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Billy Swan

Redeemably The Atheist, the Archbishop and the Saint

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On 5 September 2019, I was present in New Ross for the opening address by Archbishop Eamonn Martin at the annual Kennedy Summer School. His talk was entitled ‘*What is the role of faith in our politics?*’ (Later published in *The Furrow*, October 2019) and was responded to by Senator Ivana Bacik and Michael Kelly, editor of the *Irish Catholic*. In her response to the Archbishop’s talk, Ms. Bacik, who described herself as an atheist, objected to Dr. Martin’s insistence that Catholic politicians bring their faith convictions into their work of public representation of the people who elected them. In a later column in the *Irish Times*, Ms. Bacik described this position as ‘deeply problematic’ as it would amount to a theocracy, given that the majority of Irish voters and politicians continue to be Catholic.¹

The issue of whether Catholic politicians can act or vote contrary to Catholic teaching is one of fundamental importance but was obscured by media commentary after the talk that focused on the issues of allegiance and authority. The Archbishop’s talk was interpreted as a warning to Catholic politicians that their primary allegiance ought to be to their faith and Church. He said that ‘the life of the Christian demands that believers give a coherent witness to the Gospel in every facet of their lives. People of faith must always be attentive to the danger of living parallel lives whereby they compartmentalise their existence into spiritual and secular spheres’. In response, Ms. Bacik insisted that the allegiance of elected politicians should be to the State and to the pluralistic plebiscite that elected them. She reduced the issue to authority and lauded the freedom that Catholic voters displayed in voting for same-sex marriage in 2015 and abortion in 2018. Context here is important. The outcome of the abortion referendum in particular, was fresh in the minds of the audience at the talk and the fact that

1 Ivana Bacik, ‘The Catholic Church Hasn’t Gone Away You Know’, *Irish Times*, 11 Sept. 2019.

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many Catholic politicians stated their support for repeal of the Eighth Amendment prior to the referendum. Here I explore how the thought of St John Henry Newman can shed some light on this clash of vision and clarify that the real issues at stake here are *not* allegiance or authority but truth, conscience and the idea of notional and real assent.

TRUTH

According to Ivana Bacik, truth appears to be the preserve of the secular realm. Truth is decided by consensus and majority decision. Religious claims to truth cannot be allowed to influence public representatives for each religious tradition claims its own truth and politicians must represent people of all faiths and none. Ms. Bacik makes a sharp distinction between the truth claims of the secular and religious worlds. She said: ‘The simple Swedish phrase sums it up: ‘In school, you teach; in church, you preach. The two should not be confused’.²

From both a philosophical and Catholic perspective, this understanding of truth is deeply problematic because it assumes that all religious claims to truth are inferior to better truth claims that arrive by consensus. It also assumes that all truth claims by religions are equally valid and subjective, without any appeal to the validity of the truth they claim and how it can be verified.

This idea is not new. At the end of the nineteenth century, John Henry Newman (1801-1890) famously averted to the problem in his ‘*Biglietto*’ speech as he reacted to being named a cardinal by Pope Leo XIII in 1879. He said:

‘For thirty, forty, fifty years, I have resisted to the best of my powers the spirit of liberalism in religion. Never did Holy Church need champions against it more sorely than now, when, alas, it is an error overspreading, as a snare, the whole earth’.

At the time, Newman was speaking about the assent to religious propositions. Yet the propositions assented to might well be propositions about almost any subject matter and not just religious ones for Newman was concerned with the epistemology of belief and the assent to what is true. In his defence of doctrine, he identifies a problem that bedevilled religion in his time and continues to do so in ours. He added in his *Biglietto* speech:

‘Liberalism in religion is the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion, but that one creed is as good as another, and this is the teaching which is gaining substance and force daily. It is inconsistent with any recognition of any religion, as true. It teaches that all are to be tolerated, for all are matters of opinion. Revealed

2 Ibid.

religion is not a truth, but a sentiment and a taste; not an objective fact, not miraculous; and it is the right of each individual to make it say just what strikes his fancy’.

