

Notes on Justice and Peace Commission meeting in Carrickdale hotel, Dundalk

7 July 2018

Purpose: The aim of the meeting was to give people an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings

- a) about the referendum in the Republic to remove the 8th amendment from the Constitution giving equal rights to the mother and the unborn, and
- b) about the forthcoming World Family Meeting in Dublin.

Welcome: Mary Vallely, a member of the Justice and Peace Committee (JPC), welcomed people and led us in prayer:

Lord, today I pray for those whose lives are held hostage
Because of the demons of others' prejudice and hatred.
I also pray for those chained by inner demons that prevent them
From being all that you have called them to be.
Remove my chains so that I am free to reach out
To those who have been demonised or isolated.
Remove the shackles of my fear
So that I am free to share your love
With everyone I encounter this day.
Free me, Lord, so that I may go where you need me.

Brian Lennon, S.J., another JPC member emphasised that we were not here to agree, but to understand each other.

Talk by Grainne Doherty

Grainne works in pastoral ministry, lecturing and facilitation while completing her doctoral studies in theology. For many years she was part of the theology department in All Hallows College, while also working in pastoral leadership at both parish and diocesan level. Her recent Veritas publication "Joy of Love: A Family Perspective" (2018) is a book of spiritual reflections and prayers which situate the writings of Pope Francis in the reality of family experience today.

The following are some points from her talk:

Every culture and every era since the beginning of Christianity has engaged in a balancing act between the state and the church and it is within this ongoing struggle that the recent referendum on repeal of the eighth amendment of the Irish constitution took place.

Pope Francis insists that true understanding and ownership of our faith cannot grow without dialogue. The reality of the 'Yes' side's decisive victory of 66.4% to 33.6% in the referendum is one such essential time for dialogue – the importance in speaking out of one's experience and beliefs while also listening 'with humility and receiving with an open heart what others say' (Pope Francis: Opening address at the Synod on Family).

The result was almost a mirror image of the 1983 referendum when people voted to insert the Eighth Amendment into the Irish Constitution

The first part of the talk therefore looked at some of the main factors – in the past thirty-five years, and in the immediate run-up to the vote - that led to an almost complete turnabout. The issues highlighted included (but wasn't confined to):

- The position of the institutional church in Ireland. Although, in the main, the official church – after clearly stating its position - took a back seat in the actual campaign, its recent history and legacy of myriad scandals had a significant, if not always named, presence. Although not directly linked with the issue of abortion, the role of the church in Irish mother and baby homes (specifically, the Magdalene laundries and the Tuam babies) greatly changed its influence and credibility on the Irish culture since 1983.
- The importance of people's stories – especially in the areas of fatal foetal abnormality and pregnancy through sexual abuse. The power of personal witness seemed to translate into a more immediate impact with voters than the sometimes more complex philosophical and theological arguments of the 'No' campaign. In fact, 87% of the electorate said that listening

to such stories significantly influenced their vote. The once tabooed language of abortion became mainstream during the campaign and uncovered previously hidden and secret experiences over decades, of thousands of unwanted and/or traumatic pregnancies and the subsequent abortions – stories from people’s sisters, neighbours, daughters, cousins, friends.

- The backdrop to much of the campaign was the scandal of the both erroneous and withheld cervical smear results which seemed to highlight the vulnerability of women at the hands of both governmental and health agencies of the state. This general sense of vulnerability and lack of protection for women was further compounded by the assaults and killings of two young women in the very week of the referendum.
- The development of the internet in the years since 1983 can’t be underestimated and this not only resulted in a strongly funded advertising campaign in favour of a ‘Yes’ vote coming from outside the country’s boundaries but has also facilitated women accessing their own information about abortion and/ or sourcing abortion pills online.
- Cheap and easy travel ensured the return of tens of thousands – primarily young people – in response to the ‘#Home to Vote’ campaign. The success of this for the ‘Yes’ side in the referendum on same sex marriage three years earlier led to it being repeated with enthusiasm and efficiency for this latest referendum and was partly responsible for 87% of 18-24 year olds voting ‘Yes.’

The upcoming World Meeting of Families is happening not only in the context of the referendum on the Eighth Amendment but also in the broader context of what’s often referred to as ‘seismic shifts’ in both church and state over the past few decades.

These have taken place in a country previously known as ‘the land of saints and scholars’ but where in May past, seven out of ten people who voted ‘Yes’ are baptised Catholics, yet where only 12% of the total electorate said that religion was a factor in their voting decision; several prominent Catholics admitted to voting ‘Yes’ after examining their conscience; those who voted ‘No’ interestingly took up a wide variety of stances in relation to their faith and their church – many feeling abandoned by the perceived lack of visible leadership of the church hierarchy in the debate, while many others supported the church’s choice to remain in the background and who argued their stance more from a ‘human rights’ than a ‘religious rights’ point of view.

