

## ROLE OF THE RTE CRIME CORRESPONDENT

I am the Crime Correspondent for RTE, a position I have held for the past 13 years.

RTE is the only twenty four-hour news service in the country. I work for Radio, Television, Online and Aertel and my deadline is the next news bulletin which is usually at the top of the hour. I work for all radio news bulletins and programmes – such as Morning Ireland, the News at One and the This Week programme on Sunday - aswell as radio current affairs programmes like The Pat Kenny Show, The Gerry Ryan Show and Drivetime with Mary Wilson. I also work for all television news and current affairs programmes – the One, Six-One, Nine and Late News on RTE 2 aswell as Primetime. On a big story I can be working straight through from 6am to midnight and longer – its just the nature of the beast.

I report on all aspects of crime and the criminal justice system; government and opposition policy, the work of the courts, the gardai, the legal profession and the prison service. Due to the nature of broadcasting the television and radio reports I produce for the news bulletins are usually between forty seconds and two and a half minutes long. However the news and current affairs programmes usually allow more time for greater analysis and explanation.

I have also written two books, which have allowed me to further research and examine specific areas of Crime in Ireland today. 'King Scum – the Life and Times of Tony Felloni' is about the drugs trade, specifically the heroin business told through the life of one man and his family. 'Sex in the City' is about the prostitution industry and argues that far from it being a harmless profession rooted in freedom of choice it is a seedy, sinister and seriously damaging criminal enterprise.

The reality is that a large proportion of the incidents I report on happen late at night or in the early hours of the morning and violence is at the heart of my work– attacks, shootings, sexual assaults, murders. Most of my time is spent reporting on or trying to analyse, assess or explain some of the most awful, tragic and horrific events that can possibly occur in peoples lives. Tragically and all too often, it is not peoples' lives but peoples' deaths that I have to report on.

\*\*

I have been invited here to offer a critique of this position paper entitled Violence in Irish Society – Towards an Ecology of Peace.

I have been asked to analyse the document through my own experience – to be tough and critical – so that's what I will do. If anyone doesn't like it I'll apologise in advance - I don't mean to be offensive, I hope nobody is insulted or offended and I ask you to accept what I say as hard, fair, straight talking criticism – and take it in the spirit it is given.

And anyway you can blame Martin Long – he invited me here and told me to be tough!

As a Crime reporter I intend to focus primarily on the aspects of the paper/booklet which relate to violence and crime – in particular gangland crime – There are four other experts here – on Children's Research, Regeneration, Victims and Policing so I'll bow to their expertise in those areas and leave them to deal with those issues.

I will also stay to answer questions, comments or in turn criticism of my talk – so if you can manage to sit there for a while and seethe – don't worry, you'll get your chance to get back at me

### 1. Language

I think it's fair to say that this is a document – Violence in Irish Society – has, as I see it, been drawn up to explain the Catholic Bishop's position, thinking and understanding of Violence in Irish Society today, to provide a basis for debate and to point a way towards tackling the problem.

However I believe it is hampered from the start by its language and tone – which is aspirational,

philosophical, theological and non committal ---- much like the bishops themselves! (joke!!)

Much of the language in it is inaccessible –

For example - the booklet talks about establishing “an ecology of peace” – which it says the Pope has called for. With respect to the bossman –

What is that?

What does that mean?

And even if there is a short and simple explanation for it, the fact that it needs to be explained in the first place means whatever it was meant to mean has already been lost or will probably be lost in translation.

The document talks about building “a civilisation of love!”

What does that mean? ---- It sounds like something out of the late 1960’s hippy era – the time of peace and love! (and free love and drugs – which I’m sure the ICJSA is not advocating! - joke!!)

What does “the virtue of solidarity” mean?

These are just three examples of the rather highbrow, almost ethereal tone and content of a position paper that describes in a rather abstract and intangible way – the ICJSA’s thinking on what for many is a very tangible, real, painful and devastating experience.

I don’t dispute the intention of this booklet is to promote something positive and meaningful, to provide a way forward - to tackle the scourge of violence – but the language in it comes across as over intellectual, superior and aloof. Far from trying to say something, it seems to me in many ways to disguise the fact that it doesn’t know what it wants to say.

