

Fr. Eoin: Content

The main aims of the ICJSA in publishing *Violence in Irish Society* can be summarised as follows:-

Firstly, to respond to the growing concern with the issue of violence in Irish communities and to provide a response that is rooted in Gospel values and the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church.

Secondly, to explore the complexity of the problem of violence – both its manifestations and causes.

Thirdly, to issue a challenge to all of us, both as individuals and as a society, to re-examine the way we think about violence and the way we respond to violence.

The document itself is very wide-ranging because we were trying to convey the full complexity of this problem and the diversity of its manifestations – so there are references to

- Murder, knife crime, physical assault, violent theft
- Domestic violence, rape and other forms of sexual violence, child abuse, human trafficking
- Bullying
- Gangland violence, drug and alcohol abuse
- ‘Middle-class crime’, which as well as over-lapping with all the above categories includes corruption, tax evasion, fraud and the demand for “sexual services”

It must be stated from the outset that any one of these forms of violence could easily merit a paper in itself and cannot be treated in sufficient depth in a more general document like this. For this reason we are encouraging experts in these areas to respond to the document, adding to the debate and increasing our understanding and awareness. We hope that one achievement of this document will be the creation of spaces that allow further exchanges like the one we have here today to take place.

The debate about violence is never static. There have been many more worrying developments since this document was published in June 2008. Concern about violence in our communities continues to grow. In March of this year, the killing of two British soldiers and a member of the PSNI by paramilitaries brought back painful memories of a chapter of this island's history that many had hoped could now be brought to a close. Revelations of the full horror of the abuse perpetrated against many of the nation's children by representatives of the Catholic Church, in many cases with the complicity of representatives of the state and other sectors of our society, have had a particularly devastating impact.

Just as we could not analyse in sufficient depth all the various forms of violence in a short position paper, it would not be possible for us to examine all these issues in a short seminar. The complexity of the issues surrounding the "political" violence in the North, would, we feel, clearly merit, at least, a seminar of its own. Similarly, the abuse of children by representatives of the Church and the 'culture of silence', referred to in the document, that allowed this abuse to continue, clearly warrant public debate, but a fifteen-minute slot in a seminar like this would be neither appropriate nor acceptable.

We hope that the areas we have chosen to address in the seminar will prove suitably wide-ranging to stimulate debate and that all of you who have come here today to express your interest in this issue will be motivated to contribute to the discussion.

You should all have in front of you a question sheet for the panel discussion in the second half of the seminar. We would ask you to please write your question on this paper and give it to Nicola and the other ICJSA representatives during the coffee break. The discussion will follow a Questions and Answers style format, with the submitted questions being used as a starting point for discussion. We would ask you to keep your questions short to allow us to include as many different areas as possible in the discussion. We would also ask for your patience and understanding as we do our best to include as many of you as possible in the short time available.

The desire to promote understanding and awareness is really at the heart of this document. One of its most significant challenges to us as individuals is the challenge to reflect on our own understanding of violence and not to see it as something “at the margins of our experience” – to quote from the document.

And so in this document we argue for a multi-dimensional response to violence, inspired by Pope Benedict’s vision of ‘an ecology of peace’, that stresses the link between peace and respect for the person. The response we call for moves beyond a purely law-and-order based approach and includes

- Supporting family life
- Providing guidance and support for young people and protecting them from negative influences and role models that can be created through the glamorisation of violence in the media, tv, cinema and computer games.
- Promoting active citizenship, creating an ethos of voluntary service and fostering partnership in local communities.

As individuals we are challenged to recognise “our shared membership of society”, to tackle the practices and structures that lead to social exclusion, causing individuals and groups to feel they have no stake in society, and to get involved, contributing to the creation of a spirit of partnership in our communities through active citizenship.

By becoming involved we feel more empowered and that is why the ICJSA is encouraging dialogue at community level and why exchanges like today’s seminar are so important.

What we hope can emerge is an exchange of information that will increase awareness of the key issues that lie at the heart of this problem, indicating where there is room for more joined-up thinking, and where there are real opportunities for change. We hope that it will help us to be more focused in our advocacy work in this area, and that other organisations may benefit in the same way.

We also hope that today's event will also facilitate contact between the different groups and individuals working in the relevant areas, helping to promote opportunities for a truly multidimensional response to this problem. In particular, I would encourage you to make contact with the representatives of the 'Why Violence?' campaign, an extremely worthwhile initiative aimed at challenging the culture of violence in our society, which we are happy to support.

The central message of this position paper is that it is not enough to simply discuss the problem of violence, but we must ask ourselves what can I, and we, do about this?

And on that note I will hand over to our expert speakers.