

Recognising One Another as Persons

A Pre-Election Statement from Kevin Doran, Bishop of Elphin

As we approach the General Election, I want to share some thoughts with you regarding our responsibilities as Catholics who are also citizens. I do so in a spirit of respectful dialogue, conscious of the fact that, as individual Catholics and as a faith community, it is part of our mission to pursue the common good, which incorporates the good of each person and the good of all. We do this directly in our own local communities, but we also do it through the government which we elect and which, on behalf of all of us, takes responsibility for the common good. In identifying what I believe to be some of the key challenges facing our society, I am proposing a vision for society which is rooted in Gospel values and Catholic Social Teaching.

Communicate and Vote

Like most forms of government, Democracy has its limitations. We complain at times that we are not adequately represented. We need political leaders with a long-term vision, but we cannot expect our elected representatives to develop and sustain that vision in isolation. Our elected representatives can only "represent" us in any realistic sense, if they hear what we believe. We can raise issues with politicians in the traditional way on the doorsteps, but social media adds greatly to the possibility of making our voices heard.

Pope Francis warns of the dangers of "indifference" which results from the prioritising of self-interest and the neglect of our social responsibilities (World Peace Day, Jan 1st 2016). As Christian citizens, committed to the common good, we are called to think beyond our own personal and local needs in deciding how we use our vote. I appeal to everyone in our local Church communities to take seriously the social responsibility to exercise the right to vote. I encourage you to pray for the gift of wisdom to vote well.

One of the mantras of this election campaign is that "it is all about the economy". This is true, *provided* we remember that the economy is primarily about people, not just money. The word "economy" comes from the Greek word *oikonomia*, which means the *care of the household*. The ethical principles outlined in the Social Teaching of the Church guide us towards a vision for society that places the dignity of every person at the centre of policy decisions. Drawing inspiration from the example of Pope Francis in prioritising the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalised, ***I want to propose a number of questions that we might consider putting to election candidates.***

1. How will you protect human life from the moment of conception until its natural end?

The right to life is a fundamental human right. Respect for life is one of the key indicators of a civilised society. In 2013, the Government passed legislation which permitted direct abortion in certain circumstances. In recent months there has been talk of removing the right to life of the unborn from the Constitution. This talk tends to focus on babies with life-limiting conditions and, in the public debate, much of what is presented as fact is actually quite misleading. Some babies who are seriously ill only live for a very short time, while others live significantly longer. For a Christian, however, there is no such thing as a life without value. For as long as they live, children with life-limiting conditions are entitled to be loved and cared for like any other child *and* their parents are entitled to the support of proper peri-natal hospice services.

Some of the political parties and some individual candidates have made no secret of the fact that they favour the widespread availability of abortion, while others have begun to talk about "assisted suicide". Pope John Paul II wrote: "To claim the right to abortion, infanticide and euthanasia, and to recognize that right in law, means to attribute to human freedom a

perverse and evil significance: that of an absolute power over others and against others. This is the death of true freedom." (*The Gospel of Life*, 20). We need to convince our politicians of the importance of supporting and promoting a culture of life that recognises the unique value of every human person, and we need to actively support those who do. Meanwhile, I find it very difficult to see how any Catholic could, in good conscience, vote for a candidate or a political party whose policy it is to legalise abortion.

2. How will you support families who are struggling? How will you counteract family breakdown?

The family is the fundamental unit of society and of the Church. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "The importance of the family for the life and well-being of society entails a particular responsibility to support and strengthen marriage and the family" (2210). Family breakdown brings with it not only devastating personal costs, but considerable social costs. It is a major contributing factor to poverty, homelessness and other forms of social exclusion. There is clear evidence that financial difficulties contribute to marital breakdown. Child poverty rates in Ireland are among the highest in Europe.

The protection of the family begins with investment in marriage, strengthening parents' relationships and supporting them in their parenting to maximise opportunities for their children. In recent years, Accord, the Catholic agency for Marriage and the Family, which provides services in these areas, has seen its funding drastically reduced, while demands for its services continue to increase. The next government needs to prioritise the resourcing of organisations such as Accord that work with families to prevent relationship breakdown. Previous cuts in this area have been detrimental to the wellbeing of families and should be reversed.

3. How will you ensure that all citizens are treated fairly when it comes to healthcare?

The care of the sick was central to the ministry of Jesus and, for that reason, has always been part of the mission of the Church. In the course of my work I meet many nurses and doctors who give tirelessly of their energy and their skill in caring for the sick and the elderly, in the two large hospitals in our diocese, in a wide range of nursing homes and in the community.

The *Emergency Department* crisis is a major cause of concern. It is not acceptable that people who are seriously ill or frail due to old age have to spend hours and even days on trollies in overcrowded emergency rooms. It is widely accepted that this problem is the result of a shortage of step-down nursing home facilities for patients who no longer need to be in hospital, but who do need nursing care. Apart from the distress that this causes to patients and their families, it is also seriously wasteful of scarce resources. This problem needs to be tackled urgently, in a systematic and coherent way.

