

# The Forces which change history are those which change the hearts of men

President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, at the Rimini Meeting, 22nd August 2010

Dia dhíbh a chairde go léir,

É un privilegio essere qui a Rimini per il Meeting e un onore potermi rivolgere a voi oggi.

I thank John Waters for his kind introduction, I thank the organisers and all of you who have come to Rimini to be part of this great gathering which seeks to make friends of strangers across the many faultlines of difference and diversity. You meet here determined to build bridges of respectful curiosity to one another in a world too often content to build bunkers and to dangerously demonise the otherness of others. You come here because you believe that human beings are capable of softening their hearts of stone and changing the direction of the history we humans make, from darkness to light. Experience tells us that humankind has often convulsed human history through great evil and even appalling indifference. But here in Rimini we believe that the goodness and greatness that humankind is capable of, are not only more powerful than the depravity of which we are also capable, but that our fullest human destiny remains unfulfilled for as long as we are victims or practitioners of the cultures of demonisation.

This afternoon I want to look at the story of Ireland and at the forces which are currently changing our longstanding history of political and sectarian conflict to consensus and good neighbourliness.

Ireland's first President Douglas Hyde said:

"Hatred is a negative passion. It is a powerful, a very powerful destroyer; but it is useless for building up. Love on the other hand is like faith; it can move mountains and faith we have mountains to move."

Ireland had endured a mountain of unhappy history which had resulted in a very dysfunctional set of relationships within the island and between Ireland and Great Britain. Though all the protagonists were notionally Christians the rancour between Protestant and Catholic, between Irish Nationalist and British Unionist was toxic and transmitted from generation to generation over centuries. It is no accident that the movement to address that dysfunction prospered better in the twentieth century than similar efforts in earlier generations. My generation was the first to have benefitted from widened access to education, the first to grow up with the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaiming the dignity and right to equality of all humankind, the first to be born after the outrageous wasteful slaughter of two World Wars, the first to see the world of old empires crumble and fade and the idea of democracy take hold across the world.

Ireland joined the European Union, that remarkable adventure in partnership between nations which had for centuries engaged in war with one another. Until then we had all lived deep within cultures of mutual demonisation but now the dynamic had changed, had been made to change and those changes had at their core a determined reconciliation between nations, a respect for the sovereignty of each member state, an assertion of the innate dignity of the individual and a commitment to build a Europe which vindicated and championed human rights. Some see the force that gave birth to the European Union as an intelligent, ethical, humane pragmatism, as much motivated by longterm self interest as altruism. Others see it as the praxis of the discipline of love, of care for one's neighbour as oneself but a special kind of love, one that sought the truth no matter how uncomfortable and beyond that truth and its vindication, sought reconciliation.

There is an untold story of billions of daily acts of loving kindness and generosity that make life tolerable when nature and human nature conspire to make it difficult. These are our bulwark against life's vicissitudes, our source of comfort, compassion, inspiration and courage. We rely on them for hope and faith in humanity. But the dynamic between nations and between distinctive interest groups within nations, showed time and again that many of us lived with dangerous estrangements where our capacity to care for others was switched off at the point where we intersected with those

whom we rightly or wrongly demonised. The founding Treaties of the European Union set out to reverse that baleful dynamic. The people of contemporary Ireland, Northern Ireland and Great Britain have also made an honourable effort in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 to move beyond the self-repeating cycle of history's accumulated hurts to a landscape of fresh relationships which can offer freedom, justice, equality and peace to all.

The founding Treaties of the Union and the Good Friday Agreement were not just a bundle of lofty, aspirational sentences. Each word, each concept was hammered out on the anvil of often bitter discussion. They created a template for thinking and also for action. Each set up complex and dense machinery, institutions, laws, structures to breathe life every day into the agreed ambitions, principles and values. They created engines of endeavour which would take control of the rudder of history and ensure it was no longer left to the caprice of human nature's darker and more malign forces. The voices of the demonisers would be shamed and tamed by the outworking of institutional architectures which insisted on respect for all, representation for all and the inclusion of all. Thus both the European Union Treaties and the

Good Friday Agreement are underpinned by respect for democratic dialogue and human rights, the equality of each citizen and the right to vindication of that equality. Most important of all, they are underpinned by the support of the overwhelming majority of citizens.

