



*Ireland*

*Original filed on:-*

*Italy: PM's visit to Rome: Pt 2.*

10 DOWNING STREET

*copied to Austral sec.*

*From the Private Secretary*

24 November, 1980.

Prime Minister's Visit to Rome: Northern Ireland

During his talk with the Prime Minister at the Vatican this morning, Cardinal Casaroli raised the question of Northern Ireland. He said that he had received some new information this morning of which the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland would already be aware. This new information seemed to hold the prospect of some progress in the situation, although "an effort of imagination" would be required from HMG.

At Cardinal Casaroli's request, Monsignor Silvestrini explained that they had had a message which originated with the Chaplain of the Maze Prison, and which indicated that the prisoners on hunger strike were ready to propose a solution to the present impasse. There would of course have to be a compromise. But the hunger strikers were ready to give up the strike if their new demands were met. Monsignor Silvestrini said that he understood that the priest in question had been invited to London for a meeting with a senior Government official tomorrow, Tuesday, 25 November.

The Prime Minister said that of course she hoped a solution could be found. No good could come if the strike were pursued to the bitter end. Everyone, both inside the Maze and outside, would be harmed. Cardinal Casaroli agreed, but said that it was not always easy to strike a balance in these matters. He was conscious of the problems with public opinion to which the hunger strike was giving rise. The stress in the present situation was very great.

Cardinal Casaroli ended this part of the discussion by expressing gratitude for the tone of the Prime Minister's reply to the Pope's recent message about the situation.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Paul Lever (Foreign and Commonwealth Office).

Roy Harrington, Esq.,  
Northern Ireland Office.

M. O. D. B. ALEXANDER

CONFIDENTIAL

*CS*



Secretary of State

Private Secretary <sup>M</sup>

cc: PS/LPS  
PS/PUS  
Mr Bullard  
RID

~~c. Mr Alexander~~  
No 10

For  
Amul

THE POPE AND NORTHERN IRELAND

At lunch yesterday the Apostolic Delegate said that the Pope had recently sent a message to the Irish Bishops (via the Papal Nuncio in Dublin) which, in his view, gave a significant steer to them to do what they could to prevent the continuation of the hunger strike. The message had obviously been somewhat unwelcome, to judge from the lack of any announcement from Archbishop O'Fiaich or others, or the release of the text. Archbishop Heim said that he was obviously precluded from disclosing it in the UK but he offered, in strict confidence, to let me have an 'anonymous piece of paper' now received and attached. Though cautiously expressed, the message is clear enough: the Irish hierarchy should not address themselves merely to the British authorities (as they have up to now), but also to the prisoners themselves (which they have hitherto failed to do). Archbishop Heim clearly thought that as a whole it was a significant step on the part of the Vatican.

2. There can obviously be no question of the Prime Minister's showing any knowledge of this during her forthcoming talk with the Pope (at which Archbishop Heim agreed that Ireland might be expected to figure largely), but you may think that it would be worth sending a copy of this minute to No 10 with the briefs, which have been submitted separately. Archbishop Heim's action in sending the text is also an indication of his generally very helpful attitude.

E A J Fergusson

19 November 1980

Appeals have been made, expressing deep concern and serious disturbance within the Christian moral conscience and in the fear that the hunger-strike of the prisoners in the Maze Prison might be carried as far as its extreme consequences.

The Bishops are urged once more not only to insist with the British Authorities but also to do everything possible in order to persuade the prisoners to adopt a more humane attitude, and, I repeat, one more in keeping with Christian moral principles.

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