• Not long after Mary McAleese became President of Ireland in 1997 she bore witness to what some would have called a miracle. Five months after her inauguration, on April 10, 1998 - a very Good Friday - between 400 and 900 years of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland came into its final phase.

• The Good Friday Agreement was the most important step yet towards achieving peace in Northern Ireland. It led to a powersharing government in Belfast and a greater stability and prosperity for those living in Northern Ireland as well as residents of the border region.

• It is based on justice, equality and parity of esteem and while it isn’t perfect it is workable.
• Last year Mary McAleese told Vatican Radio: ‘The parties who signed the Good Friday Agreement knew when signing it that peace was not going to come the next day.

• ‘They had a vested interest in it and it was an expression of their desire for peace. But they also knew that you cannot turn your back on 900 years of received history and bitterness and division and mountains of accumulated hurt. It takes time. That’s why it was always called a process.’

• And it is a process that is still unfolding. As President of Ireland her motto was ‘building bridges’ and that she did, entertaining representatives of new immigrant communities and survivors of institutionalised child abuse, celebrating Unionist traditions, and carrying on her predecessor Mary Robinson’s engagement with the global Irish community.
• But the biggest bridge she built was between Ireland and Britain, and that included an historic public welcome onto Irish soil of Queen Elizabeth in 2011.

• The state visit was the first by a British monarch in 100 years and was seen as a symbolic normalisation of British–Irish relations, settling most outstanding territorial disputes between the states, including the abandonment by the Republic of its territorial claim to Northern Ireland.

• In 2011 when the Queen began one of her official speeches with a few words spoken in the Irish language: – "A Uachtaráin, agus a chairde" – it changed the landscape of Anglo Irish history forever.

• Mary McAleese’s reaction, although off mic, was heard around the world.

• “Wow” was all she said.
Mary McAleese served as President of Ireland from 1997 until 2011. She made history as the first Northern Irish native to be elected president.

She had intimate knowledge of ‘The Troubles’ in her early childhood when the family’s North Belfast home in the Ardoyne was machine-gunned while they were at church. It fostered in McAleese a desire to understand conflict, to work towards resolution rather than retribution.

She earned a law degree from Queens University in Belfast and had a successful career as a barrister before being appointed Reid Professor of Criminal Law, Criminology and Penology at Trinity College in Dublin.

While in Dublin she moved into journalism and broadcasting in the current affairs department at Raidió Teilifís Éireann (you may know it simply as RTÉ), working on programs like Frontline and the ground-breaking
Today Tonight. This was a time of a troubled spell in Irish life, most notably with the H-block hunger strikes.

- In 1981, Ms McAleese returned to Trinity College and was appointed registrar of the School of Law. She continued to work part-time for RTÉ over a number of years, contributing on a diverse range of issues such as politics, religion and the arts.

- A return to Belfast and to Queen’s University beckoned in 1987, when she became the Director of the Institute of Professional Legal Studies. Yet again her talent in this prestigious role was recognised and she received numerous invitations to travel to various parts of the world as guest lecturer.

- Her leadership skills were rewarded in 1994 when she became the Pro-Vice Chancellor of Queen’s, the first
woman and only the second Catholic to hold the position.

- Three years later she was resoundingly endorsed as President of Ireland.

- Mary McAleese is a committed Catholic who doesn’t fear going toe to toe with the clergy in Ireland, in the United States and now in Rome where she is pursuing a doctorate in canon law.

- Earlier this year, following her openly stated opinion that it was bonkers to ask 150 male celibates to advise Pope Francis on church teaching about the new family, writer Declan Lynch suggested in the *Sunday Independent* in Ireland that there was an ideal role for Mary McAleese but that she was, unfortunately, ineligible.
• ‘I tend to regard the former President Mary McAleese as a tragic figure’, he wrote. ‘She would have made an excellent archbishop, an even better cardinal and just about the perfect pope. She has the temperament, the vision, she certainly had the ambition. ‘

• The tragedy behind the higher ground that Declan Lynch saw for Mary McAleese is that she will be denied papal office simply because she is female.

• Tonight she is being brought under the gaze of Annabel Crabb. Political journalist and commentator, Annabel Crabb, was the creator and presenter of the hit ABC TV series Kitchen Cabinet in which she staged polite home invasions and interviews with politicians in their own kitchens.

• And while you might not walk away tonight with the perfect recipe for Colcannon, you will hear Mary McAleese reflect the advice Nelson Mandela gave to the world.
• He said: ‘If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner’.

• Please join me in giving a warm welcome to former President of Ireland, Mary McAleese and her interlocutor Ms Annabel Crabb.