

Making the Pro-Life Case with Compassion and Clarity – Part III

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As they communicate to their people on the subject of abortion, there is one thing priests should bear in mind, no matter how awful and tragic a given case may be. Every abortion begins in a different time, place and set of circumstances, but the end is always the same: the destruction of a life. The destruction of a life is not permissible except as an unintended consequence of the effort to save a life, and that eventuality is already covered by law and Irish medical practice.

The smartest thing the repeal lobby will do is appeal to the kindness and compassion of the Irish people. And it may be that priests themselves, and not

only members of the wider parish – wonder if there is not something to be said for a very limited response; wonder if, in certain tragic cases, the truly compassionate thing for all involved, even the child, might be ‘a termination.’

A phrase was used in a workshop I was giving recently that really resonated with me and seems to me to go to the heart of this issue: *Whose needs are being served?* In all the clamour for abortion, there is one over-arching idea which, unfortunately, is a lie. That is the idea that abortion is a *solution*. We must surely reject the moral world where a human being is a problem requiring a solution, especially such a final one. Then we

should ask: *a solution for whom?*

Abortion can undoubtedly be seen as a quick and relatively cost-effective solution to certain problems. We in the wider community can walk away relieved, as it is now all over. But there are two people who can't do that: the child and the mother. It is only for the rest of us that abortion can be seen as a grand solution.

We're familiar with the term ‘fatal foetal abnormality.’ This is not accepted medical terminology for the HSE or the IMO, but is used to dehumanise and pathologise the unborn child. We should not use or accept the use of this terribly dehumanising term. The truth is

conveyed by the words ‘very sick baby,’ or ‘unborn baby with a terminal illness.’

Our children are not ours to dispose of as we please. It is true that parents have special duties and rights regarding their children, but they do not own them. Every life that comes into existence has rights simply as human, and the first and most basic of these is life itself. The length of my life is not a measure of my value as human being, nor does it determine the nature of my rights. The life of each and every one of us is limited, and in this sense, we all suffer from a ‘life-limiting condition.’ Mortality will get

those of good will. It corrodes compassion and subverts our values. So this is about all of the life issues; it is about how – or whether – we respect all of humanity. If we say, as a society, that it is okay to end the life *in utero* of a child with Downs but not okay in similar circumstances to end the life of a ‘normal’ child, how can we pretend to value all life equally? How can we look at a born person with Downs and say to them, ‘Don’t worry, we respect you, we value you’?

If we end a life because it would be a short life, how can this fail to impact on

The fact is that people want to hear their priests talk about these things. Some, because they want to understand the reason why the Church teaches as it does. Some, because they worry that their children will think the priest is silent because there are no reasons, or at least no good reasons, for the pro-life position. Others are already fighting this fight and desperately want to feel the support of their priests and their church. The reasons why the pulpit remains silent in places are indeed varied. A few priests seem to worry that it might upset people: *they might walk out!* Others, perhaps, are reluctant as celibate men to talk about what is often presented as a women’s issue. And there is undoubtedly, in some genteel quarters, a certain distaste for those who engage in the pro-life battle. They are, it is felt, extreme, hard-line, and embarrassing.

Whatever factors might give rise to homiletic or pastoral reluctance, all I can do is restate what I said at the beginning of these reflections, and urge you to take yourself seriously. Take what you believe seriously. Take seriously the historical moment you are living in and the particular duties of speech and action that the times impose on you. Take seriously the effects that the loss of the Eighth Amendment will have on your country and your community. None of us may have the eloquence of angels, but make do with what you have and do your best. Take yourself seriously, the words will come.

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us all, some after a hundred minutes, others after a hundred years. That does not make one individual more or less human than the other.

Should we ignore the basic rights of the child in certain cases, such as terminal illness or rape? Let’s ask once again: Whose needs are being met? Abortion is not a therapy for anything. It will not heal a victim of rape but is in fact another act of violence. Nor can we short-circuit or ameliorate grief over our dying child by hastening her death. We are creatures built for grief, and from grief we recover in time. We should not transform grief into trauma.

I have used the word ‘argument’ a good deal, yet the case for life will not be won by arguing with people. Minds are very rarely changed that way. We arrive at our moral intuitions through history, culture, and personal temperament and disposition. As Johnathan Swift once said, you cannot reason a man out of an idea he was not in the first place reasoned into. That is not to say that arguments are useless, rather that on their own they are ineffective. We must create a story, a narrative. This is done by weaving and layering the arguments, and that is not the job of just one sermon,

Ultimately what we have to communicate is that this is not simply about abortion; it cannot be. Legalising abortion fundamentally changes society. It poisons the moral well. It infects even

how we view the life of one barely born who is barely alive? When we start to attach economic value or cost to the moral equation, why should we stop with the unborn? This corruption and decline has happened elsewhere; it will happen here. That is the narrative we must get across. Do we really think we will prove different to other countries? What separates us from Britain is the Irish Sea, not some impenetrable moral wall.

‘Aside from the loss to the child of its life – a massive impact in itself – and the ongoing damage to perceptions of parenthood which is no longer seen as calling for unconditional acceptance, the grief, regret and even despair caused for many aborting women is an extremely serious concern. Also highly concerning is the healthcare professions being alienated from their traditional role of promoting health and palliating suffering to assume the task of social exclusion and quality control of human lives. The aim should be to get – by good means only – as close as we can to a society that respects the rights of all, and supports all parents unequivocally in cherishing each and every child. Ireland today may not be exactly that society – too many slip through the network of support – but is close enough to win the admiration of those of us across the Irish Channel now aghast at the death toll 50 years after our own supposed reforms.’

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