

Abortion: Changing the Narrative

1. Five Years Since the Abortion Referendum

Following the referendum on abortion in May 2018, we said: *"a new situation now exists in Ireland. It is essential for us as a Church which cares passionately about the gift of life, and wants to support both mothers and their unborn children, to seek better ways of responding to this new and very challenging reality"*.¹ Part of our response was the establishment of the Council for Life, to advise and advocate for the Catholic Church in Ireland on a consistent ethic of life and care for those most at risk.

But the passionate care that the Church has for mothers and their babies is part of the mission of the whole Church. Across every sector of society, people of faith, in their own personal attitudes and actions, and often in their professional lives, seek to create a society which is both compassionate, and respectful of the lives of the unborn. These include parents, friends, work colleagues and neighbours, as well as teachers, lawyers, and healthcare professionals. Our own role as Bishops is to encourage that caring response and to help root it in the Gospel.

As we said in 2018, *"In the aftermath of the referendum it is clear that we all need to foster a culture of care, a society of support, so that when a woman finds herself in a crisis pregnancy she may find practical assistance and care... True compassion is at the heart of the Christian Gospel and it continues to motivate us. It values and protects every human life from conception to natural death"*.² The "challenging reality" is that our care now has to be exercised in a society which permits and even routinely facilitates the taking of human life, through the *Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act, 2018*.

Five years on from the Referendum which opened the way for abortion, we are deeply saddened that society in Ireland appears to be growing increasingly accustomed to the taking of unborn human life. We wish to reaffirm our conviction that the innate dignity of every human life, from conception to natural death, is a value for the whole of society, rooted in reason as well as in faith. No matter what legislation is passed in any country, the fundamental right to life for all human beings still prevails, at every stage of development; abortion is, and always will be, gravely wrong. We call on people of faith and all people of goodwill to courageously witness to the whole truth about life, in all its stages, as part of democratic debate. In every pregnancy there are two lives worth protecting - the life of a mother and the life of her unborn child.

The Gospel of Life is, quite literally, Good News for our world in which there is, sadly, so much violence, destruction and unnecessary death. It is Good News for the world to hold that every human life is a precious gift from God – including the lives of all mothers and their unborn children. The right to life is not given to us by any law or Constitution. All human beings have it 'as of right', whether we are wealthy or poor, healthy or sick. The tiny innocent life in the womb is not a "something"; it is a "someone". Science and scans vividly show

¹ Statement of the Summer 2018 General Meeting of the Irish catholic Bishops' Conference

² Ibid.

that it is, in reality, a little girl or boy at a very early stage in her or his life. To hold this truth, and to express it openly, is not something to be ashamed of, or to be excluded from public discussion, censored from newspaper columns, shut down in debates, or kept out via so-called "safe access zones". It is something we should be able to shout from the rooftops: "All human life is precious! Choose life!"

In December 2021, the Government of Ireland announced a public consultation as part of the process of reviewing the operation of the Act. This was not a review of the Act in itself, but only a review of how it operates. In other words, the government was not interested in what people thought about abortion. The stated purpose was to establish whether the Act was effective in what it set out to do, namely ending the lives of unborn babies. It was made clear at the outset that the State had no interest in submissions which would advocate in favour of a culture of life.

2. Numbers of Abortions

Over the three-year period covered by the review (2019-2021), almost 18,000 pregnancies were terminated in Ireland.³ During the same period, there were 175,000 live births in Ireland. For every ten children born alive, one was aborted. In recent weeks, the Minister has indicated that the number of abortions in 2022 reached 8,500. All of these statistics are higher than the number of abortions involving Irish women which took place in England and Wales in any year during the past twenty years. We hold in prayer and commend to God's loving embrace the women and men who have felt no other way out of their distress than through abortion; and we carry close to our hearts the countless babies whose lives and boundless possibilities have been lost.

3. Why Did so many Women Seek Abortion?:

Ninety-eight percent of all abortions carried out to-date under the Act took place in early pregnancy (during the first twelve weeks). The Act does not require that any reason be given for a termination in the first twelve weeks of pregnancy. Nor is there any gathering of information as to the emotional or physical health or the economic circumstances of women having those abortions. It is as if the women did not exist. This absence of basic factual information about abortion in Ireland is actually noted in the Review as one of the limitations of the legislation.

