

An Irish peacemaker

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [January 22, 2014](#) issue



Alec Reid administers last rites to David Howes, Belfast, 1988. Photo by David Cairns.

The Catholic priest was carrying an ultra-secret document that could mark a breakthrough in one of the world's bloodiest conflicts. En route to deliver it, though, a humanitarian crisis forced him to stop: he tried, unsuccessfully, to prevent a mob from murdering an unarmed soldier. After giving the soldier last rites, he continued to carry his potent message—although he had to change the envelope, which had become soaked with blood.

Such a heroic story sounds almost as if it comes from a Catholic suspense novel, but it really did happen—in Belfast in 1988. The priest in question was Alec Reid of the Redemptorist Order, who died in November at the age of 82.

Although little known in North America, in Ireland itself he is lauded for his critical role in ending the decades-long struggle between the (Catholic) Provisional Irish Republican Army and the British government. His mighty example of Christian peacemaking cries out to be remembered.

Alec Reid grew up in the Irish Republic, although later he moved to the north to live in a Belfast monastery. He never lost a sense of the profound structural injustices imposed on Northern Ireland's Catholics. In 1968, he sympathized with the surging civil rights movement, inspired by the example of Martin Luther King Jr. Peaceful protest, though, degenerated into violent ethnic and religious confrontations and

savage rioting, as the Provisionals launched their terrorist campaign. (Homicidal Protestant militias added their share of carnage.) Some 1,750 perished between 1971 and 1976, including a thousand civilians. Hugely destructive bomb attacks occurred both on the British mainland and in the Irish Republic.

By the time the struggle ended (more or less) in 1998, it had claimed 3,500 lives and devastated a whole generation. It had seemed like the war would never end. It is hard to overstate the deep polarization of the two main players, the British government and the Provisionals, each officially pledged to an absolute refusal to negotiate. In the 1980s, British media were even prohibited from broadcasting the voices of Republican leaders—not just the IRA but also the Sinn Féin party, which is generally regarded as the movement's political wing. In turn, the IRA refused to contemplate any agreement that fell short of total victory.

At a time when the gulf between the sides seemed unbridgeable, Alec Reid became the bridge. Throughout, he preached peace and also followed up with practical initiatives. In 1982, he approached Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams in an attempt to free a captive soldier. That effort failed, but he kept those channels open.

In the late 1980s, he established contacts between Northern Ireland's major Catholic parties, the revolutionary Sinn Féin and the peaceful and constitutional-minded Social Democratic and Labour Party. He urged the two to form a common front to work for peaceful change. It was while carrying messages between the two parties that Reid faced the deadly interruption of the soldier's killing. Still, contacts continued and were extended to include the leaders of the Irish Republic. Reid's negotiations effectively ended Sinn Féin's isolation.

Reid claimed no magical powers to halt violence. Rather, he took advantage of the mounting pressures that the paramilitaries faced in sustaining their campaign. For one thing, strong evidence pointed to British penetration of the IRA leadership at very high levels. Time and again, IRA attempts to launch violent spectacles collapsed bloodily in ways that suggested the British had advance knowledge of their most secret plans. After 1989, moreover, the fall of communism in Europe dried up IRA hopes for major arms supplies, as British intelligence was exercising surveillance over their international networks.

Surely, there had to be some way out of the spiral of killing? The Republicans accepted Reid as a negotiator because of his absolute integrity, his indomitable

personal courage and his impeccable credentials as a Catholic priest. Everyone could trust him—even when he maintained, against major evidence to the contrary, that Sinn Féin really did want to renounce violence.

The peace process was lengthy, and an early truce in 1994 collapsed. But the momentum was irresistible, leading to the celebrated Good Friday Agreement of 1998.

Although stubborn Republican extremists still operate, the worst of the war is long over, and Northern Ireland is rebuilding. Sinn Féin today pursues its goals through the ballot box.

In alliance with some Protestant clergy, Reid took on another task that was extremely difficult but much more hopeful—ensuring that the different militias genuinely had decommissioned their weapons so they could never be reused. The process was completed in 2005. He then sought still further challenges as a mediator between the Basque extremist movement and the Spanish government.

The Christian tradition calls peacemakers blessed. Doubly blessed are those who work to end a conflict that seems so utterly resistant to human intervention.