President Dr. Mary McAleese
reflection questions & episode transcript

You may wish to discuss these questions with friends, family, or with a group you establish on zoom, or use them for your own writing and consideration.

Corrymeela always seeks to locate political and religious points of view within the story of the person speaking. If you're gathering as a group, consider how to create a sense of connectedness with the group. It might help to choose one of the Very Short Story Questions to reflect upon. As with any group process, finding a way to explore human stories in the context of enough safety is important. At all times, make it easy for someone in the group to keep their stories for themselves.

What early friendships or family experiences have influenced your current approach to politics, history, theology and art?

Have there been experiences of conversion or proselytism that stay in your memory? Briefly tell a story about one. Not all these stories are negative; not all positive either. Telling the story now, what do you notice about your response?

As you think about Irish-British relationships, what key moments stick out in your telling? — think about the most recent decade, as well as think about further back. Do others recall the incident differently, or start at a different historical point, or a different vantage point? What is your experience of hearing other people telling the same incident from their point of view? Do you find their telling enlightening, or objectionable, or engaging, or something else?

What leaders within your own national history (or histories; we know many people have plural belongings) are figures of great respect for you? Tell a story about why you hold them in great respect. Are there moments of moral courage in their life you particularly admire? Are there moments of failure that you note, but hold in a forgiving light?

The Corrymeela Podcast. Interview with President Dr. Mary McAleese. Transcript.

Pádraig Ó Tuama: Welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast. In the first year of Brexit, and a century after the partition of Ireland, I'll be in conversation with some of the top names in the fields of politics, art, history, and theology.

On this week's episode, I'll be talking to the former president of Ireland, Mary McAleese, who tells us about growing up in Ardoyne: *"Ours was a rambling house — we would call it a céilíing house — and it was a house that people just rambled into (they were hard to get out of as well!)."* bringing the Queen to Ireland: "*This was a woman who had come on a Christian mission of healing — there's no doubt in my mind about that."* and the future direction she wants this island to take: *"If we got a United Ireland tomorrow, we would still have to work on the reconciliation project; it will always be there. "*

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast. My name is Pádraig Ó Tuama. With me today is Dr. Mary McAleese, former president of Ireland; lawyer, canon lawyer, theologian and author, recently, of a memoir called *Here's The Story* published by Penguin Ireland. Mary McAleese, *a Uachtarán,* welcome and thanks very much for joining us.

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
Thank you, go raibh míle maith agat.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Fáilte.

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
It's good to be here.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
It's great you're here. Just as we start, Mary, where are you talking to us from?

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
Yes well, virtually, as we mentioned. I'm speaking to you from a small farm on the shores of the river Shannon, a lake actually, on the river Shannon - the upper Shannon, between the beautiful, beautiful town of Carrick-on-Shannon and the lovely little village of Cootehall, where my father was raised and baptised. So I'm back. I'm back where my father emigrated from.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

We're starting in the very place where I'd wanted us to start, which is to look at the sense of place and belonging that you write about in your book. In the book you mention family connections back to the 13th century, and you talk about Belfast and Roscommon and the West and County Down. Why is place and longevity of time in place so important to you?

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:

Well, I grew up, as you know, in Belfast, and my family had almost no roots in Belfast whatsoever; neither my mother nor my father- they were not Belfast people. My mother was from rural County Down, my father from rural Roscommon. And they gravitated to the city really for work. But they had no connections to that place. And even though its imprint was left very strongly on us - really, in many ways, a very negative imprint, it has to be said, because we grew up in Ardoyne, a place that was ravaged by The Troubles and by sectarianism - somehow it made life tolerable, more tolerable, that we were able to draw on other wells of experience and place.

So the Mournes were very important to us, the hills north of the Mournes, the Dromara Hills (where my mother's cousin still runs the family sheep farm that's been there for generations). And Roscommon, where the roots go back very, very far. I mean, I came back to live in Roscommon. This is where I made my home. And all of my father's brothers and sisters all emigrated; all of his neighbours, with very few exceptions, emigrated. It was poor, but it's exceptionally beautiful- what a gorgeous area. And for me to come back here was very important because I feel so deeply rooted here.

Where I'm sitting, I can look out the window across the Shannon, to an old abbey, which had an abbess, her name was Eidin. (The lake shore is called after her- Lough Eidin). And that abbey had a very strong association with my father's ancient clan. And to realise... First of all, being here makes me realise the mere dot that I am, you know on the landscape of history, but also makes me realise too the importance of place and the respect for place, to love place... to have a place you can love and how bereft you are, how bereft you are if you grow up in a place you cannot love. And that's what happened to me with Belfast.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah, I was struck in reading your book, you know, in the midst of describing the sectarianism that you grew up through in Ardoyne... There's this magnificent extended family of aunts and cousins and priests who were friends of the family, and all of these people that you were in school with, and involved teachers: the sense of community seems to have been profound in the midst of a sense of sectarianism that seems to have been an ever-present threat.

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:

It was very rich in family, very rich in community. And in the days before these kinds of facilities like talking online, people actually talked to each other and visited each other's houses and didn't need an invitation, and just rambled in. Ours was a rambling house, sometimes we would call it a céilíing house. And it was a house that people just rambled into, and were hard to get out of as well. And we were forever, you know, putting on the tea, making the tea, making the toast, running around the corner to buy the packet of biscuits for the unexpected visitors. I loved all that.