The problem of relativism in religious truth described here by Newman is also one that infects the understanding of truth in the popular culture today. It reduces truth to consensus, without any need for truth claims to be evaluated and tested by objective criteria. The issue here is about the integrity of truth itself for we need some standard to judge the claims that a truth makes. We need to say about some truth claim – ‘this is wicked and here’s why’ or ‘this is good, it is a requirement of justice and here’s why’. C.S. Lewis wrote something similar when he said: ‘A dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery’.³

In order to be taken seriously, a truth claim needs to be *tested* and must not contradict itself. This brings us back to the philosophical principle of Non-contradiction that goes back to the time of Plato and was formally stated by Aristotle. It states that something cannot be true and not true at the same time. So for example, the Catholic Church teaches that an unborn child of twelve weeks or less is human, unique and has been created in the image and likeness of God. It therefore has innate rights that must be acknowledged and defended. This truth claim is also backed up by science that reveals that the unborn child of twelve weeks or less has a full human genome that is unique to their actuality and existence. The Catholic Church asks its members to assent to this truth, not because of its own authority but because of the inherent truth of what it claims. This is consistent with the thought of both St Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle who describe truth as the conformity of the intellect with the thing before it. Resisting a relativistic understanding of truth as one opinion as good as another, C.S. Lewis likewise defines truth as the correspondence with reality. He said that ‘truth is always about something’ and ‘reality is that about which truth is’.⁴

The principle of non-contradiction therefore insists that if Catholic politicians and indeed all Catholics assent to this truth claim then they will carry that conviction into political debates and into the ballot box. Not to do so would violate the principle of non-contradiction that states it is not possible to hold to the dignity of unborn life in the private sphere and vote for the removal of their rights in public. We either believe the truth claim about the unborn child of twelve weeks or less or we don’t believe that truth for both options cannot be true at the same time. In the words of the Eamonn Martin in his speech: ‘the truth is one and valid for all....

3 C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, Macmillan, New York, 1965, p. 81.

4 ‘*Myth Become Fact*’ in *God in the Dock*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1970, p. 66.

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the truth of the dignity of the human person and the fundamental right to life is discoverable by all people of goodwill’.

Catholic politicians who campaigned for a ‘Yes’ vote in the abortion referendum respond to this by claiming that while they privately oppose abortion, they do not wish to impose that value on the people who elected them including those who think differently. Such reasoning is understandable but still violates the principle of non-contradiction which undermines truth itself and ultimately civilization. For as Aristotle pointed out centuries ago, if contradictory claims are just as valid as non-contradictory claims, then all words and all claims are meaningless.⁵ This is not to judge Catholic politicians who campaigned for repeal but it does point to a very big circle that is only squared by violating the principle of non-contradiction. We turn now to another reason why many Catholic politicians explained why they campaigned to repeal the Eighth Amendment, namely on the grounds of conscience.

CONSCIENCE

The fallout from Eamonn Martin’s comments made its way to the Dáil. In response to the leader of the Labour party Brendan Howlin, who said it was time to leave behind an era when ‘clerics instructed politicians’, the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar paraphrased the familiar quote from St John Henry Newman about toasting the Pope but conscience first and added that the saint was encapsulating ‘the idea in the Catholic faith that allows people to act in accordance with their conscience, even Catholic politicians’.⁶ It was immediately clear from the Taoiseach’s remarks that what he intended was to use Newman’s insight on conscience to justify how Catholic politicians, including himself, could campaign for something contrary to basic Gospel and Church teaching.

Two points need to be made here. The first is that while it is true that Newman upheld the primacy of conscience, he did so in a manner that did not drive a wedge between conscience and the moral teaching of the Church. For Newman, the workings of conscience and the education of conscience must be understood in relation to other fundamental moral realities. He insisted that the first of these moral realities that conscience is subjected to is the presence and rule of Christ. For this reason, Newman famously referred to conscience as the ‘aboriginal Vicar of Christ in the soul’.⁷ Rather than conscience being a centre of personal subjectivism and isolated from moral demands, acts of conscience

5 Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, bk.4, chap.3, 1006a30-1008a10.

