

EXCOMMUNICATION AND THE MP

Comment on the passing of the 'Assisted Dying' Bill through the House of Commons, July 2025, by Fr Robbie Low

It is not in the nature of a Catholic priest to seek publicity or to involve himself in political controversy if at all avoidable. So it must have been with a heavy heart and an overwhelming sense of duty that Fr Ian Vane, parish priest of St Joseph's, Dorking, first warned his local MP, a Catholic, that to vote for the 'Assisted Dying' Bill in the House of Commons, would be to declare his participation in 'obstinate public sin' and complicity in a murderous act. If he persisted the priest would have no alternative but to refuse him Communion and, to avoid public scandal, let the people know what he was doing and the reasons for his action.

The MP, one Christopher Coghlan, a Liberal Democrat, could not have been in any doubt as to the seriousness of his decision. Mr Coghlan duly voted for the Bill and Fr Vane duly excommunicated him.

The background to the Bill itself is deeply troubling in its implications for both the democratic process and the future of the National Health Service.

The Bill itself is a private member's Bill. That is to say that it appeared nowhere in the manifestoes of any party or elected member. Like the famous Cameron 'Same Sex Marriage' legislation, the voters have had no say in the matter and no prior public debate.

The Assisted Dying Bill not only permits the termination of human life of anyone, apparently so minded, with less than six months to live. It arrogates to the medical profession the power to determine this unknowable and then to be party to an act which is contrary to the Hippocratic Oath and the fundamental principles of Judeo – Christian ethics upon which our constitution and law have

hitherto rested. It alters the relationship between doctor and patient irrevocably and, inter alia, puts pressure on the vulnerable to 'cease being a burden'.

The 'Murder Bill', as I call it, is completely and comprehensively at odds with Catholic teaching. The 'free vote', the 'conscience vote' unwhipped by any political party, therefore gave the opportunity for any believer to stand by their Christian convictions.

Mr. Coghlan, a self-confessed 'liberal catholic' – a familiar oxymoron - duly ignored the teaching of the Church and the warnings of his priest as to the sacramental consequences and voted for the Bill. Fr Vane duly responded by declaring him excommunicate. Mr Coghlan was outraged and duly complained to Vane's Bishop. Coghlan was, after all, merely representing the views of his constituents and, quoting the example of John F Kennedy, confirmed that his personal faith does not and will not have any relevance to his parliamentary responsibilities.

Coghlan's claims raise several difficulties. First of all he seems unaware that, as an MP, he is just that and not merely a delegate predetermined to vote with the most vociferous or well organised lobby group. He is there, as all MPs are, trusted by his electorate to use his wisdom and experience which have led to his personal convictions to discern, especially on a 'free' or 'conscience' vote, the best course of action. Mr Coghlan has declared himself a Catholic then acted plum contrary to his profession and central confession of Faith. In such a situation could he reasonably expect the Church to act as his philosophical doormat?

If, ad absurdum, a member of a golf club decided that the game should now be played by digging up the bits of green between his neighbour's ball and the hole, would the club not be acting reasonably in revoking his membership?

Mr Coghlan invokes Kennedy but his defence is much nearer the more recent 'Biden Gambit'. President Biden declared himself a devout Catholic who, personally, was not in favour of abortion but who could not employ his personal beliefs to deny the rights of others to terminate their pregnancies and thus, along with the Democrat abortion cheerleader, Nancy Pelosi (also a 'Catholic'), to become a fanatical proponent of the worst excesses of the politics of infanticide.

The Biden Gambit was the moral equivalent of a 1930s German stating that 'Although personally I am not minded to murder Jews, I cannot in all conscience stand in the way of the Fuhrer and his supporters vision of the requirements of the nation. They must have that freedom of choice.'

It is a philosophical non- starter to claim a belief central to the core of your being and understanding of existence upon which you regularly refuse to act. The separation of the politician and the man is to advocate a moral schizophrenia and a complete failure of integrity. For the Church to fail to act in such cases would be not a kindness but a grave dereliction of duty.

First of all she has a duty to her faithful flock. She must be clear that the public scandal of a Catholic in a position of civic or political and public leadership rejecting the Faith cannot be tolerated without giving a dangerously misleading message as to the seriousness of the consequences of that deliberate and calculated betrayal.

Second, the Church has a duty to the misleading and misled public figure himself. Because she cares for his immortal soul she cannot be indifferent to the personal (as well as corporate) effects of his sin. St Paul himself warns that :-

'Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup *of* the Lord unworthily shall be guilty *of* the body and the blood *of* the Lord. But let *a* person examine himself, and in this manner let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For the *one* eating and drinking while not rightly-judging the body is eating and drinking judgment *on* himself.' I Cor 11 v 27ff

The Church has a motherly duty to alert her children to the grave consequences of their actions and then, if they ignore those warnings, to discipline them for their own safety/salvation. To ignore their plight is to be careless pastors and, for the sake of a quiet life, to neglect that duty of parental love.

It is always an act of great seriousness and painful for a pastor to impose such discipline but it is one we neglect at our peril, as the prophet Ezekiel warns:-

‘Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked person, ‘You will surely die,’ and you do not warn them or speak out to dissuade them from their evil ways in order to save their life, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. But if you do warn the wicked person and they do not turn from their wickedness or from their evil ways, they will die for their sin; but you will have saved yourself.

Again, when a righteous person turns from their righteousness and does evil, and I put a stumbling block before them, they will die. Since you did not warn them, they will die for their sin. The righteous things that person did will not be remembered, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. But if you do warn the righteous person not to sin and they do not sin, they will surely live because they took warning, and you will have saved yourself.’

Thus it is necessary, for the good of the whole church, that the priest acts.

He takes the sin and the sinner seriously. He cares for his soul. He is mindful of his pastoral duty. He is also conscious of the rightful instruction and encouragement thereby of the faithful as he censures and excludes from the Communion the scandal of persistent and public sin.

Actions have consequences – both temporal and eternal.

The priest does not relish this imposition of this discipline. Indeed he will have gone to great lengths to avoid the need and wrested mightily in prayer.

But it is, at once, his duty of love to the sinner and to the flock to act.

The priest cannot be faithful to Christ and at the same time be careless of the peril to the soul(s) of the faithful in his sacred charge and pastoral care.

So spare a prayer for Fr Ian Vane as he endures the loneliness of international publicity and the outrage of the establishment. And for Christopher Coghlan MP that he may quietly and humbly return to the fold and thank God for the courageous love of his parish priest.