My mother's one of eleven children, and most of them well, they all lived in Ardoyne at some stage because they grew up there. Her parents had moved to the city when her father had got a job working with Barney Hughes' Bread, as a bread man, a 'bread server' as they call them. And so she raised, my grandmother raised her brood, in a small two-up two-down house in Ardoyne. And like, there were just dozens of us. Of my mother's siblings - she and her siblings between them - they all married quite young. And they all had large families, like they have 60 children between them. Yes, 6-0! I always say my family thought they had to increase, multiply and fill the earth entirely on their own. They did. They made a very good fist of it. And so there was this huge clan and the clan was always on the move somewhere. Now they mightn't have had cars, but they were just always going places. They were always 'colloguing' - as my mother would call it - with each other. In and out of each other's lives…

My grandparents, for example, visited our house every single day. Every day. And my grandfather would walk up the Crumlin Road - and he was a countryman, he'd been born and raised in a farm - and he must have looked ludicrous, you know, coming up the Crumlin Road with a scythe. This was the days when a scythe didn't strike dread and terror, you know, he was up, to cut the grass or cut down something or other in our garden. And he did the rounds of all his children who lived close by, in between whist drives and attending funerals. Because that was his other big passion. And we had a very rich family life, community life.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

It's so interesting that that comes together with living through this extraordinary burden and shock and threat of sectarianism that there is such thriving life happening at the same time. And that's not surprising. I think every family in Belfast was like that, or many of them, certainly. How do you look back to those twin experiences?

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:

I mean, we lived cheek-by-jowl. we always lived in the Protestant part of Ardoyne, but we lived in five homes, and almost all of those homes... my parents kept moving as the family grew bigger: I'm the oldest of nine so you always needed a new bedroom every few years. And most of my life was spent living in what I

call the Protestant part of Ardoyne, with Protestant neighbours and friends, and many of whom, you know, were and remain lifelong, wonderful friends, but there were others. We lived kind of surrounded by loyalist territory. And honestly, I do think that somehow they were offended by the nine children and the 60 grandchildren, in the school uniforms who looked as if they were going to make their mark in a different way from their parents.

My parents left school at 14 and 15, my dad at 14, my mum at 15; dad became a barman, mummy a hairdresser. And we were all going to the schools, we were taking full advantage, you see, of free second-level education and the rapid massification of third-level education. And we were - somehow people - there was a cohort that felt threatened by that, you know? Because after all, Northern Ireland was created - the British government created it - as a way of protecting, in perpetuity it seemed, the plantationist Protestants, to give them a little corner that they could call their own forever, and they could govern as they pleased. And they didn't have to offer equal or co-equal citizenship to Catholics (or anybody else, for that matter).

So we seemed to offend that in a way, because we were a growing, and we were a growing body, and we were very visible. And my aunts for example, on our road, three of my aunts and one of my male cousins had little shops, and this is a tiny little area, you know, we had two hairdressers (who didn't talk to each other, obviously). And we also had a cousin, Frank the barber, and we had a cousin who ran a little newsagent. And my aunt Kathleen who ran a dress shop. So like, we were really embedded in that community. Like there weren't that many shops there were... my family had quite a lot of them. Not quite a monopoly, but a lot of them at various times.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
In that way, it seems to be an introduction to a political citizenship as well to be aware of these dynamics to live through them as a child and then you know, you went on to study law in Queens in the 1970s- that seems to have been a very politicised time. Well, of course it was. And how did that help form your politics?

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
I'm always very glad that I grew up on the Protestant side of Ardoyne. That I didn't, I didn't grow up in a ghetto. And that I had that opportunity to have friends, to *befriend* people from right across the spectrum of political thinking within Protestantism and religion within Protestantism. That's where I first learned that not all Protestants went to the same church, unlike us Catholics, we all traipsed to the one church every Sunday. Whereas my friends scattered in all directions, as if they were fired, you know, from a machine gun. They all went in different directions.

And, I think also somehow, and don't ask me how, but somehow, the good that was in Christianity, you know, the idea that we had to love our neighbour, that did distil down, certainly into my consciousness. That was

the rallying call when sectarianism broke out, was: how do you react to this, as somebody who's supposed to be a Christian? I mean, some people went for the old playbook, you know, the old paramilitary playbook: you kill people and that's how you get what you want. You become muscular and vicious, and mean and nasty, and neighbour kills neighbour. And I really never was terribly impressed by that argument.

First of all, it was very masculine-muscular, and second, I couldn't see where it had actually worked very well. And also, it contradicted the beauty that I did manage to still see in the story of the Christian narrative, the beautiful narrative, you know, of peace on earth,of goodwill, of love one's neighbour, of a God who loves us all and embraces us all and from whom we get our dignity and equality of citizenship. So that part of the - that distilled part - of the narrative that I had received in my own religious formation appealed to me greatly, but it was also the very thing that challenged me, you know- confronted with naked sectarianism of people who plain hated us, because we were just Catholic. I had to find some way around that. And again, I'm very grateful that I had, I had such a litany of really good Protestant friends who did not conform to that view, of Protestants as Catholic haters, or Protestants as people who would deny citizenship and voting rights. Many of my friends took part in civil rights marches. Many of my friends were as offended as we were by the idea that we couldn't get jobs, that we couldn't get the vote, that we couldn't, you know, we didn't have the same access to housing. They were as offended. Why? Because they shared the same Christian sensibility.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Yeah. Well, I'm going to talk to you in a while about theology and ecumenism as well, because it's so clear from your friendships as a child that that gave birth to a really strong public ethic of ecumenism that manifested itself out through your presidency. But I'd like to talk about your presidency. What made you want to become president or what made you think you could become president when up until that stage nobody who had been born in the North had held that position previously?

