



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

29 November 1980

Your Holiness,

I greatly appreciated the privilege of being received by you during my visit to the Holy See. I derived encouragement, instruction and inspiration from our discussion. Your wisdom and experience are of inestimable value to us all. I will continue to reflect for a long time on what you said.

Your Secretary of State kindly told me of the ideas of some members of the Roman Catholic church in Northern Ireland for ending the present hunger strike at the Maze Prison in Northern Ireland. I explained the deep concern of the Government at the implications of the hunger strike, which can bring no benefit to those involved and threatens to bring violence and bloodshed to the people of Northern Ireland. I also explained why we are firmly resolved that it would be utterly wrong to take any steps which conceded that political motives can excuse murder or other serious crimes. We are now greatly encouraged, however, by the statement that has been made by Cardinal O'Fiaich and his episcopal colleagues. They have made an impassioned plea to the hunger strikers to give up a claim that has no moral justification and to desist from a course that can so gravely imperil the life and safety of others. We must all devoutly hope that the Bishops' prayer will move all those who have any influence in the matter to strive to bring an end to the present dangers.

It is in that light that the Government approaches the initiative taken by two of the chaplains at the Maze prison, to which your Secretary of State referred. We have now heard

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their ideas in full detail. We appreciate their earnest concern that there shall be no loss of life. But the package of concessions they have in mind would give both the protesters in the prison and the people of Northern Ireland cause to believe that the terrorist prisoners were being granted political status. The hunger strikers and the Provisional Irish Republican Army would be quick to claim a victory. This would disastrously undermine the aspirations of the Bishops for an end to the violence. HM Minister to the Holy See will be able to explain more fully why we have to take the view that it would be wrong to make these concessions.

The Government does however take most seriously its own responsibility for the care of prisoners and its obligation (as the Bishops remind us) to keep prison regimes under continuing review. I assured you in my message of 13 November that we shall approach the problem with flexibility and fairness in a genuinely humanitarian spirit, and will be quick to grasp any practical opportunity to ease the situation. We remain committed to that.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity  
of meeting and talking with you.

Yours sincerely,

Rapaceur Maliba

His Holiness Pope John Paul II

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