**Catholic Health Care : Apologia Pro Vita Sua**

(Boylan, Vincents, HealthCare, 8th)

At a pro life conference in Manila in the 80s, a Liverpool lady GP, of Irish origin, stated that: "We can be very proud of our Church".

I was a bit surprised. I had been a Catholic for forty years and a priest for ten but did not remember hearing that before. The media tells us the opposite every day.

She went on to say that "our Church is the only Church in the world that has stood by the principle of the dignity of every human life in the past thirty years". "The Catholic Church is the number one health care worker in the world". I had not heard that before either.

In the succeeding years I experienced the veracity of her words. The best hospitals in Muslim Jakarta, and Kuala Lumpur, Buddist Bangkok and secular Hong Kong are the Catholic hospitals (many with Irish connections). When people are really sick the last place they go to is a government hospital.

In Nairobi there is a Mater hospital founded from Dublin. It reaches with outstations to the vast neglected rural areas of the country where the government does not dare to go. It is the same story all over Africa. The prestige of Catholic health care and of being connected with it, is almost embarrassing.

One third of all AIDS patients in the world are cared for in Catholic hospitals.

When the nuns pulled out of Ballinasloe Hospital the head physician spoke of how they had changed maternal health care in the west of Ireland.

China recently trained 50,000 teachers of the Billings method of family planning. Mainly because it is free, non invasive and does not endanger womens health. It has also been proven to be as effective as the pill, see the British medical Journal, Ryder, September 1993.

The obstetricians who made the maternal mortality rate in Ireland in the 50s,60s and 70s the lowest in the world have not received due recognition. O'Driscoll, O'Dwyer and De Valera (obstetrician) did so by promoting a respect for life agenda. In the Irish Medical Journal of 1970 Prof O'Driscoll has an article entitled : "Abortion, the Therapeutic Argument", where he proves that abortion is never necessary to save the life of a mother. At the time Holles St. became a world leader in the management of labour. (if anyone can lay their hands on a copy of this article I would be grateful, it predates the internet)

Every family in South County Dublin is what they are today because of the twenty four hour service that was available at St Vincents Hospital for the past 200 years. It was the best on the planet and everyone knew it, whether it was for a sprained wrist in a rugby match, an appendix or a dying relative.

While working there as an intern in the 70s we had referrals from all over the country.

Against this global verdict of excellence the recent statements of Dr Peter Boylan ring insular.

It cannot be healthcare with a Catholic ethos that he is complaining about but rather the respect for life ethic contained there.

As another champion of Irish women he wants them to have access to every kind of modern "services", and among those services are in vitro fertilization (IVF), common in maternity hospitals. These involve the destruction of human embryos. But if your medical practitioner does not care for life, where does that leave you?

IVF has a 15% success rate, costs a bomb and involves much psychological trauma. Naprotechnology has an 80% success rate, is non invasive and cheap.

Tubal ligation is also on his list, But if you change the name to "castration" it gives a better idea of what is happening. If all the sterilization departments around the world underwent a name change, would women happily flock there? And what about men? Fintan O'Toole was pleading for this "service" in a recent article.

In the recent list of 203 maternity complaints over a 40 year period published by the HSE, nowhere did Catholic health care appear.

The voice of Boylan comes across loud and clear, together with that of the Master of the Coombe, at present in the Nairobi where I live, but in the past 30 years I have not heard him or his colleagues raise their voice about the horrors of abortion, not even those of late term, their side effects , the side effects of contraceptives or the morning after pill, some of which can be fatal, some of which include depression, breast cancer, regret, and infertility. Or the dangers of badly staffed abortion centres in the USA and UK. An Irish woman died recently in a botched abortion in London. You would think that the chairman of the Institute of Obstetricians might have time for a comment, even if only to warn those young mothers who might be in the midst of an agonizing decision on whether or not to travel. You would think Rhona Mahony as a woman would have even more sensitivity, as well as the other Masters? This not to mention the revealing Planned Parenthood videos that have surfaced recently.

Would n't you think that the 600 young Irish girls per year going for abortion in the UK should know these well documented facts and have the right to hear them from leading obstetricians. (that figure is 100,000 in Italy and 22,000 per year in Singapore). Leaders have a responsibilty to inform and to teach.

The Liverpool doctor also said that "one of the first rights of women is to know, and women are not being told the truth". Irish women would do well to check out the respect for life credentials of their obstetricians. Have they done an abortion, have they discarded human embryos? If we know the form for the Derby and the National why not on matters of greater importance. There is need for more transparency. Obstetricians need to publicly show their hands.

As abortion training is standard practice in most maternity hospitals around the worlds it has to be presumed that most Irish obstetricians have performed at least one abortion and possibly many. If IVF is common it means they are regularly discarding human embryos. They are not exactly innocent bystanders.

In the 1983 referendum, in which I was involved, there was lamentable silence from the obstetricians of the country, with a few notable exceptions. Together with the lawyers, politicians and clergymen of all denominations they said nothing. It was the ordinary citizens, along with 1000 doctors, who like the dogs in the street, smelt the horrors of abortion. The eighth amendment was not church based, quite the opposite. It was a major battle which in the end was carried by a two thirds majority.

