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The U.S. Catholic Hierarchy and Northern Ireland

1. Biographical notes on members of the delegation are attached to this brief. As President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Bishop James Malone is leader of the delegation for protocol purposes, although Archbishop O'Connor is the most senior prelate.
2. The Catholic Church has played a central, binding role in the Irish-American community. Over half the U.S. bishops are believed to be of Irish extraction and the Irish are a major ethnic grouping among the 60 million U.S. Catholics. Nonetheless, while the U.S. bishops have become highly vocal on certain political issues (opposing the arms race and abortion) they have not in general had a high profile in regard to Northern Ireland. This reflects their unwillingness to comment on the affairs of another country unless the hierarchy there requests them to do so. (Such a request was made in 1980 during the H-Block hungerstrike by the Irish hierarchy and the US bishops issued a statement).
3. However, certain U.S. bishops have shown an active interest in this issue. Bishop Hurley of Santa Rosa, California (a member of the delegation) is a board member of the Irish Forum in San Francisco which was founded in 1980. Its members, mainly of Irish descent, come from a wide spectrum of American political backgrounds. It is a non-partisan organisation concentrating on educating Americans about Northern Ireland, principally through a guest speaker programme which has given a platform for all shades of opinion in Ireland. Bishop Hurley has published a pamphlet entitled "Northern Ireland Today, An Irish American Purview". In an interview last year he said "I would not be so presumptuous as to tell people back there [Ireland and Britain] how to solve their problems, I do believe an informed Irish-American perspective is one which all sides can draw from". In his pamphlet he wrote that "the recurring theme that Irish-Americans have a romantic idea of the IRA as freedom fighters on white horses lacks both validity and credibility. The IRA is indeed a problem, but not the problem". It was reported that the Irish American Unity

Conference and the Irish National Caucus had called for Bishop Hurley to be included in the delegation. (Both these organisations have associations with members of Noraid).

4. Archbishop O'Connor's predecessor in New York, the late Cardinal Cooke, had become increasingly concerned with the Northern Ireland problem towards the end of his life. Shortly before his death he issued a "last word" to the Irish American community in which he made "a special plea" to them "to work with all your all your hearts for healing, for reconciliation and for an end to violence here in our own community and in Ireland". A St. Patrick's Cathedral (New York) Fund for Peace and Justice in Ireland was established with the approval of the Cardinal but it has not generated large-scale funding.

Cardinal Cooke was placed in a very difficult position by the appointment of Noraid's Michael Flannery as Grand Marshall of the 1983 New York St. Patrick's Day Parade. The Cardinal did not emerge onto the steps of the Cathedral to review that year's Parade until well after Flannery had passed although he spoke to Flannery at the St. Patrick's Day Mass in the Cathedral.

Archbishop O'Connor did not take part in this year's Parade on the grounds that it would be inappropriate for him to be involved prior to his installation as Archbishop on 19 March. On 18 October, the Archbishop met a group of Irish Americans and listened to their views on the delegation's visit. He said he knew little about Ireland and would be guided by the Irish Bishops. He added that he was "looking for reconciliation, particularly in relation to the St. Patrick's Day Parade".

With a diocese of 1.8 million Catholics of whom the Irish are still a powerful element, Archbishop O'Connor will have a continuing interest in Ireland. In thanking our Consul General for sending him a copy of the Forum Report, the Archbishop said that "concern for the welfare of Ireland and all its people will be an important priority in my responsibilities as Archbishop".

5. In general, members of the visiting delegation, with the exception of Bishop Hurley, have not taken a prominent stand on the Northern Ireland issue. They are willing to listen to the Government's views and to hear them sympathetically although they may not necessarily accept all these views. This is particularly true in relation to possible meetings with members of Sinn Fein.

For the future, it is likely that the U.S. Hierarchy will, in general, continue to adopt a low profile in relation to Northern Ireland and to be guided in their attitude by the Irish Hierarchy.

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