

The Council for Life –

A space for dialogue, a space to hear stories,
a space to learn together and to listen



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A few years ago, I visited a friend of mine in hospital who had been recently diagnosed with breast cancer. Like me she was a young mother with two very small children. I sat beside her on her hospital bed and she took my hand, ‘Kate, it’s gone into my spine. I’m finished’. In shock, and without thinking, I said, ‘No, no, don’t worry, you’ll get through this. It’s not as bad as maybe they think it is or you think it is’. And the conversation was cut short. I had cut it short in my desire to rush past the pain and shock of her diagnosis. I simply couldn’t face what was happening. It was most definitely not my finest hour.

I was reminded of that moment as I prepared to interview Seamus Mulconry, General Secretary, of the Catholic Primary School Management Association. Seamus was born in a Mother and Baby home. We were to speak together about what it means to be pro-life in Ireland today, particularly following the publication of the Mother and Baby Homes Report earlier this year and the loss of the referendum on the repeal of the 8th amendment in May 2018. These are painful and challenging times; and the only way to grow through

them is to stop and listen. My conversation with Seamus was to be a fascinating conversation.

Writing or speaking about being pro-life in Ireland in 2021 is not for the faint-hearted. The referendum result of 2018 undoubtedly had a chilling effect on many of us; lay and clergy alike. In the days, weeks, months and now years since the result, which was greeted by scenes of jubilant celebration by many in Dublin Castle, being pro-life has felt different. I had had a baby in January 2018. I’d had a very difficult pregnancy, one that coincided with all of the campaigning. Now, with the result, I couldn’t get my head around the celebrations of the referendum result. Here I was with a five-month old baby, asleep in my arms, looking at these scenes of jubilation. These were my fellow citizens. Some of them were my friends. How could so many of them feel so differently on this fundamental issue? How would the pro-life movement in Ireland pick up the pieces and continue the difficult work that had to be done? I don’t know why but suddenly every baby felt that bit more vulnerable to me. And, for me at least, it felt like when we went to speak

publicly, or indeed privately even within our own families, our right to do so had been diminished in some way.

And so to my conversation with Seamus Mulconry. From the outset, we both agreed that the reality of being pro-life in Ireland – if we’re going to be real about it – has of course, also been made even more complicated by the unfolding of our relatively recent social history. The story of the treatment of women in Ireland who didn’t live their lives by the ‘rule book’ is a national shame to which we must face up with honesty and courage. Seamus is a historian and is clear, ‘We can have a discussion all we like about history and context but there is an honesty also required on our part as Catholics and as pro-lifers. More broadly, as a society, we have to remember together that that was us, not just as a Church, not just as society, but as a people.’

Seamus was born in the mid-1960s. Very matter of factly, he shares, ‘the local curate came to my father. A girl was in trouble. Would my father like a son?’ The answer to the question was an emphatic ‘yes’. Seamus shares what he knows about his mother. ‘I know what age she

was, the colour of her hair, the name she gave me and some details about circumstances attending my birth.’ Seamus speaks with great fondness for the local curate and appreciation for Sr Hildegard. He speaks with real gratitude about the woman who gave birth to him ‘I am very grateful for the gift of life but ‘I don’t feel any need or desire to search her out.’ Throughout our conversation, he emphasises the importance of acknowledging that every adopted child’s story is different. He also acknowledges that his birth mother has her own story. This is *his* story and it was fascinating to hear.

Seamus describes his childhood in Clare. ‘I’d a really wonderful childhood. I had a lovely family and extended family. We lived by the beach; it was idyllic. I had total security; that was the dominant feeling for me. My parents were always there, I felt completely safe.’ The picture he paints is of summer swims, farm visits, working in the shop, playing with numerous cousins; a picture that is as normal as it gets. He was told from an early age that he was adopted but it wasn’t an issue for him at all. ‘The fact of my birth didn’t change my sense of who my parents were; no one could have done more for me. I felt totally loved.’ He movingly describes his father, a very gentle man who loved gardening and his mother, a sociable woman who loved having visitors to the house. He recalls fun extended family gatherings. All of these people helped gently form him.

Throughout our conversations is a deep and very good-humoured sense of gratitude for and appreciation of his life. ‘The very fact that I was born; it’s given me a sense of the sheer delight of life; the travelling I’ve done, the experiences I’ve had, the people I’ve met and of course, my own children. The reality is that no aborted child gets to have that and that I think is very sad, tragic really. So obviously, I’m going to think that adoption is better than abortion.’

Seamus’ take on the pro-life question is a nuanced one and has clearly evolved and grown over time. For him, becoming a parent, having a sense of connection to his unborn son sucking his thumb on a prenatal scan was a turning point. But that emotional connection is not something that seems to convince people who are pro-choice. A certain relativism persists. A child’s worth, value and rights are defined by how wanted they are. An unborn baby is described as a baby if they are wanted, if they are not



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they are described as a foetus. For many pro-choice advocates, the stance is justified through a justice lens, around questions of access. If wealthier women in the world can have access to ‘safe and legal’ abortions, then abortion access should be made available for every woman. Emotions run high on both sides of the debate and in that space making our case proved very, very difficult.

