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From the Bishop of Down + Connor
18th. July 1984

Rt. Hon. James Prior, M.P.,
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland,
Northern Ireland Office,
Stormont Castle,
BELFAST BT4 3ST.



Re: Some problems at the Maze Prison

Dear Mr. Prior,

I understand that 19 prisoners who were involved in the mass break-out from the Maze Prison are now being allowed only "closed visits" from their families. I understand further that the question is being raised of extending this restriction to other prisoners serving sentences for terrorist offences. I should like to be permitted to make some observations on this situation.

However heinous the offences which prisoners have committed, they still have very human feelings towards their wives, their children, their parents. To see these loved ones but be thwarted in their natural instinct and desire to touch or embrace them would seem to me to be a way of turning a concession into a new form of punishment. For a husband to see but be unable to embrace his wife, for a father to see but not be able to embrace his child, must be a source of extreme frustration and emotional deprivation.

There certainly are cases in my experience in which the best hope of weaning prisoners away from the paths of violence and crime is through the influence of their families. The families were in many cases totally unaware of their relatives involvement in terrorism and totally innocent of all complicity. There would seem to me to be positive value in a policy which would seek to win the good will of families of prisoners, in the interests of influencing prisoners away from crime. I know that there are cases where the opposite is the truth, but I am convinced that these are not the majority of cases. In any case, I know that you will agree that the prison regime should be as humanitarian as possible, consistently with the needs of security; and indeed you have personally done very much to bring this about.

From the point of view of the families themselves, their suffering in this situation is perhaps even greater, and these families are in nearly all cases legally innocent and in most cases morally innocent as well. Long-term imprisonment, while certainly inescapable in our present situation, creates severe strains for marriages and for family life. I feel that, in the general interest of society, these effects should be minimised as far as is possible. There seems to be a real danger that prisoners will refuse to accept any visits in 'closed' conditions, and this would obviously increase both the stress in their marriages and families and the degree of resentment in the wider community.

I have discussed the whole matter very thoroughly with Father John Murphy, Chaplain at the Prison. He is a man who has, in my opinion, given proof of balanced judgement throughout many very tense periods in prison history, and has

greatly contributed towards alleviating tension and averting crisis. I find that he is extremely concerned about this present situation and gravely worried about the probable repercussions so far as relationships within the prison and relationships with the prisoners' families are concerned.

I feel that the potential political repercussions of this situation are also not negligible. I believe that the circumstances and the climate for some political progress are better now than they have been for quite some time. Indeed, this, if I may say so, is largely due to your own wise and prudent handling of the situation following the New Ireland Forum Report. It would be very sad and very dangerous if a new deterioration in the prison situation were to put all this in danger.

I hope that this letter does not seem to be adding to your many problems. Instead, I am seeking to be helpful, since I believe I have no more imperative duty as Bishop than to do everything possible to promote reconciliation and an end to violence in this community.

Because I gathered from Father Murphy that there may be some urgency about this problem, I am taking the liberty of sending this letter to you by hand.

With kindest personal regards and every good wish,

Yours very sincerely,

+ Cahal B. Daly