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
In the summer of… I mean I was one of the people who was very, very, just delighted when Mary Robinson had become president, as first woman president. I had previously taken her job in Trinity College, back in 1975: she had been Reid professor; I became Reid professor. And in the summer of ‘97, I think many of us just assumed that she would stand again, and would of course, have been, you know, would have been elected undoubtedly again. And then she decided not to do that, but to go to the United Nations, so that opening happened. And we were- if you remember, this was ‘97, we did not have the Good Friday Agreement. But we were - if you like - slowly making progress towards it.

And I had been an acolyte of John Hume’s from, for years, from [when] I was a teenager. And his analysis that these three sets of relationships between the people within the North (Catholic and Protestant), between North and South, between in other words the peoples- cross border relationships, and the east-west

relationships: that analysis of those three sets of relationships really struck me as an imperative. And I had been working with John Hume and Gerry Adams, helping, in a minor way, the Hume-Adams talks. So I was immersed in that thinking. I also knew the Republic very well: my father is from there, I had spent every holiday here. And more importantly, of course, I had worked in current affairs here, and I had worked in Trinity College. I had also worked in Belfast, and Queens, and I had lived there, and I'd lived for many years in Northern Ireland. So I knew both jurisdictions.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
And the sensibilities that happen in both.

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
So I had been thinking, trying to distil my own thinking as to what was needed and how, you know, how I could critique what was wrong and what was needed, and how we could - with a focus on the future - trying to stop this business of always dragging the past behind us, so that it constantly is like a braking mechanism on the present, and, you know, stops the future from happening except to the extent that it replicates the past. So that was all in my mind when Mary Robinson decided she wasn't going to run.

And then I was approached- I didn't offer myself as it happened. A number of people came to me and suggested that I would be a good candidate. And they wanted initially for me to run as an independent, but I knew that a written independent would have very little chance. I also had been in another life - and I'd lived in Dublin - I'd been a member of Fianna Fáil, indeed I had run, unsuccessfully, as a Fianna Fáil candidate. At that time, the government in the Republic was a coalition government headed by Fianna Fáil in partnership with the Progressive Democrats. So I felt that I had, if I could persuade them, then I would believe in my own candidacy if you like, and I felt that I'd a good chance to win. I sort of felt that it would be mine to lose in many ways, if I did. And I also could see that that was a navigable path to doing what I wanted to do with my life and had been doing which was building bridges, but in a different- with a completely new platform.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Building bridges was your theme, wasn't it?

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
Yes, that's the theme I chose. Now building bridges was the way in which we distilled into a simple expression, really, another complicated and profound procedure, which was to try and reach out to - not people that we would normally be friendly with every day and who would come to the house anyway, because that was easy - but actually the difficult ones, the people who were the hardest to reach, who over their dead bodies were saying, would they ever stand in Áras an Uachtaráin (the house of the president); who

over their dead bodies would ever cross the border; thought that the south, was a Trojan horse, always waiting to overtake Northern Ireland and turn it into a Roman Catholic Republic. All of that. We had to deal with that. It was the people most estranged that we wanted to befriend.

Why? I didn't want to turn them into Irish nationalists incidentally, because I came from and come from Northern Ireland, as you know, and it's true religion really is just simply proselytising on behalf of something or other. It's a deeply evangelical place. It's a deeply proselytising place. People befriend you in order that you know, you become their, the pet Protestant, or the pet Catholic, or the Catholic who you know, is a unionist, or the Protestant who is a nationalist, it's all about numbers. And I wanted to get away from that really rather cynical way of dealing with people.

And I really wanted to just simply say as a really a very obvious thing: we're going to be neighbours forever on this island. We're going to be neighbours in Belfast, we're gonna be neighbours in Dublin. We're going to be neighbours in Rostrevor, neighbours in Newry, Armagh, Derry, wherever. And whatever our politics we're going to be neighbours. Wouldn't life be so much better if we were good neighbours to one another? And if we could, for a moment, just stand in each other's shoes, hear each other out and accept: this is how that person thinks. It's not my job to make them think differently. It's not my job to turn Protestants into Catholics or unionists into nationalists. It's my job as president to offer a place of hospitality where we can begin to grow simple, ordinary, everyday friendships, strong enough and robust enough to transcend difference.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Yeah, I'm struck by, you know, the ordinary everydayness of speaking about neighbourliness, and yet the extraordinary and radical nature of doing that in a place that has been so affected by sectarianism like Ireland, north and south. And I know that you came in for some criticism by for instance, marking the 12th of July in the Áras for the first time in 1998, just after the deaths of the Quinn children who'd been burned to death in a sectarian attack in Ballymoney. Yet you thought for you it was important to say: we have to persevere with neighbourliness, even in the face of atrocity.

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
That particular event was desperately important: it was the first July 12th in the Áras and I had promised when I went into the Áras that we would commemorate that day, which was a seminal day in Irish history. And we would do it together - as children of the losing Jacobites, and children of the winning Williamites - with culture and tradition deriving from that; with music, dance, poetry, song, perspective. We would share that, on July 12th. Now, as you say, I was ridiculed from a height for it. And my view was: the people who were ridiculing... if I had any respect for them, I might have taken them seriously, but I didn't. So, that didn't bother me.