Our conversation turned to the perennial question a lot of pro-lifers have, ‘how can we differ so much from pro-choice advocates on the science?’ Abortion for people who are pro-life is a shocking attack on an unborn baby. We do not judge the woman who chooses to have an abortion but for us the science is clear. But to many advocates for choice for women on this issue, access to abortion is a right to which all women are entitled. To people who profess to be pro-life; a unique, irreplaceable, individual life is created at conception. It’s the start of growth that continues for nine months and leads to birth where that growth continues. We acknowledge that some, not many, pro-choice advocates accept that life begins at conception and that the aborted foetus is in fact a human baby. For these people, an aborted baby is a kind of ‘collateral damage’ that arises in the defence of a

woman’s right to choose. But for the majority of pro-choice advocates the science we understand to be so self-evidently true is disputed and the life in the uterus seems more a geographical question; inside the womb the growing entity that is entirely dependent on his/her mother does not warrant protections and has no rights, outside the womb that growing entity does; inside the womb, it’s a collection of cells, outside of it, it’s a baby. Or even more ambiguously, rights are inferred on the foetus at a certain stage of gestation or if the foetus is healthy. It’s a conundrum. Because of this, Seamus wonders at the wisdom of an approach that focuses on what pro-lifers view as the obvious scientific rationale for their arguments. Somehow a different space has to be created.

So if our sense of the scientific and our desire to present the emotional and maternal/paternal bond between baby and parents can’t persuade what can, we both wonder?

In conversation with Seamus, what’s clear is his non-judgemental attitude, unsurprisingly, given his own history. Adoption and indeed abortion is something so many people in Ireland have had direct experience. That is clear through our conversation. ‘Most pro-life



advocates ‘get’ that life is complicated. Life isn’t black and white,’ Seamus acknowledges. ‘That complexity, the complexity that makes up the reality of so many lives has to be listened to, related to and responded to. Any rush to simplify our history, to scapegoat any section of our society has to be avoided if we are to honour that complexity’.

Seamus’s story isn’t unique, he acknowledges that, but it is *his* story. When I ask him what advice he’d give to priests and lay people grappling with how to communicate with their family, friends, parishioners, and others, on this question, he suggests that there are two dimensions to this question; pastoral and education. ‘In Ireland there are approximately 64,000 adopted people. The Mother and Baby Homes commission interviewed 550 survivors. Of the 64,000 about 9,000 people are looking for their parents’. He wonders can we say, ‘this is what survivors want when there is clearly such a variety of responses to the experience of being adopted and also, as acknowledged in the Mother and Baby Homes’. So, from a pastoral perspective, the first thing he thinks is required is listening. ‘What was your experience? How are you now? Tell me what happened.’ This is also the approach he suggests is required with the women who survived Mother and Baby homes. A compassionate listening ear, the kind Pope Francis says is required of a Church that seeks to be a ‘field hospital’ is what is required first.

In terms of the education piece, Seamus is clear that the Church’s pro-life position can most meaningfully be

presented in the wider context of the Church’s stance on a wide range of issues. Rightly pro-lifers are challenged; are we ‘for’ care of migrants, are we ‘for’ care of those made poor by unjust structures in our society, are we ‘for’ the planet, are we ‘for’ real inclusion of people who are part of the Travelling Community? Are we for real inclusion of people who are gay? Anything else, we both acknowledge won’t cut it in 2021 Ireland. The Church’s breath of social teaching is often described as its best kept secret. Situating the truths we hold about the sacredness of human life in the womb within the wider concept of what Pope John Paul II called the Gospel of Life is probably the only coherent way to go. Seamus again, ‘We need to move away from simply ‘winning the argument’ to showing who we are by how we love, by focusing on the unique and beautiful gift all life is.’ How parishes in particular embrace that challenge of celebrating life will be key. Can we, as we emerge from the Covid crisis be places that attract others because of our joy, our inclusivity, our sensitivity, our compassion and our love?

My friend with the truly awful cancer diagnosis died within a year of learning that her cancer had metastasized. Over that year, I very slowly learned how to sit, be still and just listen. I hope I was a friend – one of many – who journeyed with her with love those last months of her life.

The last word to Seamus, ‘What the last few months of revelations in terms of the Mother and Baby Homes report and the report itself have taught us is that

what people need most is to be heard, and to be taken seriously. We know that the hurt is real and the anger is real. We run away from it at our collective peril’. All of these who went through the Mother and Baby reality have their own stories to tell. In that telling of the story, it is about the Church facing into those deeply uncomfortable spaces of listening that is required. That listening has clearly hopefully begun in terms of the statements from so many of the Bishops. It is also about us facing the impact these times in our history have had on our own capacity around sharing our message around the sanctity of human life. And ultimately, if we’re to learn anything it is about looking at the ways women continue to be treated in our society and sometimes even in our Church. Seamus again, ‘Until we do the heavy lifting of working our way through this, striving for a more just world for women and their babies, and indeed everyone else on the planet, and expressing real contrition and sorrow for all that has happened, and for the parts of it for which the Church was responsible, I’m not sure we can really grow from here in terms of confidently proclaiming the wonder and beauty of every human-being, born and unborn.’

Kate Liffey is a Faith Leadership and Governance Coordinator with CEIST. She is a member of the Council for Life of the Irish Bishops’ Conference.

