

Where the Bishops of Northern Ireland Went So Disappointingly Wrong On Abortion

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The Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC) recently expressed disappointment at a statement on abortion made by the Catholic bishops of Northern Ireland.

The statement was issued in the context of the British Government's publication [on 31st March 2020] of a new framework for legal abortion in Northern Ireland which was described by SPUC as "diabolical legislation". Some of its worst aspects included:

Abortion up to and during birth on grounds of disability.

No limit for self-induced abortions. A woman who kills her child while giving birth will not commit a criminal offence.

Much of what the bishops said in their statement was excellent, unequivocally emphasising the sanctity of human life before birth in simple, direct language:

"The life of every mother and her unborn baby matters ... Every unborn baby matters regardless of age or ability, gender or background. He or she has the right to be protected in a community where everyone belongs and deserves our respect."

And the bishops showed great insight and compassion concerning the plight of mothers-to-be in difficult circumstances, saying: "Every woman faced with an unplanned pregnancy matters too. She has a right to be cared for within a community where she is protected from any pressure to abort her baby."

However, where the bishops went so disappointingly wrong was in the following advice they gave to Northern Ireland politicians:

"It is to be noted that members of the Northern Ireland Assembly are not left entirely devoid of influence. Politicians and all people of good will, who recognise the extreme nature of the Regulations, should not meekly acquiesce to their promulgation. The Regulations themselves can be debated by the Assembly and insofar as they exceed the strict requirements of the 2019 Act, new Regulations can be enacted by the Assembly. We intend to make these points in writing to our MLAs in the coming days and encourage others to do likewise."

Those words "and insofar as they exceed the strict requirements of the 2019 Act, new regulations can be enacted by the Assembly" have massively disturbing implications for Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

These "strict requirements of the 2019 Act" involve the repeal of legislation which, for nearly 140 years, has been the great bulwark – and virtually the only safeguard – against abortion in Northern Ireland: namely, Sections 58 and 59 of the Offences against the Person Act 1861. They will also demand that Catholic schools are used to promote and facilitate abortions under the new regime.

The acceptance of abortion within certain conditions on the reasoning that it will avoid something even worse, threatens to deal a lethal blow to the conscience of pro-life politicians who support such a strategy. It may not be possible at present to restore legal protection for unborn children in Northern Ireland but the complete rejection of the government's abortion framework as a matter of principle is a necessary first step in that direction.