Dr Boylan likes to say that the country has changed, but science does not change. It has been scientifically unsafe for the past fifty years to say that life does not begin at conception. The battle now is not just to protect human life but to protect scientific truth. Subjective sincerity, nice feelings, a desire to please some women, none of these are substitutes for scientific truth. Truth in all its forms is profoundly liberating phenomenon.

When human embryos are used, frozen and abused there is an underlying contempt for every human person. An educationalist in the US, James Stenson, says that universities today are experts in producing "technically skilled barbarians". People are treated as things and as trash. There is a lack of care and respect.

The ethos of the golden age of Irish obstetrics has passed and has been replaced by a utilitarian, materialistic culture. Marx should be happy about how effectively his ideas have taken root.

Investigations will reveal the truth of whether there was a lack of respect for life in the Tuam controversy. If true, it will be an anomaly, it was not the norm. But we also have to ask, if IVF is now common in Irish maternity hospitals does that mean there is a septic tank in each one, and if not, why not? Where are the embryos and how are they disposed of? This could reveal a story that is much bigger than anything that might have happened in Tuam. These are government and tax payer funded hospitals. Where are the investigative journalists? Women should be asking where are my embryos? Should the recent demonstrations that took place outside Leinster House move to The Coombe, the Rotunda and Holles St? If there is the most minimal chance that these human embyros are persons and all the scientific evidence is their favour, then why are they treated with such lack of respect? People on the boards of these hospitals should be asking a lot of questions.

Why Holles St wants to move to Vincents is obvious. But for an independent hospital would it not have been more rational to move to a general hospital like Loughlinstown or Blanchardstown with a more government related history rather than one owned and run by religious sisters? Proximity is not the only answer nor that it is university hospital, its reputation for excellence is second to none. You cannot argue with quality. Happily those other hospitals have now improved enormously but 40 years ago that was not the case. It is the sisters in Vincents and the Mater who have set the pace and the story is the same all over the world.

In the description of the financing of St Vincents hospital that appeared in the Irish Times, Diarmuid Ferriter, quoting a history of the hospital, suggests that a large part of the funding came from the government, through the Irish Hospitals Charity Sweepstakes. That needs further study to see how much of the sweepstakes actually went to hospitals in general and St Vincents in particular, and how much of it was government money and not money of citizens who bought a sweep ticket. I have my doubts.

He omits the role of Sir John Galvin. At the time it was rumoured that the hospital cost 1m pounds to build and 1m to stock and that Mr Galvin, a very generous low key benefactor paid for half the cost. He may not appear in the history for reasons of discretion but his picture, at a prominent place at the opening ceremony, decorated the walls of the hospital near the main door in the 70s, suggesting such a significant role. This was decades before the celtic tiger when Irish governments had little money and less competence.

Over the years when governments began to contribute to the hospital, they were subsidising the health care of the tax paying citizens of South County Dublin who were flocking to this hospital, as governments were presumably doing with hospitals elsewhere, as a duty of distributive justice, anything less would have been thievery. The government was not contributing to a religious order or buying bricks in the hospital or the right to do so, on behalf of the citizens of the state at some future date, as some journalists now seem to suggest. It seems to be implied that the voluntary contributions of tax paying citizens of south County Dublin to St Vincents had no value or relevance. When the government subsidised our education did they expect to own us in the end too?

The move from St Stephens Green to Elm Park at the time was an epic, long sighted decision which history has proved to be the work of incredible genius and service. Land was cheaper then and has now escalated in value. If the Dail was to move to the Dublin mountains and then in fifty years time someone was to complain of the value of the land in the Dublin mountains on which it was sitting, it would be a silly argument.

To those who complain about the value of the land on which social services run by religious for decades are housed, let them go and build their own hospitals, schools, care centres for the blind, deaf, mentally and physically handicapped, let us see how they do in fifty years time and then we can compare. Otherwise it is hot air.

As the nuns pass out of the vanguard the only responsible reaction can be awe, gratitude, and admiration for such a stunning contribution. They have not just provided clean hospitals, that is a lot, but it does not do them justice They have set the bar very high. Through standards in health care and education these Irish women, many our aunts and grandaunts, have turned our primitive backwater into a modern state. De Valera (politician) may have been the figurehead and the voice but a well trained army of religious in every town and village did all the work. Thousands of doctors and nurses have been trained in these standards and have brought them to every last corner of the earth. As a country Ireland may have had had little materially to contribute to the world but in these two areas she has spread these standards everywhere and millions around the world are living witnesses. We have a lot to be proud of.

As they disappear the baton is passed to a new lay cohort whom it is to be hoped will develop even more that respect for life. Whatever form the new government of St Vincents takes they are receiving a great legacy of respect for life in all its forms. It has been a shining light in its 200 year history and it must continue. We need more hospitals like it.

A new generation of medical students and medical practitioners must come, authentic revolutionaries, who are not afraid to challenge the status quo, to be conscientious objectors to the prevailing destruction of life culture. Medicine worldwide has lost its soul.

The protection of the eighth amendment will help that process and is its purpose.

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