6 Varadkar invokes St. John Henry Newman in Conscience Debate, *The Irish Times*, 15 October 2019.

7 Letter to the Duke of Norfolk

can only be realised with intimate union with the Spirit of Christ. Newman's description of conscience as 'vicar of Christ in the soul' was a deliberate choice by connecting the moral imperative led by Christ in the soul with the moral authority of the vicar of Christ on earth who was the Pope. Therefore, far from setting Papal and Church teaching aside, Newman was attempting to forge a closer connection between moral imperatives that come from basic beliefs and the lively conscience of the believer as a free and responsible Christian and citizen.

The second point in relation to conscience is that while Newman argued for its primacy, he also warned that, even in his lifetime, a subjective interpretation of conscience was beginning to justify anything. In the same '*Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*' in 1875, Newman observed:

'Conscience has rights because it has duties; but in this age, with a large portion of the public, it is the very right and freedom of conscience to dispense with conscience, to ignore a Lawgiver and Judge, to be independent of unseen obligations. ... Conscience is a stern monitor, but in this century it has been superseded by a counterfeit, which the eighteen centuries prior to it never heard of, and could not have mistaken for it, if they had. It is the right of self-will'.

It is this right of self-will and subjectivism that certainly asserted itself among Catholic politicians and voters who said 'yes' to repealing the eight amendment on the grounds of conscience. Yet this was a decision that they did not make lightly. So what then was the good that appealed to their conscience in order to vote this way? How did their conscience come to justify the removal of the right to life of the unborn who are twelve weeks and younger? Perhaps the answer lies in Newman's distinction between notional and real assent.

NOTIONAL AND REAL ASSENT

In the run up to the abortion referendum, health Minister Simon Harris asked the electorate to vote 'Yes' if they thought it was wrong that about 3,500 Irish women had to travel abroad for abortions each year. We need to care for these citizens at home rather than force them to travel for abortions that they have decided will happen anyway. So the argument went.

Many Catholic voters accepted this. While personally opposing abortion they were prepared to support the provision of abortion in Irish hospitals as part of health care for women in crisis who otherwise travel abroad. Their decision was based on this *perceived good* that would arise if the eighth amendment was repealed, namely that Irish women would receive better care.

This concern for women with crisis pregnancies was also shared by those who voted ‘No’. We all could agree that over 3,500 cases of abortion is a tragedy, the vast majority of them being unwanted pregnancies. The difference came in how to address the problem. Studies consistently show how a combination of poverty, the lack of support by a partner and the divorce of sexual practices from family, marriage and commitment are the main causes of unwanted pregnancies. But rather than tackle the root causes of the problem as we do in other areas of medical and social care, the only solution offered in the campaign to help these women, was the option of abortion. There was no serious effort to explore another way or face up to the underlying causes of the abortion tragedy. Furthermore, the moral dimension of the option for abortion was de-sensitised in the run up to campaign by placing the right to choose before the right to life. The right to choose became what was more real and what more people assented to while the reality of abortion as the deliberate ending of an unborn child’s life became less real and more notional. Therefore it could be argued that many Catholic politicians and voters gave a notional assent to abortion as the solution to a societal problem of unwanted pregnancies and combined with the right to choose trumping even the right to life, they voted ‘Yes’ and squared this decision with their conscience as an act of goodness. But did Catholic politicians and voters give *real* assent to abortion?

The distinction John Henry Newman draws between real and notional assent is outlined in his 1870 work ‘*An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*’. For Newman, we really assent to something which is thought of in a concrete manner; in notional assent, we assent to something which is thought of in an abstract manner. In the case of abortion and Catholic politicians, could it be argued that their ‘Yes’ to repeal was a notional assent to abortion rather than a real assent? The answer may be positive given that repeal was the only way presented of achieving a good - namely that Irish women would no longer have to travel abroad and would receive better care at home. As the Labour party posters put it – ‘For Compassion in a Crisis. Vote YES’. For such a simplistic argument to be convincing, the real horror of abortion procedures had to be taken out of public discourse and scrutiny.

