

Dying with dignity - November 7th 2020, Family Solidarity Ireland

Dear ladies and gentlemen, members of 'Family Solidarity Ireland',

Thank you very much for the kind invitation to deliver my humble contribution to your reflection on the 'Dying with dignity' bill that is moving Ireland closer towards the legalisation of assisted dying. I will briefly present myself and the situation in Belgium and the Netherlands. Then, I want to share some thoughts on the effects of secularisation in our part of the world (of Europe), how to cope with defeat, as catholics and how - if possible - to turn the tide...

About myself: I am married, father of six and grandfather of two and one in the making, from the Netherlands but living and working in Belgium since 2000. I am a biologist, former teacher in secondary education in The Netherlands and Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium and a so called 'revert to the faith'. In 2009, I founded 'Biofides', an apostolate on the relationship between biology and faith, bioethics included.

In that capacity, I am also editor in chief of the Belgian Catholic Medical bulletin 'Acta Medica Catholica', and assistant to the presidency of the World Federation of Catholic Associations (FIAMC). My wife and I are also co-founders for the Netherlands of the Catholic international Emmanuel-community, and today responsible for its Flemish region.

I have entitled my reflection '*Living with Dignity in a secularised world*'. Let me first give you some geographical and socio-cultural background about The Netherlands and Belgium.

As you can see on this slide, Belgium and the Netherlands are together known as 'the Low Countries' in Europe. Belgium is a country with two major languages: Dutch (or Flemish) in the North, French in the South, the capitol, Brussels, being bilingual on paper, but French-speaking in reality. This is significant because of the linguistic reality of the Dutch speaking world and the interactions between Flanders and the Netherlands, for instance on bio-ethical issues like abortion and euthanasia. Brussels and Wallonia are far more connected to France because of the linguistic and cultural bonds. In ethical issues, Francophone Belgium (Brussels & Wallonia), characterised by a richer catholic heritage from France, has been more reluctant to embrace certain liberal principles, that The Netherlands has adopted in the sixties and seventies, immediately followed by Flanders, although there are also strong liberal forces in French speaking Belgium.

The Netherlands and Belgium were the first two countries in the world to legalise euthanasia and medically assisted suicide, both in 2002. It followed upon the legalisation of abortion in 1981 and 1990 respectively. And the legalisation of abortion was preceded by the widely use of hormonal contraception since the introduction of 'the pill' or hormonal birth control, in the sixties, provoking a real sexual revolution in the whole western world.

I think that it is important to notice that these Low Countries have a strong protestant presence in the north, and a strong secularist (*laïcité*) presence from the south (France). The first being *less*

clear, the latter even almost *without* any morality in the culture. Maybe for that reason, the United Kingdom and France even preceded the Low Countries in legalising abortion. But regarding the end of life, the Low Countries took the lead in the secularisation process. It is also important to know that The Netherlands is a country, strongly tainted by Calvinist protestantism, whereas Belgium remains predominantly catholic in so far it was and is still a christian country. The problem with protestantism, be it Anglican, Calvinist or Lutheran, is that it is more vulnerable for moral relativism than Catholicism, because of the clear teaching of the latter, and the unity in its teaching that is assured by the papacy. This has consequences for the society, in its resistance against secularist tendencies. The problem with French secularism (*laïcité*) is that there is no moral law at all.

The process of secularisation through moral relativism leads to a loss of respect for human life. The legislation of euthanasia is preceded by abortion, which is the bitter fruit of a contraceptive mentality.

So in the end, all of Europe appears to fall under the tide wave of secularisation. We still had hopes for Ireland, Poland, Hungary, but nothing is certain. Europe as a whole, not even willing to mention God in its constitution, falls for the temptation of a materialistic, secular world view, where God does not exist nor objective moral truth, so that everything becomes permissible (Dostojevski).