And we brought in the Orange Order in the Republic, and said to them ‘here's what we'd like to do and we'd like you to be part of it’. And they bought into it, thankfully. But they were sceptical, they said, because they could see the body of scepticism outside and they thought that I would drop it, and I made a promise to them. I said: ‘look, no matter what comes or goes, no matter what the circumstance or the context, we will do this’. Why? Because in Northern Ireland, one of the awful things was that talks, for example, along the lines of peace very often became interrupted by dreadful terrorist events which sent people scattering back into their bunkers. And I was not going to let the men of violence, and indeed the women of violence, but the people of violence, do that to our building bridges. We were going to keep on going. And we were going to try and build solidarity around that and build trust around that. I was not going to be scattered back into my bunker, just because some dreadful people had visited upon the Quinn family the most appalling thing that you could do- to take away their lovely little children in that dreadful event. And so we checked on that day with people close to the Quinn family, and they came back and they said ‘please go ahead’. Precisely because they understood how important it was; we were about the business of trying to prevent anything like this ever happening again to children, like the little Quinn children. Too late for them, but early enough to prevent it for others.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
There's a phrase in Irish from the Dingle Peninsula for when you're trying to express a very particular form of trust, where you say: ‘mo sheasamh ort lá na choise tinne’ - ‘you are the place where I stand on the day when my feet are sore’. And I'm struck by how that seems to be what you're trying to do, is to say on these terrible days, lá na choise tinne, the day our feet are sore, the day we can barely stand in the same place as each other, that you're asserting that that's the very time when neighbourliness is needed, rather than the easier times.

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
My memory of that day is just tears, you know, and we were a mixed gathering, you know, literally the first such gathering of many; we had them for the 14 years I was there, we had it every year, but that year was very special. First of all, people were quite tentative, and really rather, not really knowing what to expect, you know: how would it go? And was it possible actually to gather together and to commemorate together in a meaningful way, without being superficial? Because that was always the big danger in Northern Ireland. You know, you could do what Seamus Heaney says: ‘Whatever you say, say nothing’. You could have a gathering that actually said nothing, and was a nothing-thing, but this was a something-thing. And people came with their hearts heavy after the Quinn children's deaths. And they were together, and they were there to a purpose, and they hugged and they cried together, and they put heads on shoulders together, and they held hands. And I felt it was a wonderful occasion. Because it showed the deep compassion and solidarity that...that we were capable of, that transcended all those other labels.

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Pádraig Ó Tuama:
You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama, former leader of Corrymeela, and with me today is Dr. Mary McAleese, the former president of Ireland who has just published her memoir: *Here's the Story*.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
As you mentioned earlier on, you were keen to look at relationships in the North- relationships between the two Irish jurisdictions, and then relationships across the Irish Sea between Ireland and Britain as well. And most notably, I suppose, with the visit of the queen to Ireland in May 2011. In your book, you make it clear that you felt that visiting the Garden of Remembrance, and Croke Park, and some words in Irish were key. Can you tell us a little bit about why those public manifestations of place and language were so important in that historic visit? First time a sitting British monarch came to visit the Republic...

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
This was the Queen of the United Kingdom. And she had never set foot in the Republic of Ireland, and no monarch had set foot in 100 years in the Republic of Ireland. And there are good reasons for that, all to do with a history of an appalling colonisation and appalling imperialization of Ireland. It ran deep on both sides, the estrangement. And yet, I knew from very far out, from long before I became president, that she really wanted to come. Not out of curiosity: it was not just coming to be the first monarch who set foot in the Republic. But she had a mission. She's a very deeply Christian woman. I mean, she believes in the commandment to love one another very deeply. And she was very well-read on Ireland, as I discovered when I first met her in 1995. I met her two years before I became president. And around a conversation precisely about the problems of Ireland. And so I knew how deeply she felt the fact that she couldn't go. I also realised that in coming to Ireland, she was going to come, really as a pilgrim, honestly. I would, I would use that language, she was coming on a very special pilgrimage of healing. This was not just to come and take nice photographs, you know, and to shake hands, and to make speeches. This was to come and really deeply embed in that past, in that history, to go to where the hurt was, and to show a willingness to heal.

Now, she only made one speech- she doesn't make a lot of speeches, generally, anyway. And so we knew there would be the one speech. So the places were important, the where-she-would-go was important. The Garden of Remembrance was important. Why? Because it commemorates everybody who tried, over generations, to get rid of British rule from Ireland. And so to go there, and to acknowledge them was going to be very important. Because believe me, if there was criticism of having the 12th of July at the Áras, it was nothing like the attitude to bringing the monarch, the British monarch, to the Republic. There was a lot of opposition. And there was a lot of worry that- what if it went wrong? What if something happened to her? You know, security was a big issue.

But I felt very strongly that when we were putting the ideas together of where she could go and how the visit could be presented, that the Garden of Remembrance was, you know, was really important. That going to Croke Park was also important because it's such a big, big feature of Irish life and we were heading into the commemorations as well- don't forget the century of commemorations was almost upon us. And one of those big iconic ones, of course, was the 20th November [19]20. And the killing there and the killings in the morning by the IRA and in the afternoon by British forces actually in Croke Park. So that was, those were - it seemed to me - important. Also as I said, subsequently, when my husband went to explain to the GAA why I wanted her to come to Croke Park, he said very simply: the queen is coming and Mary wants her to see the best of Ireland, and the GAA is the best we have, and it is!

