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Claudy priest 'denied role in IRA bombing'

By Chris Thornton

31 October 2006

The priest suspected of being behind nine murders in the Claudy bombings had denied any involvement, a former IRA leader claimed last night.

Ruari O Bradaigh said Father James Chesney told him in the late 1970s that he had "nothing whatever to do with the bombings".

He made the claim as Police Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan puts the final touches to a report on how the Government, Catholic church and RUC handled suspicions about Fr Chesney.

In 2002, the PSNI told the relatives of the victims that they "have not obtained justice".

Assistant Chief Constable Sam Kinkaid told them that material from 1972 indicated that Fr Chesney "was a member of the Provisional IRA and was actively involved in terrorism".

William Whitelaw, the Secretary of State at the time, held a private meeting with Cardinal William Conway five months after the bombing to discuss the priest - who was then quietly moved to a parish over the border. Fr Chesney died in Donegal in 1980.

Mr O Bradaigh, who now leads the breakaway Republican Sinn Fein, was president of Sinn Fein and was suspected of being on the IRA Army Council at the time of the Claudy bombings.

He said: "It must be distressing to the late Father Chesney's relatives, colleagues in the priesthood, parishioners and friends to hear of him being publicly accused of involvement in the Claudy bombing of 34 years ago.

"Since no-one has come forward, I wish to put on record a conversation I had with Fr Chesney in the 1970s. At a H-Block meeting in Sligo he approached me as a person he could trust.

"He said that rumours had been circulated that he was associated with what had happened in Claudy.

"He felt this was done because he was known to be sympathetic to the republican cause.

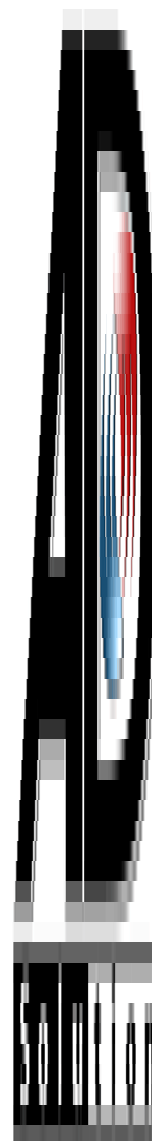
"He had nothing whatever to do with the bombings.

"Since the allegations have now become public I feel it my duty to fulfil the trust put in me all those years ago. For my part I fully accept what Fr Chesney told me."

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