4. How will you contribute to resolving the refugee crisis in Europe and the Middle East?

For some years now, Trócaire, the Catholic agency for development, has been working with local partners in Syria. It has frequently warned of the impending refugee crisis which erupted last Summer. We have every reason to be proud of the work done by the Naval Service in rescuing so many refugees in the Mediterranean. Unfortunately those refugees have been left kicking their heels in refugee camps on the mainland of Europe. Notwithstanding the huge public expression of concern and the many offers of help, the process of bringing refugees to Ireland seems to be painfully slow. It is true, of course, that due care has to be taken to ensure that those who come are genuine refugees, but that care has to be balanced with the urgent need of so many families who, through no fault of their own, have lost everything they have. When it comes to food, shelter, clothing and other basic needs, it matters little whether they are Muslims or Christians.

One important issue that does arise in the context of addressing the causes of the refugee crisis, however, is the plight of the many Christian communities in the Middle East and elsewhere which are being systematically targeted simply because they are Christian. Together with my fellow bishops, I have met with some of their religious leaders and listened to their concerns. As many as 100,000 Christians are being killed every year because of their faith. Others are being tortured, imprisoned, exiled, threatened, excluded, attacked and discriminated against on a widespread scale. Persecution against Christians is reported in 110 countries. Many of these countries have significant trade links with Ireland. It is not unreasonable to think that Ireland, in its turn, might bring to bear some diplomatic and even economic pressure in support of them, given our own ancient Christian tradition.

In the meantime, many asylum seekers wait for years to establish their refugee status and, in spite of all the promises to the contrary, continue to languish in direct provision centres, where their lives are put on hold. It should not be a case of helping them *or* the refugees. We can do both, and we will ultimately benefit from the many gifts they bring with them.

5. How will you respond to the urgent needs of those who are currently homeless and prevent further homelessness in the future?

More families are becoming homeless in Ireland now than at the height of the economic crisis or, indeed, at any time in modern Irish history, while many young people face seemingly insurmountable obstacles in trying to set up home for themselves and start a family. Meanwhile, the *National Asset Management Agency*, on behalf of the state, holds an enormous portfolio of property, much of it in the form of houses and apartments. Pope Francis has said: "We can find no social or moral justification, no justification whatsoever, for lack of housing," (24 September 2015). Homelessness and housing insecurity have a major impact on wellbeing, affecting health, relationships, access to education and employment and a person's ability to participate in society and contribute to the community.

Housing issues can be both a major cause and a consequence of family breakdown. Unsuitable emergency provision – such as the housing of families in a hotel room – leads to serious child welfare and safeguarding concerns. We need urgent intervention to address the situation of those who are homeless at present, together with long-term investment in social housing to provide sustainable solutions to the housing issues in our communities. In addition, the tragic loss of life experienced in the Travelling community in October 2015 highlighted the devastating consequences of the failure to honour commitments to provide for the cultural needs of that community in relation to housing. The outpouring of concern in the wake of this tragedy needs to be followed by urgent action to ensure the safety of Traveller families.

6. How will you support faith-based groups in continuing to make their contribution to society, while protecting their ethos and identity?

Religious freedom, which is the mark of any true democracy, includes the freedom of the majority as well as the freedom of the minority. If we are to advocate for the protection of freedom of religion and belief in other countries, we need to ensure that practices here reflect the highest standards in the promotion of pluralism, which is not the same as secularism. For Christian citizens, an essential consideration is the need to protect the space for faith values and faith-based social action. Christian communities and organisations have a long tradition of being present where society is broken, picking up the pieces for those who have been left behind. There is a growing concern that this valuable perspective and experience is being marginalised and devalued, because of political opposition to our principles in key areas such as marriage, health and education. We appeal to our elected representatives to recognise that there are real issues here for people of faith. Christians are citizens too.

Many faith-based organisations are facing increasing demand for vital social services which contribute enormously to social equality and to the common good. At the same time, however, they are seeing their public funding come under threat as a result of equality legislation that

does not recognise the right to protect religious ethos. In the name of inclusivity, Christian organisations are at risk of being excluded. Like every organisation – and like the state itself – what we do, flows from who we are. It is not unreasonable, therefore, for us to say that there are some things that we *don't* do precisely because we are Christian. If this is not appropriately recognised, many Christian organisations, deprived of public funding, may no longer be in a position to offer support to some of the most vulnerable members of our society. What is needed is a pluralistic, inclusive approach to social service provision that recognizes the unique role and contribution of faith-based organisations alongside other providers.

Conclusion

Finally, I think it is important to add that those who hold public office and who exercise that office with integrity, provide a very significant service to the common good. They work long hours, they sacrifice their own privacy and that of their family and, in return, they have relatively little job security. There will be some candidates with whose policies we might vehemently disagree and for whom we might never consider voting, but while asking them the hard questions, we treat them with respect, because that is what Christians do. I am often heartened when people tell me that they pray for me every day. How many of us, I wonder, pray for our politicians, on a daily basis. Perhaps we should.