Take this quote for example;

“virtue.. has a key role in creating a “moral environment” that alone is capable of challenging the legitimacy of a violent culture” (p24)

I can’t figure out where the booklet is going with this - Either it’s a statement worthy of a utopian ideal or a statement of the blatantly obvious – meaning if we’re all good, there’ll be no trouble! True, but not of much practical use as a basis on which to proceed to deal with the issue of violence.

- “we can face the realities of the modern world and seek to confront issues such as violence through those very values that affirm our shared membership of society and the rights and responsibilities that flow from that membership” p 11–

That’s something like a politician would say – lots of nice sounding words that seem to mean something but with nothing tangible or practical at the end of it – It says everything and says nothing. It tries to be all things to all men and this may be harsh but when you read something like this, you have to ask the question that behind these words, are the Bishops really interested in having a role in tackling this problem or do they just want to be seen to be doing something when in reality they’re not doing very much?

It’s a question I believe the Bishops must ask themselves because much of the language in this document makes it difficult to establish what exactly the Bishops are saying they want to do about violence in our society. If the language is superior, woolly, vague and sometimes complex and confusing - then the danger is the Bishops’ position or thinking on the issue of violence and their approach and resolve towards solving it, could also be superior, woolly, vague, and somewhat confused.

2. Silence in not an option –

In this section the position paper states that “the church cannot remain on the sidelines” on the issue of violent crime, that the Church must speak out. This is a noble sentiment – but the Church must ask itself whether it is in this case ‘practising what it is preaching’?

Is the Church speaking out?

In response to those questions I would have to say NO.

The role the Church has played in tackling violence and organised crime so far has I regret to say been quite minimal.

The Church as an institution has arguably failed its flock on this issue. Apart from a few noble and heroic exceptions – like Seamus Aherne in Finglas and Joe Young in Limerick, a small number of nuns and chaplains– the Church at grassroots level – its priests and pastors – have failed to deal with gangland crime.

There has been no co-ordinated response, no policy direction, no practical initiatives, no one consistent approach from the Church at community level to the problem of gangland violence.

What could the Church do?

Well for one it could speak out – and by and large it doesn't. There are only one or two priests willing to come forward and condemn gangland violence in their communities and I've already mentioned them.

Among the others, the silence is deafening.

When an attack, shooting, or murder takes place there is no condemnation – No statement by the individual curate, parish priest or higher that this is unacceptable, that this should not be tolerated, that people should come together against it. Why not?

This is in marked contrast to what happens if a tragedy occurs in a rural or coastal community. In cases of sudden, unexpected or violent death you often see the parish priest or curate on TV, or hear him on radio conveying the shock and sadness of the community – expressing the common grief and bewilderment and providing the focus for understanding and acceptance.

If a gangland shooting or murder takes place in say Clondalkin or Crumlin however – and a young man or woman is shot dead – often in brutal circumstances in front of loved ones or children - no member of the Church comes forward and takes a public stand;

EG. The family of Robert Delany – no word from the Church on that murder,

No one in the Church consistently comes out and says this is wrong. No one within the communities reflects the pain and fear of those communities,- says we as a community will not live in fear of these people. No one even comes out and states publicly the message of the Gospel that this is against the law of God as well as man.

They may say it at the funerals or in the Churches, but there quite frankly they are preaching to the converted. And the reality is the people who need to hear that message again and again are not to be found at ten o' clock mass or indeed any other mass.

The clergy may think and believe that human life is sacred and that "thou shalt not kill" but in my experience the vast majority do not come out publicly and take the moral and courageous stand. Why not? They do it abroad – in Africa and South America and other far flung places. Irish Priests are renowned world wide for standing up against injustice and tyranny – why not here?

Very few churchmen encourage people to give information to the Gardai. They don't provide a sanctuary for those in fear to come forward. They could help in the fight against the gangs on ground – they could help in the community's fight back against what are essentially dangerous bands of thugs terrorising parishioners. These are practical, tangible, real examples of the work the Church could do on this issue – but these are not reflected in this document.

Maybe the clergy are afraid. If they are I for one can't blame them, but the fact is that if they are afraid or seen to be afraid to stand up to the gangsters then the gangsters become more powerful through utilising that fear against the community. Very often in these communities – people feel they cannot turn to the Gardai - the Church could play a very important role here in tackling the fear, in disrupting the activities of

the gangs, in mediation, in providing someone these people could speak to – and not just a listening ear – a conduit for confidential information perhaps – obviously outside the confessional - a focus for action that is rooted in moral authority.