Real assent to abortion would require an explicit exposure to what happens during an abortion and to witness at first hand the intentional killing of an unborn child. For Newman, if you apprehend a proposition in a real way, you also assent to it in a real way. That is why the 2019 film ‘Unplanned’ had a powerful impact on many who saw it including those who were pro-choice before viewing it. In a hearing of a Congressional committee in the

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US, Chuck Konzelman - the writer and director of 'Unplanned' revealed that 94 abortion clinic workers sought to leave their jobs after seeing the pro-life film.⁸

How did this happen? Why did many follow the path of Abby Johnson out of the abortion industry after watching a sonogram of a child in its mother's womb being aborted? A reasonable answer is because the people in the industry saw for themselves the reality of abortion and what it involves. While their assent to it before may have been notional, they could no longer give their real assent after the reality of what they saw. They had been exposed to the real truth of what abortion entails and so could no longer subscribe to it.

Again, Newman anticipated this with his insights into truth, conscience and the difference between notional and real assent. Criticising an overly intellectual understanding of truth divorced from love among Christians in France and Italy, Newman wrote: 'They believe merely with the intellect, not with the heart. Argument may overset a mere assent of the reason, but not a faith founded in a personal love for the object of our faith'.⁹ Here Newman insists that a real grasp of truth and its impact on conscience is not merely intellectual but something far more visceral. For Abby Johnson, it wasn't a cleverly worked out argument that convinced her to leave Planned Parenthood but an image of a living child on a screen about to die, that touched her heart and changed her life.

CONCLUSION

In response to comments made by a senior Churchman on the duties of Catholic politicians, the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar drew from St John Henry Newman. This paper has also drawn from the insights of Newman to shed light on the role of faith in politics and the integral relationship between the private and public faith convictions of Catholic politicians. Newman helps us see the need to move beyond Ivana Bacik's tired rhetoric about deference to authority to the real issue of truth - how it is not equivalent to majority opinion, nor the preserve of the secular realm and how truth cannot contradict itself. She insults the intelligence of most of the 33.6% of the electorate who voted 'No' to abortion not because they were 'fervent lobbyists ... who campaigned against a more secular society'¹⁰ but because both faith and reason testify that an unborn life of twelve weeks or less, is still of value and is worth defending. Concerning conscience, while Newman insists

8 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55mDsrEWXCM>

9 J. H. Newman, *Selected Sermons*, ed. Ian Kerr. New York, Paulist Press, 1994, p.9.

10 Ivana Bacik, *opera cit.*

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on conscience having rights, he does so because conscience first has duties. It bears witness to a truth that is recognised rather than created. Finally, his distinction between notional and real assent challenges those who would condemn Catholic politicians and voters who voted for repeal. While it acknowledges the complexity of the issue of abortion, it also draws us closer to the reality of what happens when an unborn life is ended. For Abby Johnson and many who saw the film 'Unplanned', the issue of abortion became real instead of notional. If everyone who voted 'Yes' on 25 May 2018 had seen the film beforehand, I wonder what the result might have been. We will never know. But we might have a more accurate picture of what we said 'Yes' to and what it implied.

From Gratitude to Healing. Another practice that can bring us healing and consolation is to write down all the reasons we are grateful for our cherished loved one. Gratitude has immense healing power, and we are bound to have countless memories of them for which we are thankful. We thank God for having put them in our lives and for the hope of being reunited with them again. We again entrust them to the care and protection of His loving mercy as we continue to practice the third spiritual principal in healing from our grief.

– CHRIS ALAR, MIC and JASON LEWIS, MIC, *After Suicide* (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Press) p.153.