I do not have to explain to you that the acceptance of hormonal contraception does not only inhibit ovulation, but can also prevent the fertilised egg after sexual intercourse from implanting itself in the lining of the uterus, which makes the method not only counter-natural (it deprives willingly the sexual act from its natural finality which is fertility), but also abortifaciant: it deliberately takes the life of the human embryo by making its 'survival' and natural development impossible. At that point, abortion, in a very early stage of human life, becomes already a widely accepted fact, long before any legislation has been passed: the so called 'right' to end a human life is 'implanted' in the minds of the citizens, Catholics included: who has listened to the teaching of Paul VI (*Humane vitae*, 1968) and John Paul II (*Theology of the Body*, 1979-1984)? Almost nobody. Even bishops tend to be silent on the matter.

By the acceptance of contraception in our culture, the 'image of God' that husband and wife are as 'a life-giving community of love' is gravely damaged if not destroyed: the end of the 'real presence' of God in society by the sacrament of marriage. A new world order without God is established where everything is permitted. When 'putting an end to the life of a human being' becomes acceptable, why not in the case of unbearable and hopeless suffering at the end of life, not only for somatic but also for psychiatric patients and even in the case of children. So when euthanasia and assisted suicide become permissible in the minds of the people, it is a matter of time for the legislative process to come to a full legalisation of so called 'mercy killing', in the end in every stage of human life, under more and more circumstances. It is impossible not to see the slippery slope on which we have put our societies. (Card. Willem Eijk of Utrecht).

Are we able to turn the tide? And how?

With the experience of the rest of Europe in mind, to be honest with you, I have little hope that the legalisation of euthanasia in Ireland still can be stopped. If you can, you have to. That's an obvious moral obligation. If not: we still can not remain silent, even if we know that it will not lead to a better result. But without false hope. As Christians, we must be hopeful *and realistic* in the same time. People could accuse us of naivety. Reason is also a gift of God and it is better to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation, than to be frustrated when our actions do not bear fruit in the short term. Sometimes, we must take our loss. But that is no reason to lose hope for the long term. We are called to keep the faith. Therefore, I want to give you some keys for living in a completely secularised 'modern' society.

Faith

The first key is the faith itself. How do we live our faith in a hostile secular environment. As members of the Emmanuel Community, we try to develop a deep personal prayer life, rooted in God's presence in the sacraments, especially the sacrament of the Eucharist and confession. We want to do that as an individual, as a couple, and as a family. In our prayer, we experience His presence in our everyday life. We learn to have confidence in God in very concrete situations. If God allows our country to go against His laws, Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas would remind us our lack of wisdom that would allow us to understand His plan, but that it is certain that a greater good will come out of this situation. And it is not up to us to decide when and how. So we try not to say in our prayers: "Be silent, God, your servant is speaking to you", but "Speak Lord, your servant is listening to you", like Samuel had to learn many centuries ago.

Reason

One of the big problems we experience in The Netherlands and Belgium is a gigantic lack of knowledge of the faith and the understanding of the teaching of the Church, having no answers to the 'big questions' that the modern world confronts us with: in our couples, families with children. To counter the oftentimes aggressive post-modern philosophies of our times, we need to have some understanding of how the Church has answered these questions in the recent past or even centuries ago. Or we must know the way to obtain this knowledge. In this way, we can provide answers to these questions that are raised by our contemporaries: a way of giving answers through apologetics that is characterised by gentleness: no truth without love.

It seems to me also very important for our contemporaries, to understand the reasonability of our beliefs and principles. Faith and morals of the Catholic Church are reasonable, in accordance to science, and therefore accessible for any thinking being that has an open mind.

And when we are active in a particular field of expertise, be it: law, politics, science, medicine,, family, society, church: that we excel in our knowledge of that field.