The priest is a very important person in any community and by and large he is respected. A man of peace who has taken a vow of poverty, a pastor who is there to guide and lead – but where is the leadership on this issue. It is no good for the priest to just sit and cry with the grieving families and wring his hands as if to say isn't this terrible and what can we do.

The priest has a position, a platform, a place from which to speak. At present the priest is silent. And that silence filters through. People see it, they know the priest is saying and doing nothing - so when someone is shot dead – no one is there to speak for them or the community. The position paper states - silence is not an option – but the reality on the ground is that for the Church it has been the option it has chosen.

Some of you will say the current Archbishop of Dublin – Dr Diarmuid Martin – has called for a summit of all those in leadership in communities. It is a noble calling but it is a call he made over two years ago and where is the action. With respect to the Archbishop, and this is not a personal attack – but why has he, his office or the wider Church not organised that Summit? We in the media would have reported on it and reflected any developments, so why has it not happened? Why has that idea not been progressed? And on the broader issues of guns and drug trafficking, violence and murder why has the Church not been more proactive?

I hope this does not sound like a rant against the Catholic Church because it is not intended to be. I know the Church of Ireland Gazette is here so I don't want to read any headlines - tabloid style RTE STAR SLAMS BISHOP .....AND GETS BELT OF THE CROZIER.....and all this at a seminar on Violence!! Seriously though I think it is fair to say that none of the Churches or Church men and women have covered themselves in glory in relation to their action – or lack of it – on this issue.

### 3. Addressing causes

In this section the position paper refers to the causes of violence. It says the “challenge” to understand the causes “embraces the related issues of freedom and personal responsibility” – We are again already in to an intellectual exercise which then leads on to “the world of human motivation” and “the part played by role models”.(p13)

I ask where this is all leading. I thought we were going to address the causes of violence – alcohol, drug abuse, disadvantage, disenchantment, greed, profit, criminal activity, evil, etc – instead we have philosophical pondering which to me appears highbrow, written in a vacuum, with the tone of a dinner party discussion that is largely academic. It talks around the issue- it doesn't go to the heart of the matter.

And what is the first issue this section deals with in addressing the causes of violence?– the priority, the most important , the one deserving of first mention?

Is it poverty? Unemployment?, lack of education? – all major contributors towards serious and violent crime? No it is the media! What the pamphlet calls “the cultural context wherein the media provides such a powerful array of role models for young people!” Here I think the paper is really missing the point!

The bestowing of celebrity status on violent criminals is certainly an issue,

As are –

“the proliferation of television serials that glamorise Godfather type criminals”

“the extensive marketing of violent video games”

and

“the habit of newspaper headline writers to refer to well known criminals by their pet names” .... but

I'm not sure that these are the first and most important issues that should be addressed in a chapter entitled “addressing the causes of violence.”

Surely these are peripheral concerns! Surely there are other root causes which are accentuated by these

cultural phenomena.

As a representative of one media organisation you might say I would be expected to defend the media – but I am not defending it. I take on board what is being said about the dangers of glamorising serious criminals, painting them as cartoon characters when they are in reality extremely violent and dangerous people. I would agree that it is important that these individuals not be held up as cultural icons, outlaws, outsiders, rebels, Robin Hood figures, celebrities or gangsters.

They should be portrayed as who they are and that is - in most cases - quite simply thugs! The truth should be told about them and their activities should be reported in a measured, calm and balanced way. It is important therefore for the media to show these people for who and what they are, to contextualise them, to explain where they came from and how they ended up becoming what they have become.

The fact is that while the vast majority of criminals were born in disadvantaged areas, poverty is not the cause of violent or gangland crime. Most poor people do not end up in crime, most people in disadvantaged areas do not end up before the courts and anyone who lives and works in the areas most affected by it – Gardai, community workers, healthcare professionals, priests, - will tell you - the people there are ‘the salt of the earth’. In fairness the position paper reflects this.

The main reasons, as I see it, why people end up involved in crime lie in the failure of adult guardians in the home and the schools, the failures of parents, teachers and society at large - parents who either can't, won't or don't care enough about their children to give them a safe and stable home life, (p20) Again this point is made in the paper and I agree with it.