We are a privileged generation for we are living through the making of a fascinating and uplifting new history in both Ireland and Europe. It is not always elegant or pretty in the making. It is often cacophonous and difficult for consensus can be a nightmare to achieve and often those doing the negotiating have as many problems in persuading their own followers as they have in persuading the opposition. However, for all the ups and downs, false starts and setbacks the structures of the Good Friday Agreement, including the power-sharing government between old enemies in Northern Ireland are proving, like the European Union, to be infinitely more hope-filled and successful than anything which preceded them.

Already many of the longstanding thorny areas of political neuralgia have disappeared. Policing has been transformed; the culture of paramilitarism is disappearing; fraught relationships between the communities within

Northern Ireland are mellowing thanks to courageous community leadership and cross community engagement, both formal and informal at all levels of society, is deepening; cross-border relationships have been transformed and there are now formal structures to sustain and develop those relationships; and the relationship between Ireland and Britain has never been better. There are those still committed to violence and those still wedded to sectarianism but now their actions provoke striking cross-community solidarity in favour of peace where before they would have sent people scurrying into their respective sectarian bunkers. Not any more.

What is fascinating is the process of conversion from hearts of stone to hearts softened enough to work effectively and strategically with those considered the enemy. It is a process that takes time, effort, courage, patience and resilience in the face of setbacks and opposition. It demands something beyond mere hope – it requires an unshakeable faith in the possibilities opened up by the embracing of the discipline of love rather than hate.

I grew up in a divided community in Northern Ireland where our individual narratives emphasised and focussed on difference, on the things which separated us from one another and made us distrust each other. Each side had its own version of history in which the other was denigrated. Neighbours of different politics and persuasions thus lived side by side but in abject and treacherous ignorance of one another. Yet these neatly boxed distinctive and separate narratives played down other very important realities - our shared history, our common problems, our interdependence and the wasted opportunities that we threw away by overlooking the potential that partnership between us offered. Courageous voices began to ask what if we could find a way of navigating all the hurts to a managed system of working together.

Today we are discovering from first principles that the old politics of mutual meanness had suppressed and stifled the human capacity for spontaneous good neighbourliness. Today the politics of generosity is exhibiting a momentum, creativity and resilience capable of bringing more and more waverers on board the journey to peace through reconciliation. As people get to know one another a new collegiality is emerging rather like the collegiality which emerged between Ireland and the United Kingdom when they, the colonised and the coloniser, sat down as equals around the European Union table and began to work together on a common agenda. Through that regular engagement a collegial trust grew and from that trust came a conviction that the two governments could work together to end the conflict in Northern Ireland and embed a new culture of mutual respect.

Not all their early efforts were successful but step by step, by the sheer effort of trying and never giving up, they grew towards a more rounded understanding of the issues and of each other. The language of their engagement grew less antagonistic and more gracious. In fact, the language of political discourse especially within

Northern Ireland had been characterised for generations by ill-temper which was unhelpful to conflict resolution. Senator George Mitchell, the United States Special Envoy who chaired the talks which led to the Good Friday Agreement, also by his even-handedness and graciousness helped to radically change the temper of political discourse. The language used began to open up possibilities, rather than shutting them down and not only did it give energy to the many courageous peace-makers it began to persuade those involved in paramilitary violence. They began to see the possibility of dialogue as an alternate strategy for the achievement of their political ambitions. A number of them became key leaders of the move away from violence towards conflict resolution through dialogue and consensus building.

But, it was no road to Damascus conversion. The 18th century Irish philosopher Edmund Burke said "Never despair; but if you do, work on in despair." That is a fair description of the process of changing hearts from war to peace.

There were endless days and nights of negotiations, there were walkouts, rows, procedural difficulties, political intractabilities, personality difficulties, prevarications, dislikes, distrusts, doubts, episodes of atrocious violence designed to derail the talks and all sorts of unforeseen problems. There were key negotiators who would not stand in the same room as one another and some who to this very day cannot bring themselves to shake hands with one another. Yet through a painstaking process of relentless persuasion a critical mass of citizens agreed to make the sacrifices and compromises necessary to build a new future of equality for all.

