

A time to uphold the right to life: Statement by the Catholic Bishops of Ireland

On the second day of the June General Meeting of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference in Maynooth (June 11th), the following statement was issued:

A time to reflect

On Saturday last, tens of thousands of women, men and children gathered in Dublin to express their support for the equal right to life of mothers and their unborn children.

We are at a defining moment for our country.

The Gospel of life is at the heart of the message of Jesus. He came that we may have life and have it to the full (Jn 10:10). The Gospel challenges us to work for a world in which the dignity and beauty of every human life are respected.

A time to uphold the right to life

The right to life is the most fundamental of all rights; it is the foundation of all other rights. No individual has the right to destroy life and no State has the right to undermine the right to life.

Yet the Irish Government is proposing abortion legislation that will fundamentally change the culture of medical practice in Ireland. For the first time legislation will be enacted permitting the deliberate and intentional killing of an unborn child. This represents a radical change. Every citizen, not just people of faith, should be deeply concerned.

We value the skill and efforts of our doctors, nurses and other care professionals who have helped to earn Ireland's place as one of the safest countries in the world for mothers and their babies during pregnancy.

Catholic Church teaching is clear: where a seriously ill pregnant woman needs medical treatment which may put the life of her baby at risk, such treatments are ethically permissible provided every effort is made to save both the mother and her baby.

This is different from abortion, which is the direct and intentional taking of the innocent life of the unborn. No matter what legislation is passed in any country, abortion is, and always will be, gravely wrong.

A time for clarity and truth

The Government is under no obligation to legislate for the X case. People are being misled. We challenge repeated statements that this legislation is about saving lives and involves no change to the law or practice on abortion. Legalising the direct and intentional destruction of the life of an unborn baby can never be described as 'life-saving' or 'pro-life'.

Contrary to clear psychiatric evidence, this legislation proposes abortion as an appropriate response to women with suicidal feelings during pregnancy. It is even possible to envisage as a result of this legislation the deliberate destruction of a child, who could otherwise be saved, right up to and including the moment of birth.

Furthermore, we challenge assurances that the proposed legislation will provide limited access to abortion. As published to date, the legislation will allow for a very wide margin of subjective professional assessment by which the deliberate destruction of an unborn baby can be legally justified. As we have learned from other countries, such legislation opens the door to ever wider availability of abortion.

We remain convinced that enhanced medical guidelines, which do not envisage the direct and intentional killing of the unborn, could provide the necessary clarity as well as a morally, legally and medically acceptable way forward. While good health can normally be restored, life, once taken, can never, never be restored.

A time for freedom of conscience

Freedom of conscience is a fundamental human right. A State that truly cherishes freedom will respect the conscience of its citizens, including its public representatives, on such an important human value as the right to life.

It is ethically unacceptable to expect doctors, nurses and others who have conscientious objections to nominate others to take their place. Neither should any institution with a pro-life ethos be forced to provide abortion services.

A time to decide: a time to act; a time to pray

We call on citizens to exercise their right to make their views known respectfully to our public representatives and to leave them in no doubt about where they stand on this issue.

We ask our public representatives to uphold the equal and inviolable right to life of all human beings, even if this means standing above other pressures and party loyalties.

We also invite our priests and people to continue to pray the *Choose Life* prayer at Mass and in the home that the dignity and value of all human life will continue to be upheld in this country.

Some mothers today are facing difficult or crisis pregnancies. Other people who have had, or who have assisted with abortions, may be re-living what happened in the past. They deserve to receive all the love, support and professional care that they need.

As Bishops we will join this weekend in prayerful solidarity with millions of Catholics all over the world in the Year of Faith celebration of Blessed John Paul II's Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life).

Every human life is precious, every human life is beautiful, every human life is sacred. Choose life.

