian. At the opening ceremony in October, 1965, Tullio Vinay called Corrymeela "God's question mark." It was to be a question mark "to the church everywhere in Europe so that it may review its structures and task, and may be free from the instinct of preservation in order to hear the time of God for its mission in the world."
Within a short time, however, this reconciliation center, which had been conceived and established in peacetime, was overtaken by civil war. But it was not overwhelmed by that war. Corrymeela reacted to this fierce challenge with courage. Unlike so many of the established churches and churchmen, Corrymeela did not merely talk about the problems. It opened its doors to the wounded and to the war-weary from both sides. It gave refuge and comfort to the families of IRA men and to families of the extremists on the Protestant side. It asked no questions, for often there were no answers. It opened its arms symbolically, and it showed that Christianity had to cross all barriers, not just once, but again and again.

Corrymeela, however, was much more than a place of refuge and center for retreat. During the seven years since the Ulster troubles began it has developed a program of education, communication, and practical help to try to eradicate the wrongs in Irish society that were fundamental to the political and physical upheavals. Already Corrymeela has been instrumental in founding organizations to continue the work of conciliation that began in the center itself. For example, a Corrymeela conference on the volatile question of mixed marriages, which are a source of conflict and great unhappiness in Ireland, led to the formation of the Northern Ireland Mixed Marriage Association. The Association is still flourishing. Following a conference on housing, a new Housing Association was set up; it was given some $60,000 by the government to study some of the social problems connected with housing that contributed to friction. Corrymeela has staged many conferences to try to foster communication across the religious divide. It has also brought together politicians from both sides, who can talk more freely in an atmosphere of peace and rationality, and representatives of the Ulster police force and their critics. Typical of Corrymeela conference subjects are: "Ulster Politics and Christian Morality"; "The Generation Gap"; "The Two Cultures"; "The Arts in Ulster"; "Ireland: A New Start"; and "The Worker and the Church."

The Community has organized family weeks when people from both sides can meet for a longer period away from the pressures and prejudices of their home environment. People who otherwise simply would not meet can develop dialogue. One old hard-line Protestant called Johnny became very friendly with an American nun who was helping out at Corrymeela. She wore an American nun's habit, which is different from that of an Irish nun, so her religion was not called into question by Johnny. Then one day Johnny's friend from the same little back street in Belfast said, "I see that you are very friendly with that wee nun." Johnny was startled. "She's not a nun," he spluttered. "She's...a nurse, look at her uniform!" Johnny could not bring himself to admit that he had been friendly with, of all people, a nun, but his attitude to Catholics was not quite the same again. He said: "If there had been places like Corrymeela here fifty years ago, things in Northern Ireland might have been different." During the family weeks the people found often that Roman Catholics and Protestants had the same problems—poor housing, lack of job opportunities (especially for Catholics), and the awesome burden of Irish history, with all its myths and fears.

Corrymeela, however, was not content to remain in the beautiful clifftop center at Ballycastle, far from the
rioting, murder, and torture. It established a center in Belfast, near the heart of the troubled areas, to engage in a follow-up program. The Corrymeela people could meet again in Belfast to renew their friendships and consolidate their faith in the spirit of reconciliation. This past January Ray Davey, the Corrymeela leader, reacted to the worsening political situation with typical forthrightness. Instead of losing heart, he demanded that people should actually extend the Corrymeela program by establishing tiny Corrymeela cells in their own homes. So far the results have been encouraging.

Practically, there can be some assessment of what Corrymeela has achieved. It has established two centers in Northern Ireland that are a focal point for practical conciliation programs. This spring an impressive new building, the Coventry House of Reconciliation, is being opened. The building was paid for by Corrymeela's friends at Coventry Cathedral, England. Corrymeela has a core of several hundred "members" and "friends" who give counsel and practical help in many different ways. Each year thousands of people of all ages pass through Corrymeela's doors.

Corrymeela is also establishing a reputation as a pressure group, with friends in key places in politics, local government, industry, and the media. The Corrymeela message of reason, love, and reconciliation has not been drowned by the din of battle. Despite the killings, the intimidation, and the mutilations, the still small voice of Corrymeela can be heard.

Financially, Corrymeela is given a limited government grant, but much of its funding comes from its friends and through its own efforts. It is significant perhaps that Corrymeela and its people are not tied institutionally to any one church, though individually they may belong to a denomination. If Corrymeela allowed itself to be sponsored by one or another of the established churches, that could prove to be the end of Corrymeela.

Organized religion in Ireland has served Christianity badly. Church leaders meet together now more than they did before, and the media report their message of tolerance and mutual love. But this message stops short at the plateau of platitude. In practical ways it stops short, not because the leaders are not sincere, but because they are asking the wrong questions. They have forgotten how to be "God's question mark" in the middle of a turbulent society.

The Irish churches have allowed themselves to become the prisoners of political ideologies. The Protestant churches have become too identified with Protestant Ulster unionism; the Catholic Church has become too identified with Irish nationalism. Hence in Ulster today the term Protestant is synonymous with Unionist; Catholic has become the shorthand term for Nationalist.

Against such a background the church leaders are reduced to issuing platitudes about Christian charity; but there is little evidence that the churches collectively are trying to do enough to tackle the root problems that keep Catholics and Protestants divided and therefore let the gunmen in.

The churches are doing little to tackle the social sin of segregated education, where children learn from an early age that they are "different" from "the other side." The churches are making little headway with mixed marriages, though the Catholic Church seems to be dragging its feet on this question more than its Protestant counterparts. The Protestant churches are not educating their people about the immorality of unending Protestant majority rule that will not give the Catholics an opportunity to share in government. The Catholic Church has done little to make the Irish Republic a more civilized, pluralistic society that might attract more Northern Protestants to consider the idea of Irish unity.

The failings of the churches in these important areas may not be noticed in all the pews, but they are noticed in the pubs and in the clubs, where men and women look askance at institutions that sometimes behave as if words speak louder than actions. It is part of Corrymeela's strength that it can cut through the ecclesiastical platitudes and challenge the churches, as well as the world, by its policy of taking chances, even if it is misunderstood. In its own Irish way, and in the most appalling circumstances, Corrymeela is trying to answer the question "Who is my neighbor?"

Today there is very limited prospect for a political solution in Northern Ireland. The threats of civil conflict loom large. Already some 1,500 people have died. This number may seem small by American standards, but the equivalent in terms of the population of the United States would be a death rate of 150,000 people in four years of civil strife.

In 1972, one of the worst years of the fighting, Ray Davey wrote: "Very often we are asked these days if we do not feel despondent and want to give up our Corrymeela work. Of course we all feel depressed at times, but as to giving up or giving in, we can never contemplate that. It is all too easy to become emotional and despairing at such a time."

"We must realize that the gunmen have their problems too, once the shootings and the bombings cease. As support for them diminishes, they know they are finished. It is this we must work for at such a time. If it is to happen, then we must use our influence by word and deed to support those who are intimidated, and give them courage to stand for the better way."

"We in Corrymeela must be more courageous and unwavering in seeking new ways of understanding, and new formulae for communal cooperation. The qualities supremely needed now are patience, courage, imagination, and hope."

Corrymeela presses on. Its major task in the short term may be to survive. Even this requires the thoughts, prayers, and practical help of many friends in Ireland, Britain, Europe, and America. This year Corrymeela representatives hope to go to the United States to establish the beginnings of a network of Friends of Corrymeela in the USA. Anyone interested in helping might contact Ray Davey, Corrymeela, Ballycastle, Northern Ireland.