



## JOHN HUME: Pastor, Prophet, Politician

**Mary McAleese**, former President of Ireland, pays tribute to John Hume who died on August 3rd last. A tireless worker for peace, he believed in respect for diversity as a principle of peace.

I was thirteen when I first heard him preach in Holy Cross Church Hall in Belfast's Ardoyne. He did not mention the Gospel that evening for he preached on the Credit Union, a novel mobilisation of the pennies of the poor that he founded and developed throughout Ireland. He delivered a radical message of self-help in that parish with its seventy per cent unemployment. But the action and inaction of stupid and reactionary forces lodged mainly in the governments of the day at Stormont and Westminster ensured that Ardoyne would soon become notorious as the most violent sectarian interface of Northern Ireland's lamely named Troubles – an uncivil civil war by any other name – and among Christians. Into that mess not of his or his community's making, John Hume pitted his life and his immense talents in pursuit of peace.

I knew on that first evening that John Hume was no ordinary man but an extraordinary thinker of new things, a deeply compassionate carer for the poor and marginalised, a man who believed in our capacity to change things for the better if we worked together. He was as much a pastor to us as the Passionist priests who had

given him the loan of the hall. Later, I came to see him also as politician and prophet, a man offended by Northern Ireland's systemic political dysfunction with its sectarian divide and its woeful culture of violent paramilitarism in both the Catholic and Protestant communities. He fought bigotry and oppression but never descended into sectarian hatred or vengefulness. Rather his passion for the great commandment to love one another forged in him a solid faith in the capacity of the human heart to change, to soften, to be reconciled to 'the other'.

In a jurisdiction where Christian Protestants had constructed a disgraceful bastion of political and social elitism that deliberately excluded their Christian Catholic co-citizens, the sheer integrity of Hume's challenging voice affronted many, and gave heart to others. For years he hawked his superb and brilliantly articulated analysis of Northern Ireland's problems and possibilities for an agreed peace pact to the key influencers at Stormont, Westminster, Strasbourg, Brussels and Washington. It was he whose powers of persuasion almost miraculously brought the IRA to accept that their ambition for a



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united Ireland was only realisable in the context of a consensus built from peaceful parliamentary persuasion.

Like all prophets crying out in the wilderness he was to suffer a psychological crucifixion from detractors on all sides, not one fit to tie the shoelaces of this man who was precisely the towering moral problem-solving and risk-taking genius Northern Ireland needed. He was a Derry man to the core, an Irish man to the core, a pan-European to the core and the most outstandingly effective European Christian human rights activist of his generation. Who, apart from his trusted partner and co-peace worker Pat and his family, can truly tell at what personal cost to him and to them, he emptied himself time and time again in pursuit of that too-long elusive compromise that brought about a robust international peace treaty overwhelmingly endorsed by the communities in Northern Ireland and

indeed across the island of Ireland?

What are we to make of John Hume and his passing? What possible gathering of words could adequately describe such a man and our debt to him for changing us through his formidable powers of persuasion. I think of the words of St Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians (5:18). 'All this has been the work of God. He has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has enlisted us in this ministry of reconciliation'.

And now that John had left the field, the continuing ministry of reconciliation is ours to nurture and to grow so that come what may the future generations who share this island will share it as good neighbours who work with each other and for each other, in respectful delight in difference and not in fear-filled contempt. That will be our monument to John Hume, politician, pastor and prophet. 