So the Irish language, I thought, you know, that awful litany of oppression of the Irish language and suppression of the Irish language that have been part of our, the Irish experience at the hands of the British administration, had caused, untold hurt and also robbed us in many ways of the full flowering of our language, but it still hurt, you know, there was a lot of hurt around that. And I felt that if she could use just a couple of words of Irish a few words, that that in turn, - she didn't have to make a whole speech in Irish - but a couple of words would again be just so - coming from her - would be so healing. And I have to say in fairness to her, I made these suggestions, and they all came to pass- not always in a direct line may it be said! There was a bit of to-ing and fro-ing, but she was up for whatever was recommended by me. What I was really impressed by was how she trusted my judgement. And we set up a back channel through which we, you know, we corresponded.

That's how the GAA thing came about, because our own channels had told me it couldn't happen, wrongly as it happened. When I raised the issue of the GAA and there was pushback on that from our own side here, you know, in the Republic. They weren't happy about it and they said they would send an emissary to Croke Park to the leadership to see whether it was even remotely feasible. And the word came back no. And I didn't trust it. I'm GAA to the hilt and I often say, I'm more GAA than I'm Catholic! I know the GAA backwards and forwards. I said: no, there's something not right about this. Maybe it wasn't explained properly. And so I sent my husband Martin, and the head of the Department of Foreign Affairs, he went, he accompanied Martin to

meet the leadership of the GAA, who were absolutely appalled when they discovered that they had been paraphrased as having rejected the idea, because it had never been put to them. The first time they heard of it was from Martin.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Amazing. I remember watching the television coverage of that state speech and as the Queen was standing up to make her speech, it just occurred to me to go: like if this was coverage of a state visit of the queen to France, of course, she'd start off with some words in French. There would be nothing controversial or even surprising about that. It's just basic diplomatic gesture. And as she was standing, I thought: 'what language is she going to start off in?' And when she started off with beautifully pronounced five words: 'A Uachtárain agus a chairde' - 'president and friends', I wept. And then I couldn't understand- what was it in me that was so moved by hearing our language coming from the mouth of a British monarch? What was that like for you to hear that?

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
Well first of all, I wasn't expecting it, because I had been told quite emphatically that this idea was not a runner, precisely because she was terrified - and rightly so - that if she made a mess of it, it would add to all the centuries of indignity, and I understood that completely, and accepted that completely. And so my view was the subject was now closed. But then she, well, I don't know whether she initiated this. But what happened then was, I had had this conversation with her then deputy personal private secretary, now Sir Edward Young. And he had come to the Áras, and we discussed this and he came back to me, and he said: 'the Irish thing... you know, it's not that she doesn't want to speak Irish. It's not that, it's just the terror that if these words were wrong, everything could go pear-shaped'. And I understood that- absolutely sensible. And so I said: 'look, forget about it'. But I did apparently say to him in that conversation: 'I'm not asking you to do a whole speech in Irish, it's only five words'. And, and that passed off.

And then we got a visit - as you do - from the High Commissioner in Islamabad, the British High Commissioner in Islamabad. He's an old friend of mine, former British ambassador to the Holy See, called Francis Campbell, a good Northern Irish man. And Francis was coming back to London, and he dropped into Dublin. And he rang me up said 'I'm just dropping past on the way back to London' and I thought, well, that's an odd kind of journey to be making now. But then he said, he took an old raggedy envelope from his pocket. And he said (his great friend was Edward Young), and he said, 'Edward, just for the record, wants you to write out the five words', and I said straight back to him 'here, hang on a minute, that subject now is closed', you know, I don't want to be looking like I'm opening it again. Because I would regard that as really quite disrespectful of the queen. If I was to do that. I said 'no it's closed' he said 'Oh I know that. I know it's closed, it's not for me', he said, 'it's not for the queen, it's just for Edward's own...he forgot to ask you, you

said five words. He'd love to know what they were just for the record, it’s just for his record’. And I said, ‘well, on that basis, I'll write them out. But please, that's as far as it goes’.

But of course, they played me. He went straight back to Edward, and the queen rehearsed the five words. And until she stood up and said them, I had no knowledge for sure that she was going to do it. And then she stood up and I swear, in my direct line of vision, Edward Young winked at me and laughed, which is a big ‘gotcha’.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
There’s diplomacy for you!

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
You're right, the impact of that, Pádraig, I mean-

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Oh, my God!

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
The volume of letters about those five words, and people saying that they cried with emotion, because they were healing and they were *designed* to heal. This was a woman who had come on a Christian mission of healing. There's no doubt in my mind about that. Absolutely none.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Everything you're talking about here shows the power of public gesture. And I don't mean empty gesture, I mean, gesture that's full of potentiality. Something almost that’s like a sacrament, because it is doing something physical in the moment that actually changes something and has the potential to create and contain and embody further life. And that seems to have been so much of the setup in the lead-in to the decade of centenaries, you know this centenary of all of these pieces of painful history between Britain and Ireland. It seemed to me that you and your presidency and subsequently Michael D. and then the British monarchs as well going back and forth, that there was this public representation of gesture that could be almost sacramental in its capacity to hold reconciliation and to hold that up.

