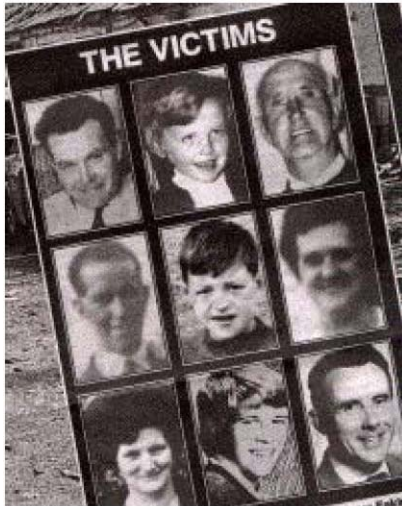


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Roman Catholic Priest led IRA murder gang



Pictures of the bombing victims as printed in the newspapers 30 years ago

A Roman Catholic priest has told a Belfast newspaper that he wished to confess to all that he knew about the 1972 Claudy massacre in which nine people were murdered by the IRA. He has claimed that the IRA unit was led by a fellow-priest who later confessed his involvement to him.

The priest, an elderly man who has been in England since he was ordained, contacted the News Letter to say that he wanted to tell all that he knows to the police before he dies.

A two-page feature in the News Letter on July 31, the 30th anniversary of the three-bomb IRA blitz on the Co Londonderry village is supposed to have brought on the priest's desire to tell what he knew of the atrocity.

The priest said: "This article reawakened the horrible memories I have of the event." He said that, if a new police investigation into the Claudy massacre was opened, he

would reveal his identity and help the relatives of those killed and maimed at Claudy to find justice. In letters to Mary Hamilton, deputy mayor of Derry City Council and herself a survivor of the atrocity, the priest recalled how a fellow-priest had confessed to him his role in the planting of the no-warning bombs in Claudy.

In the letter, he names the Roman Catholic priest, who had attended the same seminary as he did, as the man who led the bombing.

He revealed: "We were not close but, as we were both from the north, we had something in common." "He appeared to hate the English people and I didn't like his tone as I have some wonderful Christian English friends here." In the middle of 1972, he received a letter from the South Derry priest, who told him that he had been sent to Donegal. "He asked that I call to see him the next time I was home. He would like to speak as a matter of some urgency."

He said that he went to see the priest in Malin Head at the end of the summer of 1972, shortly after the Claudy massacre. "We talked long into the evenings about the situation in the north and then, one evening, John broke down in a flood of tears and said he had a terrible story to tell." "He became a member of the IRA and was soon in charge of a small number of volunteers." "His unit was ordered from Derry city to plant bombs in Claudy to ease the pressure on the IRA in the city and so they planted the bombs." "It was their intention to phone a warning as they passed through Dungiven on the way home but found that all telephones were out of order."

The priest said that, when he heard that "the police were on to him", he got a posting to Malin Head.

The priest claimed that his fellow-priest told him a lot about his activities in the IRA and



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the names of some of the volunteers. He claimed that his friend was afraid that if any of the murder gang were arrested by the police, they would confess to the mass murder. The bomber/priest has been named in the press as "Father" James Chesney, who died from cancer in 1980.

There have been claims that police Special Branch files allege that Chesney coordinated the attack. A retired Special Branch officer was reported in the press as having confirmed the existence of the files. He is reported to have said: "I read this intelligence brief on the Claudy bomb shortly after I joined Special Branch in 1976. It was mainly drawn up in the immediate aftermath of the bombing. It was still there when I retired and much of its contents were confirmed to me by other sources during the course of my career." It is believed that the files allege that the bombing was carried out by the IRA and co-ordinated by "Fr" Chesney, then curate at St Patrick's Church, Kennaught, two miles from Desertmartin.

The files also allegedly name Martin McGuinness, self-confessed second-in-command of the IRA in Londonderry in 1972 and now Education Minister. Dr. Ian Paisley, MP, said he was seeking a meeting with the Secretary of State to discuss the allegations. Mr Paisley claimed that the Catholic Church was a place of refuge which authorities were not prepared to touch. "The authorities must now be brought to account," he said. Lagan Valley MP, Jeffrey Donaldson has said that he intends raising the issue of the priest in the Commons and called on Martin McGuinness to make a statement. The news reports of the priest's involvement brought an immediate denial from the Roman Catholic church that the like could happen. But former SDLP member of the Stormont parliament, Ivan Cooper, confirmed that he had known, from the time of the incident, that the priest was involved.

What is very noticeable is the fact that neither the priest who knew of the identity of the leader of the IRA gang or Ivan Cooper, who claims he knew that the priest had been involved, nor any of the Roman Catholic hierarchy who moved the terrorist priest out of Northern Ireland after the bombing, made any attempt to have the murderer brought to justice while he was still alive.

The police enquiry into the bombing has been reopened. A senior police inspector has been appointed to follow-up on the statement by the priest who contacted the News Letter. A close relative of one of the victims told a newspaper that it is believed that one of the gang owns a bar in New York. A Dublin newspaper claimed that three of the bombers still live in the south Londonderry area where the unit was originally based. Another is said to live in Letterkenny, Co. Donegal.