

Freedom of Conscience Editorial

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Freedom of conscience is one of the most fundamental human rights. It is also the basis of democracy and of civilized living. Today it is under threat once again on various fronts, not least due to the tendency of modern governments – what we call “the State” – to become totalitarian, i.e. to decide how we should behave in every possible situation.

The modern state thinks of itself as pluralist, or as secular, or as post-religious. So, while prepared to give religious views a hearing (so that religious people can't complain of being excluded), the state does not think that religion (or anything similar to religion) has anything important to say about what is good or what is morally right or just. By default, that means the state decides what is good for persons and society, what is right and just. That's a kind of totalitarianism. It will mean that people refusing to comply with the law – any law – on grounds of conscience will be treated as ‘bad citizens’ – even criminals.

The result is that whatever is the reigning politically correct ideology tends to become incorporated into state laws, state agencies and even Medical Council Guidelines. The statutory body, the Crisis Pregnancy Agency (CPA), is funded by the Government to the tune of some €8.14 million (2006 report) of taxpayers' money.

Up to recently the CPA insisted that the Catholic counselling agency, CURA, should distribute their (the CPA's) so-called “Positive Options” leaflet – note the lie of calling abortion a positive option – or to refer their clients to someone who presumably might give the information on abortion that is sought, but which the Catholic counsellor could not in conscience condone. To refer the patient would be to cooperate in the anticipated immoral action. Remember, this is a loving response by the Catholic counsellor who desires the best solution for both the woman and her unborn child. Every abortion leaves two victims, one dead, the other seriously injured.

More recently, the same tendency could be noted in the Medical Council of Ireland's Guideline 2.6 re Conscientious Objection, where it states: “If a doctor has a conscientious objection to a course of action this should be explained and the names of other doctors made available to the patient.” The latter presumably means that the doctor should give the names of other doctors who would supply the “treatment” which, on conscientious grounds, the first doctor could not prescribe. But this is a mockery of the notion of conscientious objection.

If a doctor refuses a course of action on the grounds that he or she holds it to be immoral, then he cannot in good conscience recommend that the patient go to a doctor who would comply with their wishes. Referral is co-operation in an immoral act and the referring physician ultimately helps to achieve the immoral end. This directive by the Medical Council is, like the rest of the guidelines, under revision. There is still time to alter it so that the second part of the sentence is deleted.

The implications of this ruling is that a doctor who refuses to co-operate in immoral actions according to Catholic medical ethics can be disciplined by the Medical Council for professional misconduct and ultimately lose the right to practice medicine in Ireland if he continues to follow his conscience.

It seems that today many GPs and Obstetricians in Ireland prescribe the abortive morning after pill, even though this is in conflict with Catholic medical ethics. If this is the case, then it is possible that soon no practicing Catholic physician who refuses to prescribe will be found in these specialties. In this way, Catholic doctors are being discriminated against and Catholic patients are being denied the possibility of attending a physician who shares their values.

If the principle of conscientious objection is not firmly adhered to, then the implications for the future are indeed horrendous, since morality and personal integrity are based on following

one's conscience. At a time when corruption in all institutions of our society is increasing, the only bulwark against the rising tide is a person's conscience and the respect society shows their conscience, even if they happen to be swimming against the prevailing politically correct tide.

If we don't uphold the primacy of conscience in all aspects of political and civil society, then we are left with the lame excuse that, in recent times, many people found guilty of shady practices in, for example, business and banking, excuse themselves by – claiming "everyone else was/is doing it". We would do well to recall the words of the late John Paul II: "Freedom consists not in doing what one wants, but in having the freedom to do what one ought to do."

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