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Kevin Hargaden

Making a Meal of It: After Eight

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INTRODUCTION

One of the many frustrating aspects of the discussion around the repeal of the 8th amendment¹ was the common refrain that the voices of clergy speaking as they do, in the case of Catholic priests, from a position of unmarried celibacy, were irrelevant to the conversation. The truth is that a priest engaged in active, compassionate parish ministry cannot help but encounter this issue up close, in real time. In the confessional booth, in pastoral visits, in impromptu conversations that suddenly open up on the choice about to be made, or just having been made, or made decades ago and stubbornly lingering and causing trauma despite everything that is said about how termination is a normal thing with no psychological or spiritual ramifications. In my short years of pastoral experience, even serving as the very-much junior member of a team with the Presbyterian congregation in Maynooth, I faced the considerable challenge of discussing the lived reality of choosing abortion with those who were in my care. It felt like a particularly blatant caricature to imagine that conversations about this topic were abstract for some of those in church leadership simply because they often do not have wombs and often, do not have sex.

In the era when it *was* heard, Christian public speech on this topic has left much to be desired, and the political and material support that we have offered towards making Ireland an easier place to face

1 The eighth amendment to the Irish Constitution was passed by popular referendum in 1983 and explicitly recognised the equal right to life of the mother and the unborn. It functioned as a constitutional ban on abortion. The amendment was always controversial, but after the death of Savita Halappanavar from complications arising from a septic miscarriage in 2012, popular momentum built around a campaign to repeal the 1983 law. In May 2018 a popular referendum succeeded with 66.4% of the vote to repeal the eighth amendment, clearing the way for legalised abortion. For context on the “Repeal” campaign, see: Una Mullaly (ed.), *Repeal the 8th*, London: Unbound 2018 and Fiona De Londras and Mairead Enright, *Repealing the 8th: Reforming Irish Abortion Law*, Bristol: Policy Press 2018.

Kevin Hargaden is the Social Theologian at the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice in Dublin. He is, most recently, the author of *Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age* (Cascade, 2018)

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a problematic pregnancy has fallen well short of what it should have. Many at the time saw the 1983 referendum as a mistake. That the churches have not been visibly and enthusiastically at the fore-front of creating an environment that is pro-life after birth in the decades since is a tragedy.

The shock of the result is slowly fading. We have known for a long time that the age of Catholic Ireland – whatever it is that might have been – has ended, but this referendum is a very clear death certificate. Watching thousands of my peers cheering in Dublin Castle, in a way indistinguishable from crowds I had been a part of at rock concerts at the same venue, was both bizarre and jarring. As the political messaging, which carefully avoided talking about abortion, and instead engaged a phalanx of euphemism, became a fashion statement, I had felt like I had fallen into the pages of a Kurt Vonnegut novel. There are morally serious pro-choice movements, which offer a sort of stoic resignation to the reality of life in this vale of tears, and which are dedicated to keeping terminations safe, legal, and rare. This is not what we presently face. The blithe transformation of that position into a badge worn like a brand is one that demands our attention. If Ireland ever was as influenced by Christianity as the *Tá*-team say it was, then the moral imagination which embraces the willed death of human life as liberation was, in part, formed by our preaching and teaching. Hundreds of thousands of Christians, with varying degrees of reflection and consideration, have voted for Repeal. Whatever way we cut it, we can't separate ourselves from this vote and its consequences.

THINKING ABOUT TALKING FROM NOW ON

So, how do we go on as preachers and teachers? There is obviously a need for us to think and speak with greater depth, clarity, and grace on the issue of abortion particularly, and more generally about the holistic pro-life position of the church. Even within the church, the argument in favour of the 8th Amendment was often based on the Enlightenment logic of rights, or on the appeal to our senses based around our fundamental affection for babies. There is little understanding, even among very committed Christians, of how our opposition to abortion is of a part with our opposition to war in practically every conceivable context. People might have a sense that the opposition to abortion is connected to the opposition to euthanasia, but we have not formed our congregations to understand how those positions relate to, and in many cases are determined by, our position on including those with disabilities in the family of faith. Those with Down Syndrome tried to speak for life during the campaign, but our preaching and teaching rarely

makes these connections. Just as our synods on family values are discredited by our inaction on the housing crisis that destroys families, our pro-life position is left in the abstract if we do not take the time to embed it in the lived reality of the church.