During the referendum campaign there were many calls for and promises of help for women in crisis, but it seems that a mother in distress is often left feeling that her only option is to choose to end the life of her unborn baby girl or boy. Every woman deserves all the love, support and resources she needs to bring her child into the world, but where is the compassion and accompaniment for a woman in crisis that was promised? There are many questions surrounding the legislation introduced five years ago: Why do increasing numbers of women feel they have no other option than abortion? What options, other than abortion, are offered to women during the important three-day reflection period? What are the main causes of distress to a mother and a father in a crisis pregnancy? Which supports, other than abortion, are offered?

³ The figure of 17,820 terminations in the review does not take into account the fact that, according to the HSE, the number of terminations reported in 2021 was very significantly less than the number for which doctors were paid.

Unfortunately, we know very little about the answers to these questions because such information is not routinely gathered. Those who raise these important questions are often labelled as “anti-choice”, or “against women”. The mechanics of Ireland’s abortion regime has been reviewed, but the human experience of loss and loneliness remains largely cloaked from public scrutiny.

4. Ten Pages of Recommendations

The Review includes ten pages of recommendations for changes in the law or in the regulations pertaining to abortion, which are clearly aimed at making the Act more effective in the taking of human life. We wish to refer specifically to four of these.

a. The Mandatory Three-Day Waiting Period

The review proposes that the mandatory three-day pause between the initial consultation with a doctor and an abortion taking place, which is currently required under the Act (Art. 12.3), would become purely “advisory”. While three days is a relatively short period of time, it does at least provide a window of opportunity for a woman to consider the decision she is about to make and, crucially, to explore whether she might have other options. According to HSE figures, a very significant percentage of women (27%) do not return after the three days.⁴ This suggests not only that this “window” really does save lives, but also that, in so doing, it may also be saving many women a lifetime of regrets. Making the three-day window advisory is tantamount to removing it, and would result in the deaths of many more babies. We strongly oppose this recommendation and call on the Government, instead, to be proactive in proposing alternatives to abortion, which would both support women and protect babies.

The right to life has already been completely denied to children under twelve weeks gestation. We reject the proposal now made in the Review that the twelve-week period would be extended under certain circumstances. This would only serve to make the legislation even more arbitrary than it already is.

b. Freedom of Conscience

Almost 90% of GPs do not participate in the provision of early abortion.⁵ The Review is rather sketchy in its attempt to deal with the question of conscientious objection, largely because over 90% of GPs also ignored a Department of Health survey to establish why they were not providing abortion. Of those who responded, 26% said that they did have a conscientious objection.⁶ We believe that the percentage is likely to be much higher. According to the Review, the HSE identifies conscientious objection as a major factor in the refusal of hospital consultants to provide abortion.⁷

⁴ Data revealed in HSE replies to parliamentary questions. PQ Ref(s): 22277/20; 44969/21; 48352/22. But NOT referred to in the Review

⁵ Review, Page 38

⁶ Review, Page 40

⁷ Review, Page 44

The Review recommends that the provision of abortion should feature as a mandatory requirement in job specifications and in contracts of employment. Failure to comply would result in termination of employment. This, quite frankly, is a shocking proposal. Freedom of conscience is a fundamental human right and cannot simply be over-ridden in this way.

Throughout the Review, “termination of pregnancy” is described as “healthcare”. This is an abuse of language. As we have already pointed out, no connection with the health of the mother or the child is given as the reason for the vast majority of abortions in Ireland. Neither is any evidence provided to suggest that the conscientious objection of healthcare professionals poses a risk to women in Ireland. We believe that it is quite unreasonable to require doctors, nurses and allied health-professionals to agree to participate in something which is and always has been contrary to the ethos of their profession. It is really quite unthinkable that doctors who absolutely respect the right to life would be excluded from the practice of maternity care, or from obstetrics and gynaecology generally.