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
I think that's a really interesting analysis. And I love it. And the reason I love it is because for me, those iconic moments that you've described, like for example, using the Irish language; like going to the garden of remembrance; like standing on the hallowed sward of Croke Park looking back up at the Hogan stand and talking about Michael Hogan. These were moments loaded with grace so they were in many ways exactly

that- sacramental. For me, sacrament is about loading, either whether it's loading life with grace, and they were grace-filled, and they weren't cynical gestures. We've become, honestly, we’ve become so inured, so almost, anaesthetised by spin. And by empty gestures, by things that turn out not to be real, by hypocrisy.

We were looking in this visit for things that had absolute authenticity about them, utter, utter authenticity, stripped of spin, stripped of anything, except just the grace of that moment, and what it conveyed. And what it did to history, what it did in the present to create something new, to unleash into the future a new kind of grace. And, and I think it did that because these gestures were so authentic. I’d a lovely letter, I've talked about it a few times. I think I wrote about it in the book, but this wonderful woman wrote to me.... like I had what, 6000 letters after that visit? Her Majesty, the queen had the biggest post she ever got on any state visit. It meant so much to the Irish in England too you know, who some of them had lived with their heads down for a long time.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
You’re listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. I’m Pádraig Ó Tuama, former leader of Corrymeela, and with me today is Dr. Mary McAleese, the former president of Ireland who has just published her memoir, *Here’s the Story,* from Penguin.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Mary, I want to turn to what you've called a potential threat to peace: Brexit. You've been very critical, warning of potential drift in the peace process. Has it also set back relations between Britain and Ireland given that we're talking about the kind of culmination of some beautiful moments of British-Irish reciprocality? We have seen some increase in anti-Irish rhetoric from pro-Brexit politicians, even the threat to starve Ireland by Priti Patel. What do you think the last few years leading into this centenary of partition, how do you think the tone of British-Irish public conversation has gone?

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
Brexit I believe to be a disaster in every possible way. It was not within our thinking when the Good Friday Agreement was constructed. And the Good Friday Agreement took it for granted that all the sides: Britain and Ireland, Northern Ireland, would all continue to be members of the European Union. And that that would give us a platform through which we would continue to grow this common identity. In John Hume's view, always, his view was that, particularly the Single European Act, and the single European market had really flattened the border and helped to really normalise relationships, which on a cross-border basis have become very organic, very spontaneous, very normal, very natural. And that was one of the great benefits - not just to the Good Friday Agreement - but particularly and sometimes forgotten, of the single European market. And so if back in 1998, we had thought that there was going to be a Brexit day, the Agreement would have been

different, it would have had to be different, to build in new strengths to deal with that horrendous weakness that was coming down the line.

But one of the values of membership, the common membership of the European Union, indeed was the Good Friday Agreement itself and the process that led to it. Why? Because from 1973 onwards, Irish politicians, Irish businessmen, people involved in trade unions, right across all civic society sectors, civil servants, met together on a daily basis on something to do with European business. And Irish governments and British governments grew in friendship with one another as happens over those days. We think of the relationship between John Major, for example, and Albert Reynolds; those two governments, headed by men who were pragmatists, and who had great trust and faith in one another, but also who could see a common purpose around what peace could look like.

And so one of my problems is: when Brexit happens, those daily encounters disappear, we don't have them anymore. And, they took - people were on speed dial to each other, you know - but that took years to establish and to build, we're going to lose all that. That is a huge volume of connectivity that will literally evaporate overnight. And we needed that. Why? Because we are joint custodians of the peace process. And the Good Friday Agreement, although it does have the three strands and it does have mechanisms for strengthening those strands and developing them and it has fora in which those strands can be articulated, they were never road tested against Brexit. And indeed they've been weak enough if the truth be told. And, so they haven't been road tested, and that worries me.

The other thing that worries me, of course, is this dreadful Tory government of Boris Johnson's, which, you know, I just find its attitude to Northern Ireland appalling. I was living in Britain during the time of - I was living in London and teaching in London, in a university there - during the time of the referendum. And so I know from first principles, how little attention was paid to the impact on Northern Ireland. They didn't give a toss about Northern Ireland or the Good Friday Agreement, the Brexiteers- not a toss. Funny enough, in fairness, I have to say to Theresa May, she did. She thought... she was one of a very few politicians to even bother to come to Northern Ireland to discuss - as an anti-Brexiteer then - the dangers from Brexit. And I have great respect for her as a result of that, but very few others did. Very, very few. The only other one I can think of was Alex Salmond from Scotland. So you have a body of Brexiteers who were arrogantly dismissive of the impact on Northern Ireland. They didn't want to care, they didn't care about, they actually just plain didn't care.

And even when it was pointed out to them, and I went and made speeches to groups in Westminster, as part of a group that got together to try and explain the impact and the dangers of that impact. We were laughed at. I mean, I remember being on Sky television the night of the result. We knew, we knew fairly early on that we were going to lose this referendum, incidentally. We already knew. And it was devastating, really quite

devastating, which is one of the reasons why I got so involved. I hadn't intended to get involved [in] anything politically. But I felt this was absolutely essential when we realised that we were in danger; that Brexit was going to win. And I remember being on television, and Adam Bolton from Sky News, who literally had no idea when I suggested to him that this was going to have an impact on the peace process and the impact on the Good Friday Agreement. Northern Ireland, after all, had voted to remain like Scotland, and was going to be now overwhelmed by the vote of England and Wales. Why did people in Northern Ireland vote to remain? Not just because they wanted to be European, but they knew how important European-ness and membership of the Union was to the peace process. They knew how important it was.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
I mean looking ahead you've been quite clear about wanting to see a united Ireland or a new Ireland at some point. How do you see that happening? Do you have a timeframe? Do you think Brexit has changed that?