I want to suggest that the way we talk about life issues from now on ought to be determined by our intention and our audience. There will be a temptation to try to pass laws that again make abortion illegal. Funding will likely be available from deep pockets across the Atlantic for anyone who wants to start that campaign. It is bound to fail, at this time. Our intention is not to over-turn this law, but to foster the care of life, in all stages, with all abilities, in utero and in the world, old and new, enemy and neighbour. Our intention must be to form a church made up of people who understand that following Jesus means receiving the hospitality of God. What is given, is given to be given, and so our Christianity is demonstrated in how we welcome the stranger, be they living very differently, seeking asylum, or hidden in the womb. The numbers travelling to England and buying pills online demonstrate that Ireland was inhospitable to life before the 8th was repealed. The church cannot make the wider society hospitable. It can be hospitable within that wider society. This should be our ultimate aim. This would be an example of what Stanley Hauerwas would call “the church being the church.”

What is needed is thinking, teaching, and preaching that takes seriously the moral dilemmas that the pregnant woman can face, which plausibly seeks to explain why we are so determined to protect “a clump of cells.” Amid all the talk about the decline in church attendance and the collapse in church influence, we can find solace in the work that should always have been our priority: pastoring the faithful as they deepen their discipleship. If our intention is hospitality, our audience is the faithful. The chance to speak to a dozen sincere Christians at a bible-study on a Wednesday evening is more strategically important than 3 minutes of being harangued on national radio. Building relationships with the teenagers in your congregation by hosting a breakfast for them every Saturday is more significant than having lunch with a TD. Jesus tells us that the Kingdom of God is like the tiniest seed planted, which grows up into a vast eco-system (Matthew 13:31-32). The time for talk in the public square has come and gone. What is needed now is that we talk about this issue with truth and love in our own homes. We need to work out what it means to be pro-life in this society. As we nourish our Christian imagination for hospitality, our public witness will be expressed in our actions, more than our words, and everyone will be better for it.

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LISTENING BEFORE SPEAKING

To speak compellingly about this topic, whether in the pulpit, or in the parish centre, or in the pub over a pint, means informing ourselves.

If you reflect on how you are informed, you are likely to notice a trend to fresher and fresher accounts of things that are shorter and shorter in form. Our daily news cycle is just that: we are rarely given more than a day to think about anything. My great theological hero, Karl Barth, advised his students in the early twentieth century that they should carry a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. I suspect Karl would reconsider that advice today and instead follow Thomas Merton's guidance. He avoided newspapers, convinced that if anything happened that really mattered, his friends would inform him. In an age when Sky News seems to be displayed by law wherever people queue, and where our social media streams beep at us night and day, the task of informing ourselves about ethically heavy concepts requires stepping out of the flow of constant distractions. In our hypertext world, seeking out the older and longer and more complicated positions attains almost to the level of spiritual discipline.

Your congregation already knows the news. What they need from you is reflection, informed by prayer, on the substance below the surface of whatever dispute is raging. They don't need your hot take. They long for someone with whom to practice the art of wisdom. This is perhaps most clearly the case in the question of abortion, where the daily discourse is so contentious and dismissive.

I suggest that the first ingredient for speaking graciously on this topic is therefore not to dismiss the pro-choice side. There are many strategic reasons why it is important to know thine enemy, but the fundamental conviction here is theological. There is no dialogue without listening. While we may lament the excesses, what has gripped many this summer in Ireland is nothing short of a moral awakening. We can disagree with the reasoning and the conclusions, the motivations and the rhetoric, but to disagree rightly, we must first listen.

Cristian Mungiu's classic Romanian film, *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*,² would be an excellent starting point, since its plot rotates around a woman who seeks an illegal abortion during the end of the Ceaușescu era. Reflecting on a poem like Anne Sexton's *The Abortion*³ can prompt the kind of empathic understanding which gives our words the weight that they need to fit such a

2 Cristian Mungiu, *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (BAC Films, 2007).

3 Anne Sexton, *The Selected Poetry of Anne Sexton* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 56.

heavy conversation. Reading her account of procuring an illegal abortion in the 1950s every morning for a week will allow the heft of what is at stake to seep into the marrow of your bones. Often our speech about those who have ended pregnancy can lack an appropriate pastoral regard. When we read Sexton wonder “how anything fragile survives,” we are transported into the shoes of one who feels that ending this possibility is the wisest course of action. Compassion is first an act of the imagination. We must nourish it with the best that the pro-choice side has to offer.