These are the opening words of the Good Friday Agreement now some twelve years young. "We ... believe that the Agreement we have negotiated offers a truly historic opportunity for a new beginning. The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all."

The words "fresh start" are important for the twelve years since the Agreement have been a rollercoaster with some appalling acts of violence designed to destroy the resolve of the consensus builders and send people back into their sectarian bunkers. We have seen with awful clarity that the 1998 Agreement was no mere one-off event when history changed forever but merely the start of a long tough process of unlearning old ways and learning new ways. As one of our poets John Hewitt has said memorably - "We build to fill the centuries' arrears." Those arrears will not be filled in by mere spectators.

The European Union and the Good Friday Agreement both set in train processes which require our active participation as citizens who support these new still evolving young cultures of consensus and who conscientiously integrate them into our way of life. Our active, vigilant, participation is

essential for the dark forces of hatred are active too and they have centuries of horrendous success behind them. They would have us teach our children to hate others because they are Jews or Arabs or Catholic or Protestants or Roma or black or white or gay or emigrant or female or different from us in some way. They would have us give up on peace building, on respect building and equality building. They would try to provoke us by their violent words and actions to creep back inside history's bunkers of mutual distrust and prejudice. They would try to persuade us to give vent to attitudes which make the lives of individuals and groups utterly miserable and keep them vulnerable. Like the youngster making the discovery that he or she is gay; the emigrant child making the discovery that his skin colour is the butt of racist venom; the ambitious and able young girl waking up to the realisation that her gender places disgraceful barriers in the way of her full potential; the children of conflict zones and endemic poverty and disease zones around the world who are wondering does anyone out there care. They are all at this very moment the victims of powerful and opinionated others whose words and actions are capable of shutting down the light of hope in their lives. The language of hate creates and sustains the mayhem in which they live. The best known antidote is an active courageous love that challenges the forces of ignorance and malevolence. Both have history making powers. One makes bad history, the other makes good history.

In the thirteen years since I became President of Ireland, I have been privileged to witness many changes of heart that bordered on the miraculous, none more so than the positive peace-building roles being played by former paramilitaries. They generally come from marginalised communities which suffered most during the violence and which feel a deep sense of exclusion and victimhood. Yet some of the most radical cross-community initiatives are coming from those very individuals as they work to ensure that their people feel the full benefit of peace. History books will rightly record the names of great leaders who helped promote change, but for me the most inspiring common thread is the power of ordinary people to effect change through their daily lives, through what they say and do, the people who did not leave to others the job of changing history and whose courage in the words of

Winston Churchill is characterised by "going from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm".

The Rimini meeting would still be a mere notion, an unfulfilled good idea had it not been for those who took the idea of friendship across all sorts of divides, put a structure on it and committed to making it real – the thousands of volunteers who in creating this meeting year in and year out have revealed a vast hunger for the opportunity to move beyond mere curiosity about the otherness of others into real, deep friendship and sharing. Who can say what hearts have been changed here or elsewhere because Rimini happened and keeps on happening?

Leonardo da Vinci said "I have been impressed with the urgency of doing. Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Being willing is not enough we must do." His words point towards this very personal active accountability for change which is at the heart of the Rimini Meeting.

As we meet here today our world is a chaotic place where so many yearn for the changes that can bring them peace of heart, liberation from poverty, disease, oppression, abuse, neglect and selfishness of all sorts. In the most recent part of our narrative respect has plummeted for many global and national institutions, both financial and faith based, which were once esteemed for their values and high principles. We see the evidence of human failure all around though our righteous indignation is evidence of our unwillingness to settle for failure. How then do we get to the world we want? We do it the same way we built peace in Europe and peace in Ireland - we build it in the unromantic way described by "a daily, a weekly, a monthly process, gradually changing opinions, slowly eroding old barriers, quietly building new structures."

We do it by ourselves, by living up to the challenge of Gandhi's words - "be the change you want to see in the world" - and if we do it with love it will be done, in time it will be done.

Grazie mille.