NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Abortion comes to Ireland

Phyllis Zagano | May. 8, 2013 Just Catholic

Just in time for Mother's Day, the Irish parliament has begun to debate a bill legalizing abortion. The cleverly titled "Protection of Life during Pregnancy Bill 2013" supposedly clarifies current Irish law. It does not. It changes it.

Presented against the backdrop of a horrendous case in Galway, the 33-page bill allows abortion in the case of an emergency medical threat to the life of the mother -- or at least a medical threat -- or if there is risk of suicide. Approval is on a "one-two-three" basis: one doctor for an emergency, two for medical threat, three for suicide. And get this: None of the 19 obstetrics facilities in Ireland can refuse to perform the procedure. Individual medical practitioners can't really be conscientious objectors. They must make referrals.

But back to Galway. In November 2012, a pregnant 31-year-old dentist, a native of India, turned up at a Galway hospital with back pain, an elevated white blood cell count, and the beginnings of a miscarriage. They did nothing, even after she asked that her doomed baby be taken. She died. A few months later, the courts found "medical misadventure" -- that would be medical malpractice -- and coincidentally, the "Protection of Life" abortion bill found its way to the Irish parliament.

So what's going on? Abortion is legal in every European Union country except Malta. Ireland's law already protects the life of the mother, allowing termination if her life is in danger. It would seem that a woman undergoing an early miscarriage would qualify. (The Galway woman was at 17 weeks.) The law allows termination as medical treatment, so there should be no problem or confusion.

In Galway, such was not the case. A midwife told the parents that as long as the child's heart was beating -- independent of her septicemia and partial miscarriage -- "Ireland is a Catholic country" and they could not end the pregnancy. The Irish legal system eventually certified the hospital's mistake, giving a push to delivery of a very broad abortion bill.

The new Irish law is interesting. It explicitly eliminates ending an ectopic pregnancy (where the fertilized egg implants in a Fallopian tube) from the catchment of "abortion." It defines life as beginning with implantation of the fertilized egg in the womb. And it does not give any term after which an abortion may not be performed. For a number of reasons, the proposed legislation is rather scary.

If the unimplanted fertilized egg is not a human being -- no matter that's the scientific term -- then IVF and morning-after pills wear new badges of legality in Ireland. With no term limit on when an abortion may be performed, in theory, a medical condition at eight and a half months could allow for a partial-birth abortion -- killing a partly delivered baby. Most egregiously, by including threatened suicide as a risk to the health of the mother, the proposed Irish law makes mockery of psychiatric care. Has anyone told the lawmakers that abortions also cause suicide?

The problem is a muddled understanding of what moral theologians and ethicists have taught for years: the "double-effect" termination of a pregnancy is not, formally, an abortion. Terminating ectopic pregnancies and

treating cancer of the womb are the textbook cases. Newer diagnostic procedures and newer treatments may expand the categories, but the determinations are best made by medical ethicists, not by lawmakers.

But by including threatened suicide in the mix of reasons to protect the health of the mother, Ireland is essentially removing medical ethics -- and common sense -- from its law books. And, as the midwife pointed out, Ireland is a "Catholic country."

As with any political cause, abortion has its supporters in Ireland. But the general population does not seem to support the proposed law. There is much back-and-forth about "a woman's right to choose," but at the end of the day, ordinary citizens do not like the idea, especially the suicide provision. As a Dublin cab driver told me not long ago, "If they're that badly off, they can get on a boat and get it done in the U.K. We don't need to do that in this country."

Will the law pass? Possibly, but not without a fight from the more conservative members of the parliament, whose views are backed by the Catholic bishops.

Even so, Ireland's jump to the pro-abortion bandwagon underscores very real facts about Catholicism in the country. Yes, the Irish bishops have complained about the bill. Yes, the Irish cardinal has suggested excommunication for those who vote for it. But few in the age group truly affected by the law could care less what any churchman says or does. Soon enough, most objections will die out.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and author of several books in Catholic studies. Her most recent books are *Women & Catholicism* (Palgrave-Macmillan), *Women in Ministry: Emerging Questions about the Diaconate* (Paulist Press) and *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (with Gary Macy and William T. Ditewig), (Paulist Press).]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Phyllis Zagano's column, "Just Catholic," is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up [1].

Source URL (retrieved on *04/18/2014 - 13:42*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/just-catholic/abortion-comes-ireland

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup