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## Letters To the Editor

Catholic Physicians' Guild

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## Letters...

### Letter from Finland

As of July 1, 1979 the law on abortion has changed in this country. From that date the limit for abortion on social grounds is 12 weeks of pregnancy, i.e., a request for an abortion signed by two physicians is sufficient for a woman to get an abortion, provided the other conditions of the law are met. The conditions are not very severe and the Finnish law on the matter of abortion is well known for being very liberal, so much so that we practically have free abortion up to 12 weeks.

Formerly the limit was 16 weeks. The reform is based on the fact that the health risks for the woman increase 3- to 5-fold if the abortion is performed after 12 weeks of pregnancy. Furthermore, other countries apply the same limit, which is the one recommended by WHO. Politicians also argued that since abortions are on the decrease, the limit date may be set lower.

The new law also presupposes "effective campaigns" for contraception as well as for dissemination of information about the change of the law. Neither of these provisos seems to have been met very well. A recent poll indicates that less than half of the general population has heard about the new law, and less than 20 percent knows what the reform is about.

Abortions on women 13 to 20 weeks pregnant can still be performed on medical grounds. In these cases applications are handled directly by the Ministry of Health. Because of the poor knowledge about the reformed law, the Ministry now fears a great increase in bureaucratic inertia.

The Ministry of Health has also produced instructions for physicians on the evaluation of the social indications for abortions. These instructions are rather detailed as far as the applicant and her background are concerned, but the background and the conscience of the physician are not men-

tioned. We still have no possibility of conscientious objection in Finland.

In Sweden, euthanasia has been discussed after a case that occurred in the summer of 1978. A man of 44 with multiple sclerosis in the terminal stage was found dead after having been given a lethal dose of insulin and tablets by a woman engaged in a pro-euthanasia action group. She had obtained the medicines from a physician who worked with the same group called "The Right to Our Death" (*Rätten till vår död*). Both the woman and the physician were sentenced to eight months imprisonment for assistance in manslaughter. The physician's certificate was withdrawn by the Swedish Medical Association after which he committed suicide. The woman has appealed to the Highest Court; the case is not yet closed.

Prompted by the discussion of this case, so it is assumed, a teen-aged hospital assistant gave some 20 chronically ill elderly patients in a Malmö hospital a lethal dose of hospital detergent in the spring of 1979. The case was disclosed when an unusual increase in mortality was noted in the department where the young man had some weeks previously begun his first job in a hospital. He had had no previous education in health care. The young man is presently charged with murder and attempted murder of some 20 persons.

The overall effect of these tragic cases seems to be that the discussion on euthanasia has decreased, at least in Finland. In any case, these incidents provide excellent arguments against euthanasia, which is well worth noting also on the other side of the Atlantic.

— Robert Paul, M.D.

### On *Humanae Vitae*

#### To the Editor:

Thank you for sending me that wonderful issue of *Linacre* which commemorated the tenth anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*. As the mother of eight "enlightened" children, I sometimes suspect that my filial devotion

to the Pope is considered by them to be a little quaint and old-fashioned.

What a thrill for me to read through a top-level, scholarly periodical which reflects such a firm, reverent, and unquestionable loyalty to the Holy Father.

I am determined to see to it that this issue is read and read until it falls apart!

God bless you and your staff.

— Mrs. Frances M. Crist  
New Orleans, La.

#### Letter from Ireland

As anyone with Irish relatives or connections will well know, our country had no mail service for almost the first six months of this year, due to a strike in the postal services. The postmen have returned to work, but even now (August), the deliveries of mail are haphazard. I recently received a postcard from an old friend posted in March of this year, just before he died suddenly. It gave me quite a jolt, but it served to remind me of the sort of problems that must have occurred in the Vatican with two new Pontiffs elected in a short time last year.

Our new pope, John Paul II, has made it quite clear that he intends to travel widely to see his church. When he was in Poland this year, our Cardinal-elect, Michael O'Fee, went to see him, and returned with the news that he would visit us on his way to speak at the United Nations in October this year. Our delight at this honor is unrestrained. He comes to see the Irish people, but especially to visit and pray at the Shrine of Our Lady at Knock.

Now this is the centenary of the apparition at a tiny village called Knock (translation—"hill") in Co. Mayo in the West of Ireland. Our Lady appeared with St. Joseph and St. John and a figure representing the Lamb of God at the gable end of the little church one wet Sunday evening. At first she was seen by three school children, but eventually by over twenty adult villagers. As the news spread,

efforts were made to discount this vision, but to no avail, as the witnesses were adamant. Gradually a cult developed and miracles were claimed. Whilst no formal recognition by Rome has been given up to now, this shrine is well supported by the Irish hierarchy, pilgrimages are constant, and a great basilica has been erected. Pope John Paul II will say Mass at Knock for an estimated quarter of a million Irish people.

We had also hoped that he would visit the North of Ireland, and use his great charisma to effect reconciliation between Catholic and Protestant. Unfortunately this is not to be so. It is now ten years since the troubles began and over 2,000 people have died, without any sign of the violence finishing.

We also hope that he may speak to the Irish medical profession. Whilst we are well represented professionally, viz. the Medical Association and the Medical Union, we have no national medical ethical society. The Catholic Doctors' Guild is unfortunately no more. Consequently a recent bill to allow the sale of contraceptives at pharmacy outlets under doctor's prescription became law with hardly an ethical whimper. There were many protests, but none organized sufficiently to exert pressure. Anovulants have been for sale for 15 years on medical advice in this country, but now all contraceptives will be available by medical prescription. The majority of doctors and pharmacists do not wish to be associated with this system, but it appears that we must follow the common practices of other members of the European economic community. It is to be hoped that we will not eventually stoop to legalizing abortion, as the other states have done.

Undoubtedly a strong medical ethical lobby would be able to proclaim the proper ethical standards, remembering that the Irish medical profession is at least 80% Catholic. Perhaps the fillip of His Holiness' visit will be just what we need.

— Dr. Robert F. O'Donoghue  
Cork