

May 23, 2013

Dáil Éireann
Leinster House
Kildare Street
Dublin 2
REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Dear Colleague:

As someone who was born and raised in Ireland, I am all too familiar with the country's difficult history when it comes to abortion. For too long, Ireland's abortion law has persisted in a state of confusion, with Irish women and their families paying the price.

This letter comes to you from Catholics who are concerned about the health, welfare and rights of the women of Ireland. We represent the voice of the majority of Catholics all over the world who believe that our Catholic faith demands social justice and that we are called to address the needs of those who are suffering and in positions of powerlessness.

You are now in a position to act on legislation that is long overdue and establish a framework for access to legal abortion services. It is sad to see that the church hierarchy in Ireland has resorted to bullying tactics to intimidate and harass those who support this proposed law. Threats of excommunication and of the denial of communion have been used time and again in many countries, but these have not stopped Catholic countries like Argentina and Mexico from passing more humane abortion laws. The simple truth is that you can be Catholic and be prochoice. Here are some important facts to consider:

1. Catholic politicians do not have to make policy in line with what the bishops expect, especially on abortion.

Catholics are required to find a balance between the demands of spiritual and civic duties. In many instances, Catholic policymakers may be compelled by their conscience to speak out in support of—and to legislate in favor of—access to safe, legal, comprehensive reproductive health services, including abortion care.

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In 1966, the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom said that Catholics must respect the positions of people of other faiths and avoid "any hint of coercion" in expressing religious views. The declaration specified the government's role as protecting against "abuses committed on the pretext of freedom of religion." This pluralism does, in fact, leave room for the many Catholics who do not support the position of the church on abortion.

2. Excommunication should be a last resort, not a political weapon.

The law of the church does not allow for anyone to be treated as a second class citizen. It also does not mandate that all dissenters be silenced, nor does it condone indiscriminate punishment doled out on the basis of political ideologies. All Catholics have the right to decide, the right to speak up, the right to safeguard their privacy and reputations and the right to receive the sacraments.

Canon law requires that we interpret its penal laws narrowly, focusing on individual punitive situations and discouraging us from making broad generalizations. Penalties do not apply to what someone thinks, says or does to protect or promote safe, legal abortion, and even in cases in which excommunication may be applied several exceptions exist. While some bishops have penalized prochoice Catholics in a small handful of cases over the past decade or so, these instances have been very rare, showing that the church hierarchy has been unwilling to enter into a war with the many prochoice Catholic policymakers and reproductive rights advocates.

3. Denial of communion for prochoice legislators is not widely accepted among the church hierarchy.

There is no widespread consensus on communion bans among the church hierarchy. In fact, many bishops are taking the position that the altar rail is not the place to work out political disagreements. For example, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin said that communion "should not become a place of debate and contrast and be used for publicity reasons by anybody."

As the discussion in the *Dáil* moves forward, we urge you to dismiss the noise and listen to your conscience. Church teachings on abortion are far more nuanced than is widely acknowledged and, along with church tradition and core Catholic tenets, leave room for supporting a more liberal position on abortion. For example, the Vatican has acknowledged that it does not know when a fetus becomes a person and has never declared its position on abortion to be infallible. To explain this more fully, we have enclosed a brochure, *The Truth about Catholics and Abortion* for your reference.

Catholics can, in good conscience, support access to abortion. We call upon you to show your support for Irish women and to reject calls from the church hierarchy and their ultraconservative allies to deny access to much-needed safe abortion services.

Respectfully,



Jon O'Brien
President

Enclosure: [The Truth about Catholics and Abortion](#)