

**In his first in-depth interview, Fr Martin Magill said
Arlene Foster rang after the funeral and asked him
to pray**

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After yesterday's announcement of a new attempt at restoring devolution, Father Martin Magill said there now exists an opportunity for political opponents to bury their differences for the common good.

Fr Magill's rousing reflection at St Anne's Cathedral during the service of thanksgiving for the life of the murdered journalist brought mourners to their feet, drew applause from both inside and outside Belfast's St Anne's Cathedral and is widely believed to have hastened the latest talks, due to begin early next month.

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The 57-year-old parish priest's heartfelt plea — “Why in God's name does it take the death of a 29-year-old woman with her whole life in front of her to get to this point?” — made headlines around the world.

In an interview with the Belfast Telegraph at his home yesterday in West Belfast, Fr Magill said now was the time for local politicians to heed public opinion and grasp the initiative.

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“Look for the bigger picture. Look beyond party politics to the common good and think about those areas of Northern Ireland that haven't benefited from the peace process and those people who haven't felt the values and the benefits of where we've got to 21 years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement.”

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Fr Magill said he never expected such a reaction to his powerful reflection — which high-profile Methodist Minister the Rev Harold Good helped advise on — at the interdenominational service on Wednesday afternoon.

“It was the response to the question that gave it the power, the legs and the energy,” he said.

“It struck me that the people in the cathedral brought the politicians to their feet rather than my question.

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The popular cleric and community leader also said he had

received a phone call from Mrs Foster on Wednesday evening after the funeral, revealing that they had “a very gracious conversation”.

“She talked about reaching out,” he said. “She’s a woman of faith. When I asked her what I could do to help she asked me to pray and she talked to me about the importance of prayer

- and I obviously agreed with her on that.”

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Referring to being unable to finish the central question until the applause stopped and people sat down again, Fr Magill said he sensed he had “unwittingly tapped into something and people responded”.

“People starting to clap and then stand up... I didn’t see it coming and I didn’t expect that,” he said. “More than anything else people have thanked me for saying what so many people have been thinking.

“What’s very clear to me now is that people are looking for leadership. They desperately need leadership.

“That question gave people an opportunity to say ‘enough is enough’ and that question somehow set people off.” The priest, who is originally from Aldergrove, Co Antrim revealed that he took advice from friends while composing the reflection, including Mr Good, the famous peacemaker.

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the reflection, including Mr Good, the famous peacemaker.

“I talked to a number of people to prepare this sermon including Harold Good, and it was really in the conversation with him that this question emerged.”

Fr Magill also sought counsel from Fr Joe Gormley, who anointed Miss McKee in hospital after she was fatally shot and “spoke out very publicly” ahead of her funeral asking anti-agreement republicans not to march in Derry as part of their Easter Rising commemorations on Easter Monday.

When asked why he didn’t use the words ‘terrorist’ or ‘republican terrorist’ in relation to Lyra’s killers, Fr Magill said he had been guided by a “very long and very helpful” conversation he’d had with the Derry-based priest.

“Fr Joe has given a very clear stance on this, which is that we’re completely opposed to the violence,” he said.

“He called on the political organisation Saoradh to call off their Easter parade out of respect

and they did. So they listened.

“While we disagree entirely with violence, Fr Joe said it’s important that we don’t demonise those involved in this, even those involved in any way in Lyra’s murder, we don’t demonise them; we don’t dehumanise them.

“While we disagree entirely with violence, Fr Joe said it’s important that we don’t demonise those involved in this, even those involved in any way in Lyra’s murder, we don’t demonise them; we don’t dehumanise them.

“I hope I’m very clear — I’m completely opposed to violence, but we don’t want to close a door; we want to try and keep it open. I also support Fr Joe’s call that people still involved in this, or the organisations that support this, to enter into dialogue.

“It absolutely breaks my heart that young people who’ve grown up post Good Friday Agreement signing have got caught up in this violence because I lived as a child of the Troubles.”

Fr Magill, who went to school in north Belfast, also collaborated with St Anne’s Dean Stephen Forde ahead of the funeral, and the two attended the wake at Ms McKee’s mother’s home together on Easter Sunday afternoon.

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"Whenever it was decided that it was going to be in St Anne's, the Dean came up with the idea of him and I visiting the family together and that's what we did," he said.

The Lyra Fr Magill knew had "real enthusiasm" and "a love for life" and he remembers the lively young woman who visited him at home 18 months ago to talk about the book she was writing.

"There was a real liveliness about her; she had a bright, bubbly personality," he said.

When he was asked by a family member to officiate at the service of thanksgiving because of their connection, he said the idea of a joint service at St Anne's Cathedral "felt right from the very start. I knew from the beginning that it was going to be a Service of Thanksgiving, not a Requiem Mass".

"The Dean took the lead in bringing the service together and there was a very definite sense from the family of wanting to be inclusive; that was very important for them and St Anne's lent itself very well to that."

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"When a younger member of the family dies — the baby of the family in this case, and in these particular circumstances — it's hugely painful," the priest said.

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Fr Magill called on people within republicanism, the GAA, the church and influential Catholics to engage with those who are still involved in violence.

He also appealed for people to give the PSNI or Crimestoppers information about Lyra’s murder because of the widescale public revulsion it provoked.

“There can be a huge amount of fear that prevents people from coming forward,” he said.

“In some societies it’s a rule that we don’t tout or tell police but we need to change that to see that this is our civic responsibility.”

He added: “This is not about informing, this is about developing a different type of society built on justice and fairness, or hope and not fear.”

When asked whether there needs to be a conversation within nationalism about the IRA and the New IRA and republican ideology, Fr Magill said: “There definitely needs to be a debate.

“There is no love lost between republicanism and the Catholic Church,” he added.

“We’ve condemned violence over the years; it was wrong and it is never justified.”

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olence need to be told that things have changed.

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“They’ve been through it and they’ve seen the worst of it and they can influence the younger generation.”

Fr Magill, a founder and joint chair of The 4 Corners Festival, which seeks to inspire people from across Belfast to transform it for the peace and prosperity of all, acknowledged the ongoing tensions surrounding Michelle O’Neill’s attendance at commemorations for dead IRA men.

“That’s such a divisive issue,” he said.

“The whole question of commemorating the dead is a very sensitive one. We need to have conversations about how this is done because it’s causing an enormous amount of difficulty.

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“It’s yet another legacy issue we haven’t worked through.”

He said that he understood that by continuing to do that Sinn Fein’s Northern Ireland leader is “absolutely” going to perpetuate the problem, adding: “We must find ways that don’t cause pain and yet allow people to be able to remember their dead.”

Fr Magill also said he agreed with comments recently made by the Alliance party’s Philip McGarry, who said every community leader, political or religious, has a responsibility.

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“There’s a clear sense that politicians have a particular responsibility... but it’s important to widen it out because, to some extent, it’s almost like politicians are in a fish bowl and all the attention is on them,” he said.

“Of course they’ve got leadership responsibility — we elect them for this — but it’s also important for others to be influencers as well.”

Asked whether Lyra’s murder will make a difference in terms of Northern Ireland moving forward, Fr Magill said there’s “an opportunity at the moment; a bit more hope”.

“The fact that we’re going to have the Irish and British governments involved in bringing the parties together is a sign of hope,” he said.

“It’s important we’re not cynical. We must focus on the opportunities we have to influence. All of us have a responsibility.”

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