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
Well, I think Brexit will feed, to some extent, it'll feed those, that cohort of people in Northern Ireland who are not united Irelanders, in any shape or form, who wouldn't necessarily be pro-united Ireland, but who might now consider the issue in more broad terms if they could continue membership of the European Union. Why? Because in the immediate aftermath of Brexit - the Brexit referendum - Enda Kenny did a very good day's work: he went to the European Union, and he got agreement from all member states, including the United Kingdom, that if there was a referendum on the future constitutional position of Northern Ireland, and the decision was in favour of a united Ireland, then Northern Ireland would automatically segue back into the European Union- there wouldn't be a whole pallava of having to meet all sorts of targets and open and close chapters and all that, that they would just segue straight back in to the European Union. That's a great bonus. That's a big comfort. And so, yes, I think that will play.

The other thing, of course, is the demography, the demography now is marching, marching steadily towards a Catholic (so-called) demography, which shows that they will have a voting majority. Ironically, they'll probably reach that voting majority in the hundredth anniversary of the establishment of Stormont.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Yeah. And do you think you can- like a united Ireland isn't necessarily a reconciled Ireland and, you know, nationalists in the North and nationalists in the Republic also have beefs with each other at times about what the shape of Ireland should be. How do you see the journey towards a reconciled Ireland happening alongside questions to do with a border poll?

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:

I think the reconciliation project is a centuries-long project. I mean, it's a generations-long project. It's a slightly different project from, more than slightly different from a united Ireland. Because if we got a united Ireland, tomorrow, we'd still have to work on the reconciliation project- it will always be there. The united Ireland project literally is a fifty percent plus one project. That's what was agreed in the, one has to accept that. That is the agreement in the Good Friday Agreement. That's what we all signed up to. Now, it would be wonderful if it was more than that, if we got to a situation where you know, you were able to... where a united Ireland was, by referendum, supported by much more than simply a Catholic majority, or a nationalist (so called) majority, that would be a wonderful thing. And it's one of the reasons why I think, as we discuss the issue of a united Ireland, we have to be concerned that it is also about creating the circumstances in which it can become a reconciled Ireland; in which everybody has equality of citizenship, and so we have to think of innovative ways of meeting the needs and the desires and the wants and the identities of the people who will share that, that eventually united Ireland.

One of the things that bothers me greatly is the way in which we were unable, for example, during the Covid crisis, to create an all-Ireland strategy. Now it made incredible sense to confront a pandemic that was impacting the entire island, the entire world, with - as Gabriel Scally kept telling us over and over again - with one set of answers applied to the one island. And yet that didn't happen. Now that worries me because it didn't happen, for reasons....well I'd like to, I'd like to hear those reasons articulated: I've never heard a good one articulated.

So I do firmly believe that not until we get over partition and relieve ourselves of the abject burden of partition, which has been baleful. I mean, it's, it's been awful. And let's face it, I mean, the unionist government's had the best part of a century to create, you know, a liberal democracy with co-equal citizenship and a happy place, and they really failed rather abjectly at doing that. And if you're to look at the trajectories of the two parts of the island, where did the liberal democracy emerge from? Where did the wealth-creating, stand-on-your-own-two-feet liberal democracy emerge? It emerged in the Republic.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
You were president of Ireland and not just president of the Republic of Ireland for two terms, the second term was uncontested. But people in the North couldn't vote in those elections for the president. Would you like to see that change?

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
Well, I stood in that election, I had no vote, no member of my family (except one brother who lived in the Republic) had a vote and still I was voted into office which was, you know, a wonderful thing, a wonderful feeling. It would have been, it would have been even more wonderful in many ways, if the people of Northern Ireland could have joined in that, but that's not how it is. But you know, people are working on that,

and they're trying to work up a plan. But I think that is, in some ways, really not the, it's not the big issue here.

The big issue really here is how we trundle forward, knowing there's going to be a referendum coming. It has to come- it's part and parcel of the Good Friday Agreement. When the numbers are sufficient that they could possibly sustain a vote in favour of a united Ireland, the Secretary of State will be obliged to call that referendum because that was the deal, it was the compromise deal: Northern Ireland stayed part of the United Kingdom for as long as that was the will of the people, but the will of the people would be tested, and here was the plan for testing it. So that has to be honoured. And it will have to be honoured at some stage in the future, in my view. I don't know when. I'm very glad that the government in Ireland has said that they're not going to be calling for it for the next five years. I think that's very sensible. We do need to take breath, we do need to keep working on the reconciliation project, we do still need to keep working on the trust. And we also need to have some idea in our heads what that united Ireland might look like. And how will it embrace a fairly significant cohort of people who regard themselves as British and who will feel that they have lost?

There's going to have to be generosity, what we cannot have- even though a fifty percent plus one will win the day, will win the day. And we accept that because that's what we, that's what we signed up to in the Good Friday Agreement. How will we embrace - those of us who believe in this united Ireland and who see the building together of something really quite new and strong, with great heft and momentum behind it - how will we embrace one another? And how will we sell that embrace to people who don't really want to be embraced; who just feel they lost and will be angry and upset? So there's a lot of thought, I think is going to have to go into what I might call the soft politics here. The pastoral end of things.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Your role as a former president and as a canon lawyer and theologian, a public voice in public theology in Ireland and in the broader Catholic Church too… you walked away from the presidency after two terms - two extraordinary terms - and rather than keeping up an international profile, you went off to Rome to study, leaving the Áras for books in Rome, and presumably essays and marking and all the things that come with…

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
Exams! Medieval Latin, God help me.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Tell us about that. What is the - I mean, you've already touched on it - but your extraordinary interest and awareness in the public power of religion, and I can hear your subtlety that the public power of religion hasn't always been for the good, but you have devoted enormous amounts of time to studying that.

