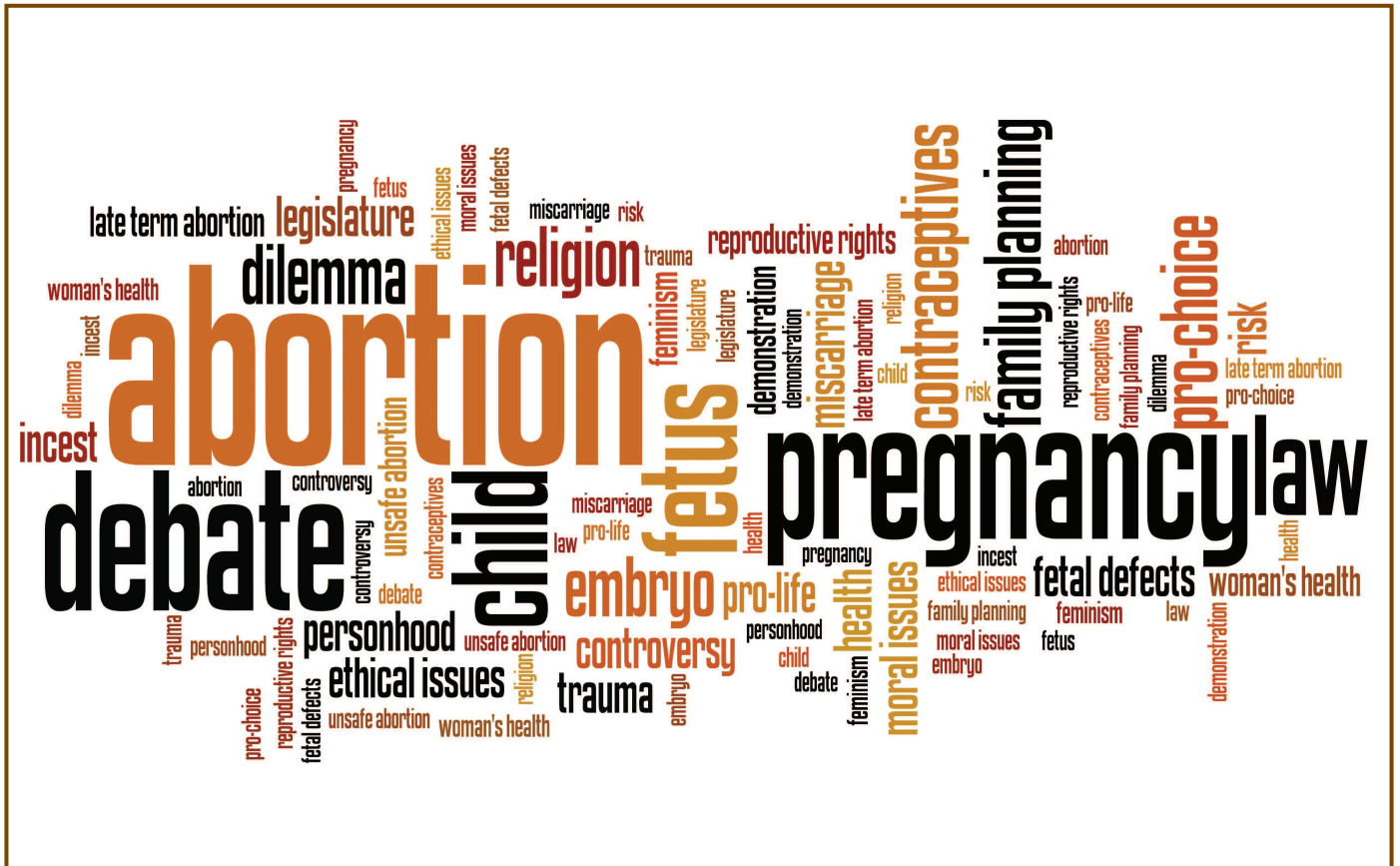


# Making the Pro-Life Case with Compassion and Clarity – Part I

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There is an approach to debate that has been used for centuries by Talmudic scholars; it is one that would benefit us all when approaching issues that divide and inflame passion. Before any discussion can begin, each of the participants must be able to outline the position of their adversary to the satisfaction of that adversary.

When talking to friends who disagree with me about the life issue, I propose a further ‘thought experiment.’ I ask them to take my stated belief seriously. I ask them to *hear* what I am saying, then, for a moment, to unconditionally accept that I actually *believe* what I am saying, then to reflect on the *consequences* that holding this might have for my actions.

Too often, in discussions about abortion, we not only argue in parallel, but worse, we are accused of arguing in bad faith. Rather than accept the

foundational premise of the pro-life position that abortion is the ending of a life, a human life, our opponents instead advance the debate on the basis that there are other hidden and unworthy reasons that motivate our opposition to abortion. They then divert the debate away from the morality of the central issue to the supposed hidden agenda, which might be misogyny, a desire to control women’s bodies, or any of the sins of patriarchy. To get someone to accept seriously, even for a moment, the sincerity of my belief in the sanctity of the life of the unborn may at least change the tenor, if not the substance, of our engagement.

