

Catholic Bishops' statement *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 The care that the Church has for mothers and their babies is part of the mission of the whole Church and must be lived out in our daily lives, private and professional. Today, we 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 at every stage of development still prevails.

2. A Review of what?

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. 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.

3. Number of Abortions

Over the three-year period covered by the review (2019-2021), almost 18,000 pregnancies were terminated in Ireland.² During the same period, there were 175,000 live births in Ireland. For every ten children born alive, one was aborted. The number of abortions in 2022 reached 8,500, an increase of 25%. By contrast, the number of abortions in England and Wales, involving women living in Ireland, have been declining steadily over the past twenty years.

4. 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 an abortion in the first twelve weeks of pregnancy. The State does not ask why so many women sought abortion. As far as the review is concerned it is as if the women did not exist; their circumstances are not discussed. The mechanics of Ireland's abortion regime have been reviewed, but the human experience of loss and loneliness remains largely cloaked from public scrutiny.

5. Ten Pages of Recommendations

The Government's *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 2018 Act provides for abortion without any reason being given, within the first twelve weeks of pregnancy. In order to ensure that the woman has at least a short window of time to consider such a major decision, the Act requires that there must be a three-day pause between the first medical consultation and the eventual completion of the abortion. The evidence is that over a quarter of women did not return to complete the abortion. The review now recommends that the three-day pause would become purely advisory. We strongly oppose this recommendation, which would weaken protection both for women and for babies. We call on the Government, instead, to be proactive in proposing alternatives to abortion, which would both support women and protect babies. Neither do we accept the recommendation that the twelve-week period during which early abortion can take place without any reason being given, would be extended under certain circumstances.

b. *Freedom of Conscience*

Almost 90% of GPs do not participate in the provision of early abortion.³ It is not entirely clear how many of them have made this decision on the grounds of conscience. It is almost certainly much higher than the 26% suggested in the review. The HSE identifies conscientious objection as a major factor in the refusal of hospital consultants to provide abortion.⁴

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

² 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.

³ Review, Page 38

⁴ Review, Page 44

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. Yet, the *Review* now 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-riden in this way. We totally reject the suggestion that healthcare professionals who respect the right to life would be excluded from practicing in maternity care, or from obstetrics and gynaecology generally.

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”⁵ within the vicinity of any centre providing abortion. Limiting the right to peaceful assembly is not the action of a State which purports to present itself as having liberal-democratic values. 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.

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, abortion 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.

6. What can People of Faith do?

Five years on from the Referendum, 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 truthfully and respectfully about the dignity of every human life.

b. *Be present to women in crisis pregnancy*

Our casual comments or reactions can be encouraging and supportive, or negative and dismissive, when a family member, friend or girlfriend 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 across Ireland and the UK in the annual online ‘Pray for Life’ Novena, which begins on 23 May and concludes on 31 May, the Feast of the Visitation. Please 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. 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, however, to encourage a greater political acceptance that abortion is not the solution to a crisis pregnancy.

The Gospel of Life will not be silenced. Five years on we will continue to advocate that “both lives matter”. 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.

Sunday, 14 May 2023