Every person working in a healthcare setting, not only doctors, nurses and midwives, should have the freedom to opt out of participation in any act which is intended to contribute to the deliberate taking of human life. Neither should they be required to refer their patient to someone else who will do what they themselves believe to be unethical.

c. Legislation for the Provision of “Safe Access Zones”

The Review recommends that legislation be introduced to provide for so-called “safe access zones”, to prevent any presence which “*would reasonably be regarded as having the effect of influencing a person’s decision to have a termination of pregnancy or provide the service*”⁸ within the vicinity of any centre providing abortion. We note that the Government has already published the heads of a Bill which would have that effect. Limiting the right to peaceful assembly is not the action of a State which purports to present itself as having liberal-democratic values.

Similar legislation has recently been imposed by the UK parliament in a most draconian fashion, even to the extent of criminalising private prayer in a public place. We believe that those who conscientiously oppose abortion as a crime against humanity must be free to express their concerns in a respectful and non-violent manner in the public space. The Garda authorities have consistently made it clear that, with existing legislation to curb anti-social behaviour, “safe access zones” (which are really “exclusion zones”) are not necessary.

d. De-criminalisation of Abortion

The Act (Section 23) regulates the circumstances in which the termination of pregnancy is not a criminal offence. In all other circumstances, the termination of pregnancy remains a crime. The Review recommends that medical practitioners should be removed from the scope of Section 23. In other words, if doctors carry out abortions in contravention of the Act, they would not be guilty of a crime. We reject this recommendation on the

grounds that nobody should be above the law when it comes to protecting human life.

5. What Can People of Faith Do?

We are conscious that, in the aftermath of the referendum in 2018, many people who had worked hard to defend the right to life of the unborn were deeply disappointed. That was a reasonable and understandable response. Five years later, however, it is time to consider what further we can do to support women and to restore the recognition of the right to life of unborn children. Here are a few possibilities:

a. Be confident in sharing your pro-life values:

Valuing the right to life of every human being is a truly compassionate position. In our own homes and workplaces, and among our friends, we need to have the confidence to speak the truth about the dignity of every human life. There is no reason why our commitment to support both mothers and their babies should not have a place in public discourse and in private conversation. It is possible to express a pro-life view-point without being aggressive.

b. Be present to women in crisis pregnancy:

How might you offer support to someone who is pregnant, by listening, encouraging or simply being present to her, in a way that might help her to continue with her pregnancy, rather than ending it? Our casual comments or reactions can be encouraging and supportive, or negative and dismissive, when a family member, friend or girl-friend tells us she is pregnant. Over the years many mothers in crisis have felt supported - sometimes at the very last minute - by a sensitive offer of practical help to find a way out of their crisis other than by ending the life of their unborn baby. Find out about pro-life support groups for women in crisis pregnancy; for parents of children with life-limiting conditions; and those which provide spiritual support for people following abortion.

c. Sign-up for the "Pray for Life" Novena:

Join people all across Ireland and the UK in the annual online "Pray for Life" Novena, which begins this year on Tuesday 23rd May and concludes on 31st May, the Feast of the Visitation. (This is a great Feast of Life; a day when two women - Mary and Elizabeth - meet to support one another in pregnancy and give thanks to God for the gift of life.) You can register for the Novena on www.prayforlife.ie

We remain convinced that the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act, 2018, will, in due course, be repealed. While we welcome the fact that a number of Oireachtas members have stated that they do not wish to see a liberalisation of the current law, we will continue to encourage a greater political acceptance that abortion is not the solution to a crisis pregnancy.

The Gospel of Life will not be silenced. We will continue to seek dialogue about how a respectful and life-supporting environment can be created for every person in Ireland, at every stage and in every state of life. We will keep on witnessing to the truth that a culture of life and love and care that embraces everyone – especially the most vulnerable – offers the greatest hope for

humanity and its future. Five years on we will continue to advocate that “both lives matter”, and that mother and child in a crisis pregnancy have a right to a humane and life-affirming outcome, for both. We will continue to seek loving and supportive protection for every mother in distress and for every child in the womb, including those diagnosed with a disability or a life-limiting condition.

We do so because we believe that all human life is sacred, and that Ireland and the rest of the world will one day come to accept this truth. Meanwhile we continue to do our best to change the narrative through dialogue and by testifying, in season and out of season, to the Gospel of Life.