In Ireland we are approaching a terminal date. The referendum to remove the Eighth Amendment is coming; should it succeed, it will fundamentally change how we perceive the value we attach to

human life in general and unborn human life in particular. We are living a moment when we can affect the future moral culture of our country in a profound way. So I take this opportunity to ask those I might assume to be friends or allies in this matter: *How seriously do you take what you believe?*

When an idea is just an idea, when there are no real-world consequences, when the idea does not require action, it is very easy to unreflectingly parrot a phrase and move on: ‘Of course I am pro-life.’ However, there are real-world consequences, so I would ask again: How seriously do you take what you believe?

Statements to the effect that abortion is the destruction of a human life have been so common in Ireland in recent decades that there is a risk that we may be desensitised to their real import. So, stop now and think for a minute. Reflect

on the statement, 'Abortion is the ending of a human life.' Then ask yourself: If I genuinely believe this to be a statement of fact and a moral truth, what does that mean for me? What are the consequences for me, for what I say and what I do?

When I talk to priests and religious around the country, I meet people with a deep desire to support a culture of life in Ireland, and who are greatly concerned at the prospect of the removal of the Eighth Amendment. However, in the light of the last twenty years and the current climate of anticlericalism in the media and most of the political classes, they are also

message is not going to create an impossible barrier between the argument and the listener. We have to consider who it is we are speaking to and how they will hear what we say.

Around thirty-three per cent of Irish adults attend church on a regular basis, which means that sixty-seven per cent of Irish voters in the upcoming referendum do *not* go to church regularly. Many will go at Christmas and Easter, for funerals, weddings, confirmations and communions, while a smaller number are completely detached from all religious practice.

indeed they live a culturally Catholic life, there is a strong chance people will have a view of life that is sympathetic to the pro-life cause. It would be wrong to suggest that talking to these people (and even more so to congregations) in spiritual terms is not valid and useful – and indeed truthful.

The reality is, though, that the way people today integrate their religious life into their life in the wider world is profoundly different to even thirty years ago. Allowing that your congregation may be pro-life (and the chances are that in part it is not) from a faith perspective does not mean that this will translate into action at a political level. Even some devout Church members are chary about what might be seen as imposing a religious idea on other citizens who hold different religious views.

But abortion is not simply a theological or religious question. In fact it is imperative to insist on this both as an intellectual truth and as a recognition of the practical task we are faced with, which is one of persuasion. If we allow others to frame this as a 'merely' religious issue, then not only are we wrong in fact, but we are surrendering the debate. This must be about human rights – and the most basic of those rights, the right to life.

**Part II of this piece will be published in the March issue of Intercom.**

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worried that any intervention from them might be detrimental to the pro-life cause. Often, they seem to believe that even if they were to speak, there is no-one listening anyway, so what good would it do? And I regularly hear it said that everyone knows what the Church teaches on abortion, so why speak on something so divisive when everyone in the congregation knows perfectly well already what the Church's view is?

It is true that the moral authority of the Church has taken a battering. It is also true that there are many in the media who are actively hostile to religion of all stripes and would like to extirpate it from the public square. There are commentators who would like to frame this debate as simply a battle between the Church and women; they would have us believe that abortion as a moral question is only a religious matter, and that religion has no place in law-making for this Republic. And yes, everyone probably does know what the Catholic Church teaches about abortion. But how many know the reason for this teaching?

#### **What is to be done?**

Let's start from a simple position: first do no harm. Before you can hope to change minds and hearts you must ensure that the manner in which you deliver the

As a matter of fact, many of those sixty-seven per cent do not see themselves as having no religious or spiritual component to their lives. In my experience, the term 'cultural Catholic' understates the extent to which these people see themselves as Catholic. If

Bringing a respect for human dignity to practical politics can be a daunting task. There is such a wide spectrum of issues involving the protection of human life and the promotion of human dignity. Good people frequently disagree on which problems to address, which policies to adopt and how best to apply them. But for citizens and elected officials alike, the basic principle is simple: *We must begin with a commitment never to intentionally kill, or collude in the killing, of any innocent human life, no matter how broken, unformed, disabled or desperate that life may seem.* In other words, the choice of certain ways of acting is *always and radically incompatible* with the love of God and the dignity of the human person created in His image. Direct abortion is *never* a morally tolerable option. It is *always* a grave act of violence against a woman and her unborn child. This is so even when a woman does not see the truth because of the pressures she may be subjected to, often by the child's father, her parents or friends. Similarly, euthanasia and assisted suicide are *never* acceptable acts of mercy. They *always* gravely exploit the suffering and desperate, extinguishing life in the name of the 'quality of life' itself. This same teaching against direct killing of the innocent condemns all direct attacks on innocent civilians in time of war.

US Catholic Bishops, *Living the Gospel of Life*, 20.