



Briefing – March 2011

The Craigmyle lecture was delivered by Dr Philip Howard, Chairman Joint Medical Ethics Committee of the Catholic Union & Catholic Medical Association on 25 October 2010 in Portcullis House. The lecture was divided into two parts. First, the current euthanasia debate was considered and second the Christian understanding of suffering was explored. Dr Howard started by explaining why Euthanasia is wrong, and continued by explaining the state of the current debate on euthanasia and how it is rapidly changing. He referred to the End of Life Assistance Bill then before the Scottish Parliament modelled on the Oregon Death with Dignity Act 1997. The Bill exemplifies many of the attitudes and approaches of the pro-euthanasia movement, which is pushing for euthanasia. This Bill was handsomely lost when put to the vote. Dr Howard quoted from a JMEC document reminding us that:

“The value of continuing life is a moral question and human dignity, properly understood, is not lost by dependence, disability, deformity or degenerative disease. All human life retains moral worth and is of inestimable value... We hold that to nourish a fellow human being in a manner appropriate to their condition is a human duty.”

The second part of the lecture dealt with the Christian understanding of suffering from Dr Howard’s personal experience.

One of the particular rewards and privileges of clinical practice is to bear witness to what theologians call heroic sanctity where individuals engage in the most extraordinary acts of charity towards others. There are times in the lives of experienced clinicians when the full impact of the selfless charity of ordinary individuals strikes like a whirlwind. It is all the more powerful when it is met suddenly and unexpectedly as part of one’s everyday professional life. There is a unique insight into the profound love that one individual has shown towards another- sometimes for many years, without thought of reward and hidden from the gaze of others. It comes as a silent and unheralded revelation of one person’s profound and selfless love for another. I have seen it in the devoted care of a mother for over fifty years for her profoundly disabled daughter with spina bifida and hydrocephalus, in a single mother heroically caring for her son with a rare, progressive and ultimately fatal neurodegenerative disorder despite the often callous disregard and even harassment of others and in the devoted nursing care given by a wife over eight years to her husband with a terminal neurological condition. Such insights which are only experienced briefly yet profoundly, lift the veil on the profound love that one human being can show for another. Yet like a whirlwind the experience is momentary, the memory permanent. (the full text of Dr Howard’s lecture is on the Union’s website)

Religious Freedom

Neil Addison Barrister and National Director of the Thomas More Legal Centre was one of the speakers at a conference in Dublin organised by The Iona Institute on 24 September. He spoke about religious freedom. The best summary of the current position for Religious believers in Britain was given by Dr Rowan Williams Archbishop of Canterbury when he said in an Interview on 11 December 2009: “The trouble with a lot of Government initiatives about faith is that they assume it is a problem, it’s an eccentricity, it’s practised by oddities, foreigners and minorities” ..and a similar comment was made by Catholic Archbishop Peter Smith: “religion is regarded as a legally permissible private eccentricity; allowable behind closed doors once a week, but not in any way to be given expression in public or working life” The growing secularisation of British life is of course something shared with much of Europe but two specific problems in Britain arise from the 30 year history of the Northern Ireland troubles followed by the September 11 2001 attacks in New York and the July 7 2005 attack in London. In consequence Religion is often subconsciously seen in Britain as not merely a harmless eccentricity but as a potentially dangerous eccentricity. (the full text of Neil Addison’s talk is on the Union’s website)

CES Sex Education: The Chairman informed the committee of a publication by the Sex Education Forum which had come to his attention. This booklet aimed to provide sex education for five year olds. The merit of

such an aim was in the view of the PPAC questionable. What particularly concerned the committee was that the booklet detailed matters that seemed beyond the needs of pure basic education. It showed for example five different positions for intercourse.

Persecution of Christians: This had been the subject of the Pope's Christmas Day address.

"The human being is one, and humanity is one. Whatever damage is done to another in any one place, ends up by damaging everyone. Thus the words and ideas of the Synod must be a clarion call, addressed to all people with political or religious responsibility, to put a stop to Christianophobia; to rise up in defence of refugees and all who are suffering, and to revitalise the spirit of reconciliation. In the final analysis, healing can only come from deep faith in God's reconciling love".

Discrimination against Christians: On an allied theme the PPAC considered the position of a Christian mental health worker, Margaret Forrester, who was facing the sack after showing two colleagues a leaflet warning of the physical and psychological damage that could be caused by abortion. The leaflet summarised accounts from women who had experienced abortions. She would get legal representation but there was a concern expressed that the Courts now never appeared to uphold the rights of Christians. Mrs Forrester won her case.

"Right to Believe": The U.N. Human Rights Council adopted in the Defamation of Religions Resolution promoted by the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. This Conference linked 57 countries with majority or significant Muslim populations. There were two votes. In March 2009 the resolution was passed by a vote of 23 countries in favour with 11 voting against and 13 abstentions. In April 2010 there were 20 votes in favour, 17 against and 8 abstentions. The UK voted against.

The International Press reported at the time that Western Governments and a broad alliance of other groups had expressed dismay at this adoption.

This resolution allows governments the power to determine which religious views can and can't be expressed in their country, and it gives the state the right to punish those who express 'unacceptable' religious views as they see fit.

Thus in effect it makes religious persecution legal and endorses it with the seal of the UNHRC. The concern was that in many cases it would be the practice of Christianity that would bear the brunt of this development. A "Right to Believe" campaign had been organised to protect religious liberty but had not succeeded in preventing the passage of this Resolution.

That there have been at least two votes indicates this does not appear to be an issue set in stone.

Recruitment

The Union is currently in the middle of a recruitment drive so if any member has friends who are interested in furthering our work, please ask the office for membership application forms.

Fund Raising

A fund raising group is in the process of being formed so if any member has any contacts who could be approached as possible sponsors or donors, please let us know by writing or emailing the office.

Lenten Appeal

A proposal "Building for the Future" was adopted at the Union's AGM in November 2008 and this included an appeal for additional funds. Consequently, although we are in a period of government cuts if members can make an additional personal contribution would you please do so.

Memorial Mass

A Memorial Mass has been arranged for the repose of the souls of Robert Keen and Richard Cheffins, both distinguished former members of Council, at Westminster Cathedral on Thursday 9th June 2011 at 5.30pm. Following Mass refreshments will be served in the Meeting Room, Vaughan House, Francis Street, sited immediately behind the Cathedral, at a cost of £10 per head. Please inform the office if you intend to attend the reception and remit the amount due, also to the office. This is to ensure that there will be a sufficient supply of refreshments.
