



Pastoral Letter
on
Unborn Human Life

+ *Michael*
Archbishop of Tuam

Cherishing Mother and Baby

The precious relationship between a mother and her baby can never be captured in words alone. It is language of the heart. It is secret but the secret is shared to some extent by everyone. The immediate, almost involuntary smile which the sight of a mother and baby can evoke is not without deeper meaning. This is life and love in all their beauty and frailty. And much more. A baby means a future. An answer to hope. The ready presence of tomorrow.

We are very familiar with the excitement and sheer joy of the news of pregnancy. This contrasts only too sharply with the feeling of trauma and turmoil of women who, for whatever reason, experience pregnancy outside of all readiness, confidence and support. Feeling abandoned and desperate, perhaps not even understanding very well the enormity of the decision and its consequences, they may decide to have an abortion. This is tragic on so many levels, foremost among them the death of the child and the subsequent and well-documented difficulties experienced by many women after abortions. But the tragedy is deepened by the fact that alternatives may often have been available. Alternatives including care and support and the saving of both lives. I have no doubt that children are alive today because others, through their availability, support and help have promoted human life and the protection of the mother and the baby in the womb. I only wish that more lives might have been saved.

The Central Issue – The Taking of Innocent Human Life

Abortion is the deliberate taking of a human life. That is the central issue here. As we listen to the debate you will notice that many of the arguments used to support abortion confuse this issue. The result is distraction from the main point. We have witnessed this in the attempt to redefine the term “Pro-life” so that it actually makes provision for the destruction of life. Some commentators refer to a ‘potential’ human life in the woman but fail to acknowledge that this is a human life with potential. Still others speak of making abortion ‘safe’. It is not safe for the unborn child whose life is ended. Abortion kills. It is never, simply, ‘safe’. Complex and heartbreaking though the ‘hard’ cases may be – and as Christians our response can only be one of compassion – abortion has proved extremely difficult to restrict in countries where it has been introduced on specific grounds such as rape and if the child has a life limiting condition or disability. As we can see in the recent experience of England and Wales where one-in-five pregnancies ends in abortion every year, what was once proposed, however mistakenly, as a resolution to tragedy has, over time, become a matter of lifestyle and choice. Our hearts harden.

Our Duty To Protect Life

The Church, however shamed by its own failures and sins, remains duty-bound to speak out on behalf of those who have no voice; on behalf especially of those who, through no fault of their own, are unwelcome. We may feel lacking in confidence or even courage before the world's impatience but that has no bearing on our duty. We, as believers, have a clear responsibility to respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life, to defend and promote life, to show reverence and love for life. We are bound to promote a culture of life, especially in the face of what, in the reputedly 'developed' world, is rapidly becoming a culture of death. And we believe furthermore that every human being has the same duty and obligation.

The Constitution of Ireland, at present, endeavours to be truly inclusive and tries to ensure that every human life is treated equally irrespective of age, ability, gender or social standing. As things stand, we do not discriminate. In this respect our Eighth Amendment has protected people of different abilities. We do not decide who should or should not be allowed to live. Now we are being asked to deprive the most vulnerable of this guarantee of the most fundamental of all rights, the right to life. The current debate is not about the proper relationship between faith and politics. It is about our shared commitment as citizens and as human beings to a fundamental and universal human value: that the direct and intentional killing of an innocent person can never be justified and it commands the protection of society and the state.

The right to life is the most fundamental of all rights because it is the foundation of all other rights. The Catholic Church, in common with many Christians in other Churches and many of the great religious and moral traditions of humanity teaches that the direct and intentional killing of innocent human life at any stage from conception to natural death is gravely wrong. Human life is at its most defenceless in the womb and has a right to receive every protection.

Valuing The Life Of The Mother

The mother provides, in her very body, the child's first home. Thankfully the miracles of modern science have given us a new window into the life of the baby in the womb. We can now see just how rapid and beautiful is the development of the baby in the womb. Many women attest that pregnancy, while involving rejoicing and gratitude, also involves suffering and sacrifice. Crises can arise that involve both the mother and the baby. In this regard it is important to clarify an aspect of Catholic teaching which has often been misrepresented. The Catholic Church does not say that the

life of the child must be preferred to the life of the mother. The medical treatment of mothers whose lives are in danger ought always to be a priority, even if this results in the unintended death of the child in the womb.

The Church is duty bound to present its teaching on the dignity of human life in such a way that people would honour this most fundamental of all rights. It is our duty to do this while fully respecting those who differ from us – to make our views known by every legitimate, peaceful and reasonable means. As a Church we endeavour not only to support those who may be contemplating an abortion but women who have had an abortion.

The pro-life commitment of the Church is reflected in our compassion for those who so often regret having had an abortion; our understanding for those who are facing difficult decisions, and our assistance for those who choose life. The work of CURA in this regard is a clear expression in a practical way of the compassion, understanding and care with which the Church wishes to respond to every woman who faces difficulties or crises in pregnancy. The services provided by CURA are available on www.cura.ie and CURA can be contacted on 1850 622 626 and by email curacares@cura.ie

Why We Choose Life

In considering something as fundamental as this we ought not to behave as if our faith could be divorced from our decision and left “outside the room”. Our faith confirms the fundamental truth upon which every human right and the very future of humanity depends: that every human life is beautiful, every human life is precious and every human life is sacred. Every human life is created in the image and likeness of God! In the face of new life we see, not a threat, but a promise. We do not take back our welcome. I conclude therefore by making this simple and urgent appeal to all: **Choose life!**



+ Michael Neary,
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