Thus, novels like John Irving’s famous *The Cider House Rules*,⁴ or memoirs like Susan Wicklund’s *This Common Secret*,⁵ or philosophical explorations like Ann Furedi’s *The Moral Case for Abortion*⁶ should be considered as we think through this issue in a changed legal context.

THOUGHTS BEFORE SPEAKING

When it comes to exploring what it means to be pro-life, there are classic texts that all pastors should probably be familiar with. *Humanae Vitae* reaches the age of fifty this summer, and perhaps enough time has passed to allow us to go back and read it with fresh eyes.⁷ Perched as we are on the edge of the revolution soon to be wrought by gene therapy, the fundamental political position that flows from the encyclical looks less like the work of a reactionary conservative church and more like a prescient foundation for radical resistance to the technocratic instrumentalisation of life. As a Reformed Christian, it continues to surprise me that Catholics are not familiar with the writings of G.E.M. Anscombe. Her brief, but intense answer to the question, “Were you a zygote?” continues to

4 John Irving, *The Cider House Rules* (London: Black Swan, 2010). There is also a 1999 film adaptation starring Michael Caine and Charlize Theron.

5 Wicklund trained as a doctor directly motivated by the harsh care she received from the American medical system when she sought an abortion. A flawed book in many regards, this might be especially pertinent for readers in the Irish church today because of the light it casts on the human costs associated with the pro-life protest movement. Such tactics do not look wise when described through Wicklund’s eyes. Susan Wicklund and Alan Kesselheim, *This Common Secret* (Philadelphia, PA: Public Affairs Books, 2007).

6 Furedi’s book is notable for a number of reasons, but readers of *The Furrow* will surely notice how it begins with a reference to the teaching of Jesus – walking a mile in the shoes of the other – which seems to be shared without recognition of its source, and because of the biographical testimony of the author that it was the suffering of an Irish friend that first alerted her to the importance of pro-choice activism. In her third chapter, she demonstrates the same ability to listen to the other side for which I am presently advocating. Ann Furedi, *The Moral Case for Abortion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

7 Reading *Humanae Vitae* in conjunction with *Laudato Si’* would be one way to engage with the Papal tradition without getting caught up the twentieth century controversies. The call to holistic care for life that Francis makes is not disconnected from the call to holistic care for life that Paul VI makes!

be hugely provocative and her classic short essay on contraception and chastity informs the wider question (which can never be forgotten) about how the traditional Christian sexual ethic is not motivated by a hatred of the body or a despising of joy, nor by a bias against women or a disregard of pleasure, but by a profound commitment to communities built around flourishing relationships based in the abundance of God's good creation.⁸

Stepping out of the news-steam to reflect on this matter is essential, and in Stanley Hauerwas we have a thinker who has also shown us how to step out of the assumptions of our age. He is able to call our attention to the over-simplifications that mar both the pro-life side as well as the pro-choice side, and his conviction that our reflection on this topic must be thoroughly embedded in the Christian tradition and the present practices of the church, and not determined by the discourse in wider society, must be seriously considered in Ireland over the coming years.⁹

There are younger scholars who have been making important contributions to this debate. I heartily recommend the work of Charlie Camosy, a moral theologian based at Fordham University in New York. His book, *Beyond the Abortion Wars*, is a vision for how to engage the challenge of being pro-life in the American context informed by the lessons learned from the first few decades of that movement's action, informed by a younger generation who are often more attracted to theological accounts of the issue and more dedicated towards achieving effective changes in policy.¹⁰ It requires translation to apply to our context, but Camosy gives us a realistic and well-informed basis from which to work. He followed the debate in Ireland closely, and is a voice that the church would do well to seek out as we try to forge our own path.

James Mumford's *Ethics at the Beginning of Life* is arguably the most theologically sophisticated account amongst those recently published that help us speak meaningfully on this topic. He engages the phenomenological philosophical tradition to consider the experience of pregnancy, of gestation, or birth, of parenthood,

8 G.E.M. Anscombe, "Were You A Zygote?," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures* 18, no. 1 (1984): 111-15; G.E.M. Anscombe, "Contraception and Chastity," in *Why Humanae Vitae Was Right: A Reader*, ed. Janet E. Smith (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1983), 121--46.

