

Pope, church leaders laud Irish peace agreement

By Christena Colclough
Catholic News Service

BELFAST, Northern Ireland — Church leaders across Northern Ireland welcomed the peace settlement brokered April 10 by politicians.

Pope John Paul II also welcomed the agreement and asked for prayers that the people of the region would have the courage to make peace a reality.

Archbishop Sean Brady, primate of all Ireland, commended politicians' efforts to work out a settlement to end Northern Ireland's 27-year civil conflict and asked people to consider the agreement carefully.

"It is my hope that an agreement will lead the way to the future," he said, asking people to "see the positive and see the advantages and see what is in it for our neighbors as well as for ourselves."

In a statement issued Good Friday, April 10, the archbishop said he hoped the agreement would "lead the way to an Ireland where people grow and respect each other and learn to trust each other despite their differences."

"Only a limited number was involved in the peace talks; all of us now must be participants in the work of reconciliation, of building trust and healing the hurts," he said.

Other church leaders added their voice of support to the peace settlement but recognized that difficulties lay ahead. Archbishop Robin Eames, Anglican primate of the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland, said that in order for the settlement to come to fruition, "we have to say that we are prepared to take a step of faith."

At Castel Gandolfo, the papal summer residence south of Rome, Pope John Paul



Wives of loyalist prisoners rally outside Ulster Unionist Party offices in Belfast, Northern Ireland, April 11 in support of a Northern Ireland treaty hammered out by Irish and British, loyalist and nationalist leaders April 10.

told visitors April 13 to "give thanks to God for the positive results reached a few days ago in Northern Ireland."

The pope said the agreement would allow "the dear and so harshly tried populations" of the island "to look to the future with greater trust."

"We pray to the Lord that each person, listening to his or her own conscience, will have the courage to make responsible and concrete gestures that will allow all to walk together along the path of peace, preventing anything which could lead again to hatred and violence," the pope said.

The peace agreement accepted April

10 by the governments of the Irish Republic and Great Britain and the political parties of Northern Ireland was reached after a marathon negotiating session in Belfast. The agreement will be put to voters in the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland in May.

It includes establishment of a new 108-seat Northern Ireland assembly, a North-South ministerial council and a British-Irish council, as well as constitutional changes in Britain and the Irish Republic. It also includes a review of the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland, decommissioning of paramilitary weapons and the early release of political prisoners.

Former U.S. Sen. George Mitchell mediated the peace talks. More than 3,300 people have died during the course of Northern Ireland's conflict.

Some politicians, who refused to attend talks, were expected to campaign for Northern Ireland's electorate to reject the agreement.

Preaching from the pulpit on Easter Sunday, the Rev. Ian Paisley, a Free Presbyterian pastor and leader of the Democratic Unionist Party, warned parishioners against the agreement, which he said would distance Northern Ireland from Britain and push the province to a united and predominantly Catholic Ireland.

"Our land is in turmoil and crisis. We are going to be fed lies from now until the referendum by politicians," he said. "But our enemies do not know that we have a secret weapon, and that weapon is truth."

Msgr. Denis Faul, a prominent Northern Ireland peace campaigner in Dunganon, said the settlement was the first step along the road to peace but cautioned that without support from every section of the community, the agreement would fail.

"The settlement offers a new beginning, a new setting off point, and we should all be working very hard for this opportunity to build the peace," he said, warning that "blood on the street can wreck any political settlement."

Father Brian McCann of St. Bernadette Church, Belfast, said his parishioners were cautious about voicing optimism but "behind apprehension, there is a solid foundation for hope and anticipation."

Another parish priest from St. Bernadette's, Father Fred McSorley, said that "it might take time to change hardened attitudes, but now we have that opportunity."



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