Practice

Being filled with the personal love of God for us, through our prayer, we receive the love and compassion for our neighbour, our enemies included, even our lawmakers. Do we pray for our lawmakers and influencers as much as we criticise them? Are we willing to have a respectful conversation with them? Through our understanding of faith and morality, we are able to face the challenge of the encounter with the modern mentality, always distinguishing between the person and his or her convictions. As truth is always accompanied by love, we always try to remain respectful with the person, with whom we may vehemently disagree.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to evangelisation, always prepared to bear witness of our beliefs. This is a call to be witnesses. I think that witness should first and foremost be a testimony by example, rather than by words. People look at us how we *are*, not only what we *say*. Our words must be in accordance with our attitudes. A real christian is recognisable by his *reactions*, rather than his *actions*.

We must also respect the free will of every human being, because God does so. That means that I prefer to *witness* of my convictions in practice, rather than trying to *convince* other people. Changing someones opinion and way of life involves an *act of the free will* and that is not *our* domain: it is the sacred space inside every human being, christian or not. We have to respect that, if we believe in God. There is a moment that we have to accept that the other person stays the way he is. Let us change the world primarily by changing ourselves, rather than the other person. In our dialogue, we should always distinguish between the person and his/her beliefs and acts. The other person must always feel respected, even when you vehemently disagree with him or her.

That does not mean that we should be passive or silent; on the contrary: a christian is proactive in doing the will of God: we are apostles, missionaries, sent by Jesus to evangelise the world. The seeds of the truth that we spread around us will bare fruit, but we may never know how and when. As lay people, we can spread the gospel of life in every place where God calls us: the family, the workplace, in society, in politics, within and outside the Church, ... but always with kindness, understanding, compassion, in dialogue rather than in fights and disputes. No truth without love, but also: no love without truth.

We will also have to be patient. It may take decades or more before the Western society returns to its christian roots. See the signals of the times and use the opportunities that Providence provides. Maybe, the Covid pandemic is a sign of the times: it forces people to return to what is essential in life, to basic truths, and maybe... to prayer, to God. But it took christianity three centuries to christianise the Roman Empire and America 2,5 centuries to abolish slavery. So be patient and do not count on seeing the results in your lifetime (that would be egoistic): for God, a thousand years is like one day. Maybe our children or even grandchildren will pick up the fruits of what we do today.

A Christian also accepts persecution, suffering, exclusion, even 'martyrdom'. That is in the end what *bearing witness* means. It may also be helpful to realise that "our kingdom is not of this earth", as Jesus says in the Gospel. Of course, we are called to do good and in this way improve the

world, but our world, our country, our society, may not become an idol, as if nothing else counts than restoring christianity. The early christians did not try to change the world, but lived the christian faith in a heroic way, and that changed the world. In the end, our destiny is not here but elsewhere, which is a reason for hope, even if our country choses the wrong way. We do what is good, because we are children of God, not only in order to make the world a better place.

And please let us always be joyful! Sad and frustrated catholics are such a bad testimony to the faith. The same is true for Catholics that place themselves above other people because of them knowing the truth of God. Everything we receive is grace, a gift from God, so humility is the attitude that should characterise us. We are at the service of other people, not placed above them. So rejoice always, also when things turn bad, politically. Let nothing disturb us, God suffices (Theresa of Avila).

Conclusion

Is everything lost, if euthanasia and assisted suicide are legalised in Ireland? It seems to go in that direction. No, nothing is lost. Maybe for now, but not for ever... So try to get over it as soon as possible (although disappointment is a natural reaction) and renew your trust in God. Ignatius taught us his 'holy indifference': it does not really matter wether things go well in my life or not, because I am with God. So be a witness of truth, love, hope and joy, whatever becomes of our western society. Let us be witnesses of the **dignity of human life**, where our society misunderstands completely what dignity means. "It's not about how much you do, but how much love you put into what you do that counts", as Mother Teresa said. So in stead of the proposed 'Dying with dignity', we try to live with dignity in a a secular world, which means nothing less than being a Saint.

The importance of catholic movements for the family can not be underestimated. They can help us to adopt the right attitude in face of the secularisation that is taking place. "May the Irish people always support marriage through personal commitment and through positive social and legal action", a quotation I found on your website. I can only wish you Gods blessings and help in your strivings.

Thank you very much!

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