9 While all of Hauerwas' work will cast light on this issue, consider, as introductions: Stanley Hauerwas, "Abortion and Normative Ethics," in *Vision and Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 127-46; Stanley Hauerwas, "Abortion: The Agent's Perspective," in *Vision and Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 147-65; Stanley Hauerwas, "Abortion: Theologically Understood," in *The Hauerwas Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 603-22.

10 Charles Camosy, *Beyond the Abortion Wars* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

in an account which is rich and thoughtful.¹¹ That description might sound like this is a very intimidating, cerebral tome. It is barely over 200 pages, and while it is an academic treatise that will surely stretch the reader, isn't that what we are searching for when we train to talk about this on a whole new level?

Lest these sources all seem far too academic, let me close by suggesting that culture is full of pro-natal narratives that often go unnoticed. Movies like *Juno*,¹² or in a very different key, novels like *Children of Men*¹³ testify to how the bigger picture of the church's speech on this topic is about life in all its fullness. To that end, the primary text that should be informing our speech is the bible. From the Psalmist's declaration that we are all fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14), to the poetic pro-life politics of Jesus and John jumping cartwheels in embryonic friendship (Luke 1:39-56), to the way that Jesus engaged the women he encountered (for example, one of many, Luke 7:36-50), the entire Scriptures testify to the need for a pro-life position that goes beyond abstract philosophising or legal definitions and reaches out to the other with gentleness and love.

CONCLUSION: THOUGHTS AND WORDS, BUT ACTION TOO

The recipe for our response after the Eighth must include intentional listening and deliberate teaching. The primary location of the church's action remains the church. If we consider the results alone, it can easily look like the church's position in this society is in ruins. Ruins are a great place to worship, however. As we think through this issue in these changed contexts, it is clear that our speech must be dedicated to forging a church nourished by a mature Christian imagination, able to make the leap between the life-transforming experience of an encounter with God and the encounter with life at its very beginning.

The negative reaction commonly encountered by ecclesial voices in this referendum is no mystery. The churches in Ireland have not been effective witnesses to the grace of the Gospel in recent decades. My peers think of the Catholic church in terms of abuse and abuses covered up and the Protestant churches in terms of standing by while a civil war waged on, or even in some cases, actively encouraging it. Our testimony as leaders is discredited. There is no point in seeking clarifications, trying to draw out how the State was complicit, or how the wider culture held the same views. Preachers of the Gospel should be those most familiar with the idea and necessity of scapegoats. If that is our role in the public

11 James Mumford, *Ethics at the Beginning of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

12 Jason Reitman, *Juno*, 2007.

13 P.D. James, *Children of Men* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992). This was also adapted for the screen, in a 2006 film directed by Alfonso Cuarón.

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square for the coming years, so be it. In the courts of the church, our role, as ever, is the clear exposition of the good news that God seeks our friendship. The ultimate other extends a remarkable offer of hospitality to each and every one of us. If our hospitality to the unborn is not birthed from there, it remains sub-Christian.

Listening and reflecting, speaking and teaching, these are things we need to learn how to do again now. But ultimately, action must flow from this. The care of life for those who are dying – in their old age and before they are even born – is a responsibility that the church must accept. Ante-natal, post-natal, and traditional palliative care should be an institutional focus of our shared life. Our agitation on the political level must resist the temptation towards culture wars, and instead be concerned with the nuts and bolts of making sure that those in the margins and those most at risk – including single mothers and their foetuses — are cared for effectively. Back in the day, St. Francis taught that we should preach the Gospel and if necessary use words. Using our words is now entirely necessary. A pro-life church can only arise when communities talk together with respect and grace, and work out what it means at this time, in this place, to welcome life and live it to the full.

Heavenly Messengers. To agree to be a reader of the word of God at Mass is to take on a noble and glorious work. It is to share in the Church's mission of proclaiming the Good News to the world like the angels at the empty tomb on that bright Easter morning who told that Christ had risen from the dead. Similarly, today's ministers of the word are heavenly messengers, commissioned as heralds of something astounding that absolutely changes the face of the earth.

– OLIVER TREANOR, *Speaking on God's Behalf*, (Dublin: Veritas) p. 15.