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:

Well one of the things that always baffles me, for a long time, has been the way in which public discourse - particularly political discourse, media discourse - assumes that religion doesn't really matter; that it's an entirely privatised, that rather got bored with it, let it go away, couldn't be bothered with it, it’s dying on its feet. Actually, no it's not. Five out of seven people in the world identify as members of one of the seven major religious-based systems in the world. Most of those faith systems are ancient. They are millennia old. And they have shaped cultures all over the world. And they continue to shape cultures all over the world. I mean, we talk in the West about the demise of the Catholic Church's power. And it's true, people are walking away, wherever there's education. And wherever people know that they have the right to freedom of speech, freedom of opinion, freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. People are entitled to walk away, and they do, but there are many parts of the world where those, that understanding of fundamental freedoms still has to reach.

The Catholic Church has never had more members than... it has 1.2 billion members today, one in six people in the world is a member of the Catholic Church. It's growing in Africa, it's growing in Asia. And that phenomenon, and Islam of course, will quite soon probably in numerical terms probably overtake Christianity. There’s somewhere between two and three billion people in the world are Christians. And sooner or later - actually sooner - Islam will take over that number. So these big Abrahamic faiths: the Christian faith and the Islamic faith are set to dominate the religious landscape for the future. So they have to be taken seriously. And we do have to equip ourselves, I think, with the information to be able to interrogate their power, their status, and their influence. They are still hugely, hugely influential.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I mean, I can see Mary that, you know you've been described - and in the book it mentions - that you've been described as a thorn in the side of the Catholic church because of speaking about questions to do with freedom of conscience; questions to do with the role of women in the leadership of the church; questions to do with the visibility of LGBTQ people in the life of the church. And you continue to remain a part of the church. I mean, obviously, that's partly ‘cause it's impossible to leave - according to canon law - but also you remain active in terms of being a voice speaking within it. What keeps you nurtured to continue to speak from the point that you do speak?

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:

Well first of all, I have great faith. I do believe that there is a loving God out there. And I do believe that I'm answerable to that God, and that I benefit from the grace that flows from that relationship with God. So my faith is different, in many ways from my religion. I'm surprised that my faith has managed to survive my religion, quite frankly. And I'm surprised that faith for a lot of people manages to survive religion, because

religion very often differentiates and drives us into bunkers, rather than introducing us to the wonder of this God, whose human family is all of us, regardless of which religion we encounter.

I mean, I'm very fortunate over my lifetime - and in particular, since I left the Áras - I have lived in community with Muslims, with Jews, with orthodox, with Eastern Catholics, with people of no religion. And I've been, you know, so blessed in many ways, and I've studied with them and I've lived with them, and we have communicated and also among the greatest friends I have are people of faith that when we distil it all down, we discover our faith, you know, it's pretty similar. And our relationship with God: pretty similar.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Dr. Mary McAleese- president, lawyer, canon lawyer, theologian, it's been a real pleasure to talk to you. And the memoir is out now, published by Penguin and it's called *Here's the story*. Mary McAleese. Many thanks.

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
My pleasure, thanks. Good to see you, Pádraig.

Our guest this week, Dr. Mary McAleese, was President of Ireland from 1997 to 2011. Her memoir *Here's the Story* is available in bookshops and online.

Don't forget to listen right to the end for when she answers one of our 'Very Short Story Questions'.

Thanks for tuning in to The Corrymeela Podcast. I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama and I'll be back with another episode next week.

The Corrymeela Podcast comes to you with generous support from our funders: the Henry Luce Foundation, the Community Relations Council in Northern Ireland and the *Fund for Reconciliation* from the Irish Government

The Corrymeela Podcast is a FanFán production. Thanks to Researcher and Producer Emily Rawling. The podcast was mixed by Fra Sands and Safe Place Studios.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
D'you mind if I ask you a couple of really, very short story questions? We're kind of looking for a two sentence answer. I'll just ask you one or two of these. What three people from your culture's present or past would you want to be in a lockdown bubble with?

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
Oh, three people? Alec Reid.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Priest of Clonard. Redemptorists.

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
Absolutely. For sure, always loved a conversation with Alec, and he would be one. A wonderful woman called Amal Al Qubaisi, she's Muslim, first ever woman elected to an Arab parliament, great friend of mine- tremendous character. And a young Muslim scholar, whom I lived together with in Rome, when we lived in community in the Lay Centre in Rome, and who introduced me to Islamic thinking on the Virgin Mary. He's from Kosovo. And those will be my three. And as you can see, the conversations will be all around faith issues, but also about just everyday life, and how they can be should be enhanced by faith and not damaged by religion.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:
Has anyone ever said to you that you were disloyal to your culture or identity?

Pres. Dr. Mary McAleese:
The worst time for me was Cardinal Bernard Law in Boston, who did say that he despaired for Catholic Ireland, that I was their president. And I had to remind him that I was not the president of Catholic Ireland, nor was I elected to be the president of Catholic Ireland. I was elected to be the president of Ireland.

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