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NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
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Bryan Cartledge, Esq.,
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Dear Bryan

THE POPE'S VISIT TO IRELAND

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office have informed us that our Minister (Mr Crossley) at the Vatican has reported (Holy See Telegram No 23) that strong pressures seemed to be building up for the Pope to visit the North and that in the light of the pressures Cardinal O'Fiaich had been invited to Rome on Monday 27 August to discuss them. The Vatican Foreign Minister had indicated that they might thereafter contact the British Government with a specific proposal about a visit to Northern Ireland.

After consultation with the FCO and with the approval of my Secretary of State, Mr Crossley has been instructed first to repeat to the Vatican the line (already approved by the Prime Minister) to the effect that HM Government wishes the Pope to understand that if he wishes to make a visit to the UK he would be warmly welcomed and that the Government would do all in its power to make such a visit a success; but that if the Pope did envisage crossing the border HM Government would welcome the opportunity of considering a request to do so 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. He will go on to say that it would not be possible to indicate in advance what HM Government's reaction might be to a specific proposal for a visit by the Pope to Northern Ireland. This would require consideration at the highest level in the light of the specific terms of a Vatican request. He will indicate that our problems would not be confined simply to ensuring protection for the Pope. It would also be necessary to consider the protection of individual citizens. Depending

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on what exactly was proposed, a visit could easily spark off inter-communal violence in Northern Ireland in which innocent individuals could suffer tragically. There would be plenty of time between now and the visit for plans to be laid to disrupt it. The consequence could be damage to the very aims which the Pope had in mind in thinking about making the visit. He will urge that the Vatican should, therefore, consult HM Government fully, and at the earliest opportunity, and in any case before any public statement (however unofficial) is made.

We have been concerned about possible leaks on all this over the holiday week-end. In any case, the visit of Cardinal O'Fiaich to Rome may of itself produce press enquiries about the possibility of a visit by the Pope to Northern Ireland, irrespective of the conclusion which the Vatican itself reaches. Press Offices in London and Belfast have, therefore, been instructed to respond by repeating the substance of the statement made earlier by Prime Minister to Mr Fitt, but in the terms in which Mr Crossley has already spoken to the Vatican (see above). They would go on to say that no approach has yet been made and that if and when it is made Ministers will carefully consider it in all its aspects. They are instructed not to be drawn beyond this.

We cannot take this further at present, but you will wish to know that we have reported to my Secretary of State some preliminary views about our response should an approach from the Vatican be received. We would then know more clearly what is envisaged. At one extreme, if all that the Vatican had in mind was a symbolic gesture, e.g. a quick in-and-out helicopter visit to pray at the grave of Cardinal Conway for peace and reconciliation (an idea that has recently been floated in more than one quarter), then there might be, comparatively, few problems. The present and provisional view of the security forces is that such a visit might provoke a disturbance somewhere (not necessarily in Armagh) but that it would present no insurmountable security problems, although they would obviously want to consider the specific proposal very carefully. 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 - 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.

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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. The fact that an "open" visit could have such serious implications in both security and political terms underlines the need for the earliest possible indication of the Vatican's intentions and this is what the Minister in Rome will be trying urgently to obtain.

I am copying this letter to Paul Lever, FCO and Roger Facer, MOD.

Yours ever,
Joe

J.G. PILLING

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