Dialogue

The following are some of the points made during the dialogue following Grainne’s input. You will see that there was plenty of disagreement. Even where a point has no one disagreeing with it, this does not mean that other participants accepted it:

Right to life and the referendum on the 8th Amendment:

- *Human rights*
 - I disagree with everything that Grainne said: the real issue was human rights. The right to life is fundamental. The fifth commandment says: ‘Thou shalt not kill’. Human rights is a working out of Church teaching but people were not informed.
 - But despite the 5th commandment, the Church has been slow to condemn capital punishment.
- *Church leadership*
 - The Church bears a responsibility for the result because they gave very little leadership. Pope Francis was stronger in stating that abortion is like being a Nazi with kid gloves.
 - The church needs to support families, engage with victims of rape, abuse, domestic violence, poverty and unemployment, if it is to reduce abortion.
- *Conscience*
 - Some Catholics like Mary McAleese and Ursula Halligan were prominent Yes supporters. They kept taking about conscience. People need to be taught better. Conscience can mislead us. This often means people doing their own thing rather than following church teaching.
 - But the church is the people, not the clergy. They are only part of the church.
 - Conscience is open to interpretation: will we be led by the Church or by the people?
 - Conscience is not just what you think yourself.
- *Secular agenda*
 - The media pushed the secular agenda: first the gay marriage referendum, then the

abortion referendum. We were snowed under by media manipulation, all under the guise of compassion. 5 women who had had abortions and regretted it told their story but these were not highlighted. They will never stop pushing the secular agenda: in Drogheda the Labour party have posters up about secular issues in schools and employment. The secularists have no morals. Our legislators are mostly secularists. We are a minority under attack.

- I disagree with this. I think many secular people have very strong morals: for example many will strongly disapprove of infidelity in relationships. Society is changing, so are relationships.
- I rarely felt I could say what I wanted in public. But people are not stupid. They have access to different media, and there was an overwhelming Yes vote. And there was a 64% turnout.
- I disagree with this view of the media: it was they who exposed clerical abuse. The church has lost all moral authority: they should accept their guilt and listen to criticism with genuine humility.
- *The role of men*
 - There is rarely any mention of men and the role they play in pregnancy, and their rights when a woman is pregnant. Men are often seen just as sperm donors. This is sad especially today when many men play a much greater role in rearing children. It's wrong to see abortion as only a woman issue.
- *Some other points*
 - The abortion referendum was lost many years ago when we voted to allow the right to travel.
 - There have been six referenda since 1937 on abortion in one form or another. It has been 30 years since the X case in which the parents of a child wanted to use DNA from the aborted foetus as evidence against the rapist. The complexity of this and other cases is why many decided that abortion should be dealt with in laws passed by the Dail, not in the Constitution.
 - They gave the issue over to the Citizens' Assembly and then loaded the members in favour of abortion. Members also had a strong inferiority complex as a result of colonialism, and wanted Ireland to be more 'modern' than other countries.
 - There is too much pressure now on young girls to grow up.

LGBTI rights

- Gay people had to hide in the past. That was terrible.
- What about the complications with toilets for transgender people?
- I have a problem with groups on the margins dictating the law.
- But it is vital that the law protects minorities.
- The church still teaches that gays are 'intrinsically disordered'. That is wrong. This unchristian language needs to be eradicated. Pope Francis recently said to a Chilean abuse survivor, Juan Carlos Cruz that it was ok to be gay as that is the way God made him. But then he supported the ban on gays being accepted into seminaries.
- My grand daughter is gay and has a partner abroad. I went to their wedding and, no, I don't think what they are doing is wrong. They have adopted a child and they are very happy as are we.
- What about gays adopting children? Some said this was not right: a child needed a father and a mother. Can the child of a gay person sue the state because it did not give him or her the right to a father and a mother?
- Others pointed to research showing that children of gay couples were just as well adjusted as any others, and that the issue therefore was not whether the parents were gay, but were they good parents. Many children of heterosexual couples could be worse off. Also many children are brought up by single parents and are fine.

Other points

- Archbishop Diarmuid Martin said after the Irish bishops' meeting with Pope Francis that he was amazed at the way that the pope listened to them. But the bishops have not put this lesson learned into action and are not listening to their own people in Ireland
- People talk about the ordeal of the women in the Magdalene laundries. But where were their families when they needed them?
- Whom should we invite to Communion? Pope Francis points out that it is for the imperfect.
- My daughter stopped going to Mass as a 14 year old. Catholic education is a total disaster. Teenagers who practise their religion are a minority and need support. Some cannot admit they believe because they will be shunned. Some churches are now taking

teenagers out of the church during the liturgy of the word and giving them a chance to share, and we got them involved in a justice project. They found this helpful.

We ended with a final prayer, led by Mary Vallely:

It is time we stopped talking of despair and started living in hope.

It is time we started reading and hearing more of the good that people can do
For themselves and for others.

There are far more good Samaritans in this world than there are destroyers.

We must not let the public pessimism of a few destroy the optimism of many.

It is this flame that will illuminate hope for all people.

It is this hope that will bring about a new and better world.

Easter is a protest against despair and dejection.

Faith in the resurrection means refusing to accept the status quo and struggling for
undreamt possibilities.

End