In school the teachers and principals can't, won't or don't ensure these children have at least a basic level of education – in numeracy and literacy – before they leave school. Let's be honest, most of these children cannot read or write by the time they grow up enough to become involved in violent crime. That I believe, is an absolute disgrace particularly in view of the later consequences for these individuals and for society at large.

It is arguably criminally negligent that young boys and girls are permitted to go through school, year after year, class after class, without being taught the basics –basic reading and writing. That is wrong; – and it is a wrong which ensures that that child is damaged into the future. It is a wrong which stores up problems for society as a whole.

Education is something that is touched on in the position but the failure of the education system and the consequences of that failure are not developed here. Considering the role the Church plays in Education, the fact that it manages and runs the vast majority of schools in this country, this is certainly the place where the Church can play a positive, practical, dynamic and life changing role in tackling violence.

Any move by the Church in this direction - to ensure for example that no child would leave any of its schools after eight years in the Primary School system without being able to read and write to a basis standard - would have an immediate and dramatic impact on violence and criminality.

It could for example put it in its mission statement for all its schools. It could at Board of Management level ask questions of its principals and in turn its teachers as to why in so many schools this simple objective is not being achieved.

#### 4. Conclusion

The conclusions in the position paper are in my opinion not good enough. They are a case of offering all things to all men and nothing to anyone. They smack to me of a noble and somewhat abstract list of the worthy but weak. They are of the ‘maybe we should do something about this violence thing variety but we're not really sure exactly what we should do and besides we don't want to offend anyone!’

There is nothing definite here – no position, no point, nothing that translates into practical and tangible

suggestions or policies. The conclusions are to me written in an almost political way in that they seek to offend no-one or demand anything specific of anyone – and therefore the aspirations in them while positive are meaningless because they are non specific.

Take for example the one that calls on the Government and those in leadership in our communities to “support family life by promoting family-friendly work practices.” Fair enough but what does that mean?

Does it mean for example that the Bishops or the ICJSA are opposed to the current government’s tax policy of equalisation whereby women who chose to work in the home and stay at home to raise their children have lost the full tax relief that they previously held?

If so why not say that and explain the reasons why this is now ICJSA policy. Otherwise the statement to “support family life by promoting family-friendly work practices” is one that everyone can agree on and claim to aspire to but one that in reality, because it is both non specific and non committal, is meaningless

There is a “suggestion” to “seek” a ban on violent videos.

What does that mean? We think we should look at maybe asking someone else to look at, maybe the Government or someone else perhaps, if they might or might not think about banning violent videos???

Wishy washy! Not strong enough. Not definite enough. You either have a position on violent videos or you don’t. Either you say you want them banned and explain why or you don’t.

Here’s a real catch all – “Create an awareness of the harmful effects that both excessive alcohol consumption and all substance abuse have in promoting a culture of violence in our Society.” That’s something that could have been written by MEAS- the lobby group for the drinks industry - whose job it is to get people to keep spending their money on drink and to drink as much alcohol as they can without fighting, falling down or causing trouble. I doubt that is what the ICJSA wants – maybe it is but I doubt it! (joke)

The Church will have to go further than concluding it needs to “create an awareness.” The awareness is already there. Everyone knows the damage too much drink and drugs can do.

## 5. Summary

In summary perhaps the fundamental criticism I have of this paper is reflected in the booklet itself. It states (on P 10) that “This brief position paper from the ICJSA is designed to contribute to this work by reflecting on ways in which the social and community infrastructure need to be transformed if violence is to be successfully challenged.”

In a nutshell this paper is too reflective. While the Church at senior level reflects, people are getting hurt. While the Church ponders the philosophy behind transforming the social and community infrastructure people are getting killed. The time for reflection is over. It is long past the time for action.

The position paper states (on p28) that “violence will only be overcome by the mobilisation of communities” – It then goes on to talk about the challenge for governments, the work of the Gardai and the PSNI. What about the challenge for the Church?

The Church- rooted as it is in the community has the opportunity and the capacity to do a lot more - to become directly involved, to retake the moral high ground. The power of the church could be harnessed to tackle this issue head on, to help the communities stand up to the criminal gangs, to enable and empower them to fight back.

The Church has the ability, the resources and the power to lead on this issue, to do some good, and to be seen to be doing some good– rather than simply to preach about doing good.

Thank you very much for listening to me – I hope you will take something positive from this talk which I hope you take as constructive rather than critical.