

Report: Catholic leaders moved Northern Irish priest after 1972 bombing

DUBLIN - An independent inquiry has cleared church leaders in Northern Ireland of any "criminal intent" in the case of a priest accused of a 1972 Irish Republican Army bombing in Northern Ireland.

However, the report, based on an investigation by Britain's Police Ombudsman into the handling of a bombing that killed nine people in Claudy, Northern Ireland, found that church leaders held secret talks with police and British government officials to discuss the case of Father James Chesney, who police believed was involved in the bombing.

After the talks, Cardinal William Conway of Armagh, Northern Ireland, agreed to move the priest in question across the border to the Irish Republic, apparently with the understanding that this would avoid police investigation.

After the inquiry report was released Aug. 24, Cardinal Sean Brady of Armagh said "the church was placed in an impossible situation" when approached by the British government, because British officials said they would not pursue Father Chesney's potential involvement if he were moved out of Northern Ireland.

At the time, church leaders questioned Father Chesney about possible involvement in the atrocity. He strenuously denied any involvement.

The report found that, in 1972, detectives concluded that Father Chesney was an IRA leader and had been involved in the bombing. It added that by acquiescing to a government deal to move Father Chesney outside the jurisdiction, police were guilty of a "collusive act."

The police ombudsman, Al Hutchinson, said this had compromised the investigation and the decision "failed those who were murdered, injured or bereaved" in the bombing.

Political commentators have suggested that British government officials felt that protecting the priest from potential prosecution was the lesser of two evils.

During that turbulent period in 1972, many believed that Northern Ireland was on the brink of a sectarian civil war. Almost 500 people were killed that year. At least one Northern Irish commentator has said the government felt that if a priest had been arrested in connection with the Claudy bombing, it could have pushed community relations over the edge.

Cardinal Brady told Catholic News Service: "The Catholic Church did not engage in a cover-up of this matter. The actions of Cardinal Conway or any other church authority did not prevent the possibility of future arrest and questioning of Father Chesney."

The ombudsman found that until the time of his death in 1980, Father Chesney "is known to have regularly traveled across the border but was never arrested, questioned nor further investigated by the (police) in connection with the Claudy bombings or other terrorist activities."

Bishop Seamus Hegarty of Derry, the diocese where Father Chesney was a priest, appealed to "anyone who has information in relation to this horrific crime to provide it to the Police Service of Northern Ireland."

"Father Chesney is dead and, as a suspect in the Claudy bombing, he is beyond the justice of earthly courts," he said Aug. 24.

Bishop Hegarty said the Catholic Church, like other churches in Northern Ireland, "was constant in its condemnation of the evil of violence," so it was "shocking that a priest should be suspected of involvement in such violence."