



A Culture of Killing

By Past Grand President Jim Kelly

The period since the beginning of this year has been characterised by a well resourced and highly organised campaign by pro Euthanasia groups which have aggressively pursued the legalisation of Euthanasia, despite the fact that the UK Parliament has continued to reject such legislation for the last five years.

As one of our respected, national newspapers recently commented, “anybody listening to the BBC yesterday could be forgiven for thinking that this debate has only one side”. Most of us are very dependent on the mass media for the information which we use to form our opinion on a wide range of subjects. Few of us have the time to carefully examine the appropriate evidence and come to a balanced judgement, so we rely on what the mass media tells us in the hope that they have given a balanced and equitable view. On the issue of assisted dying and euthanasia, that would be a dangerous assumption. Sadly, we have been subjected to a series of one-sided programmes, news bulletins which highlight the pro-Euthanasia views of high profile individuals and the selective publication of the results of opinion polls. These pay scant attention to the interests and views of the disability rights movement, the judiciary, the medical profession and indeed Parliament; they ignore the modern hospice movement and palliative care which has revolutionised the science of pain and symptom control.

One-sided Coverage

A recent Panorama programme featured the case of Mrs Kay Gilderdale, recently cleared of the charge of attempted murder after administering morphine and other drugs to her daughter.

In the course of the programme Mrs Gilderdale’s actions were sympathetically portrayed in a wholly positive way, without questioning the moral dimension of her actions, without giving equitable coverage to the legitimate concerns of the many disabled people whose lives are as equally difficult and sadly challenging as that of her daughter. In the same programme Chris Woodhead, the former Chief Inspector of Schools, now suffering from a debilitating and fatal illness, supported the right of individuals to choose when to end their lives, a position similar to that which has been advocated by Debbie Purdy. The prominent news coverage of Terry Pratchett’s lecture in favour of allowing assisted suicide came across as yet another attempt to influence public opinion.

Such one-sided coverage of euthanasia ignores the factual evidence from those countries and states in which suicide has been legalized. There “the right to die”, not only repudiates the sanctity of life but also creates opportunity for the abuse, both deliberate and accidental, of some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Evidence reported from the Netherlands indicates “that up to 1000 adults and dozens of disabled babies, under the Groningen protocol, are killed each year without their consent despite the fact that this is not specifically permitted by legislation.

Half of all Netherlands cases of Euthanasia are not reported and increasingly so called ‘terminal sedation’, giving large doses of sedatives whilst withdrawing food and fluids with the explicit intention of ending life, is now common practice accounting for 8% of all deaths.”

Brave and Compelling

In the House of Lords’ recent debate on Lord Faulkner’s proposed amendment to the Coroners and Justice Bill, Baroness Campbell’s brave and compelling witness represents a very different perspective. As a woman who has spent the last 50 years battling a degenerative disease, and who has faced many serious crises, she told the House of Lords ‘that suicide reform would lead to state assisted dying; to a situation in which doctors would encourage people with disabilities to end their lives’. “Those of us who know what it is to live with a terminal condition are fearful that the tide has already turned against us”. In a characteristically well focussed summary, she told fellow peers that assisted dying “is to abandon hope and ignore the majority of disabled and terminally ill.”

Largely Amoral Society

Our “largely amoral society” was the focus of a forceful sermon last Pentecost by Scotland’s Cardinal O’Brien who currently faces the challenge of ‘The End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill’ launched by

Margo Macdonald. Her bill, if passed, would introduce a system similar to that in the Netherlands, ‘allowing both assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia not only for the terminally ill but also for anyone who is ‘permanently physically handicapped’, unable ‘to live independently’ and who ‘finds life intolerable’.

In his sermon Cardinal O’Brien expressed his deep concerns at the increasing numbers of abortions, the ongoing debate about euthanasia and what he accurately described as the “tragic disregard for human life, whether in the womb, on our streets, or in old age”. He then went on to point “the way to solutions which will help solve some of our problems”. He counsels that before any society can prosper and flourish, it must give encouragement and support to “the foundation stone of our society, the foundation on which any stable society is built”, namely to the institution of marriage and the place of the family. This course of action is something which our society has steadfastly ignored as it has repeatedly acted in ways which have undermined marriage and weakened the family.

However Cardinal O’Brien does not leave the issue there; he forcefully reminds us of the words of Pope Paul VI, first spoken nearly 40 years ago but still relevant today: “It is not enough to recall principles, state intentions, point to crying injustice and utter prophetic denunciations: these words will lack real weight unless they are accompanied for each individual by a livelier sense of personal responsibility and by effective action”.

