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Letters To the Editor

Catholic Physicians' Guild

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LETTERS...

Letter from Ireland

I think it was in California that a man decided to publish a newspaper that told only good news. As you can imagine, it lasted a very short time. Thus, in annual letters like this, one tends to tell only of the woes of our country, both medical and ethical. However, it is fair to begin with one great success, and to give a few moments to the visit of His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, to our country last September. This was a success beyond the dreams of the faithful or the estimates of the organizers. During barely three days and at three major gatherings and seven lesser ones, he was seen and heard by over two million people — not really half of our population of four million but somewhat less, because many people took holidays and followed him from place to place. As always, his object was to pray at a shrine of Our Lady, this time at Knock, County Mayo. Once again, as in other countries, this was in an area of poor land, with poor peasants and small holdings. His first meeting with the Irish was in Dublin's famous Phoenix Park, where a million people came and went without difficulty, the city having closed down for the day. But in Galway, when he met the youth of Ireland, and in Knock nearby and Limerick a little further south, the country roads could not cope with the immense traffic for these three visits which took place over a period of a little more than 24 hours. However, neither this, nor the bad weather, deterred his enthusiastic audiences. On re-reading his sermons, it is fair to say that he covered all the fundamentals of Christian doctrine, but that he reminded the Irish particularly where their duty lay in giving example in the

practice of the Faith, more especially in regard to the sanctity of marriage and of human life, referring particularly to contraception and abortion. He also made a most impassioned plea for peace in the North of Ireland.

On more mundane matters, one is disappointed to read that a regular weekly service is organized to take women from Dublin to England for the purpose of having abortions performed. We now estimate that between three and four thousand southern Irish women, both married and single, go to England each year for this reason. In this country there is a small but vigorous group which campaigns for freedom to have abortions done at home. Many of these are the same persons who succeeded in getting a liberalized law on contraception put on our statute books last year. While this did happen, the legislation has not yet been put into effect because of the wishes of the majority of the people. However, family planning clinics, which also offer male sterilization, are now very busy in the major cities.

For the first time, we have had a threatened strike of nurses and (separately) junior hospital doctors, both in search of better pay and working conditions. One hesitates to criticize young people who feel their worth is not recognized, but it is more a sign of our severe inflation, which is running at over 20%. The best salary increases will be outdated in one year, and I fear that the country as a whole has not yet realized the gravity of the present world recession. I think that we have been banking too much on the fact that oil has been found off our coasts, although it is not yet in usable quantities, and may not be for some years. Young doctors and nurses will take example from their seniors, and if we have not given them the right attitudes toward work and dedication to duty, it must be our own fault. In this respect it is a pity that Ireland nowadays has no representative medical/ethical association, although we have a Medical Association and a Medical Union. It is to be hoped that the Cath-

olic Doctors' Guild will soon be reconstituted, and again give a lead and example as it did up to about 15 years ago.

To end on a more cheerful note: in 1979, 63,615 babies were born in Ireland in 25 units. The numbers of deliveries per unit varied from 325 to 8,450. In 1945 the perinatal mortality rate was 21.5 per thousand, but in 1979 it had been reduced to 15.6, which is a great tribute to the work of this branch of the profession. In the next 12 months, it is hoped that legislation to improve the standards of mental care and the conditions in mental hospitals will be introduced, but I have written about this before. More importantly, a private member's bill in Parliament to change the law in relation to rape (at present, often to the detriment of the suffering woman) has been introduced, and in consequence of this, full state legislation is being prepared, which should become law within the next year.

—Dr. Robert F. O'Donoghue, F.R.C.O.G.
Cork

Message from India

It is but natural that there should be a time lag between the submission of my news dispatch from India and its publication in the U.S.A. The resulting "stale" nature of the news will, I hope, not put off your readers.

We are in the midst of an Indian summer which is most certainly unlike yours. The temperature soars, tempers fray and impatience rules the day. This is particularly so at the present time, as elections to the Legislative Assembly in nine states are fast approaching. Street corner meetings, election rhetoric and promises fill the air, but we all tend to relax and take it easy rather than succumb to the prevailing threat which affects man and beast alike,

resulting in both amusement and consternation. For instance, a monkey was recently reported to have thrown a woman off a terrace, causing instantaneous death. This action resulted in an upright citizen demanding the monkey's arrest and prosecution under some section or other of the Indian Penal Code!

Be that as it may, all that happens is not in jest. The clamor for the legalization of euthanasia has reached our shores after having been rejected in parts of Europe, the Americas and Oceania.

A member of Parliament belonging to the ruling Congress (Indira) Party recently submitted a "private member's bill," called the Mercy Killing Bill, 1980, for discussion and approval in Parliament. In the statement of the objects and reasons for the bill, it reads that "thousands of people in this country are either completely invalid or suffering from diseases for which there is no treatment available in India. They are a burden to themselves and to their families, as well as to society. They wish to be killed, but there being no provision in the law of the country, doctors take no action in that direction, knowing full well that they cannot be cured. To relieve those thousands of persons from their sufferings, the proposed legislation is desirable."

One of the sections of this odious piece of possible legislation identifies those who may request to be mercifully killed:

1. Persons who are completely invalidated and are bedridden due to accident or disease, or by birth.
2. Persons who have been suffering from a disease declared as incurable by a competent medical authority.

Reference to the bill provides some idea of the procedure to be followed. If "qualified" in the medical sense, a patient requesting to be killed must apply to the civil surgeon of a district hospital who will then place the application before the medical board

which, after examining the patient thoroughly, must need to be satisfied by a majority vote of 75% that the patient suffers from a disease which is incurable in India or is physically invalidated and bedridden. A certificate will then be issued to the patient, recommending his case for mercy killing, which must then be deposited in the court of the district judge. The latter, on receiving the plea, is required to inquire from the applicant-patient if he desires to be killed. And if the judge is satisfied he may grant the request of the patient and give permission for the act. On the production of this document from the district judge, the civil surgeon or the chief medical officer of the district "shall put an end to the life of the applicant in the manner to be prescribed."

What strikes one on reading this proposed bill is the fact that there is no attempt whatsoever to hide the fact that killing with mercy is requested and must be performed. There is no attempt at camouflaging the truth by using the term euthanasia. It appears that the author of the bill has a fad for calling a spade a spade and agrees that euthanasia is nothing but legalized homicide. How sad!

Many men of reason, of all religious beliefs, are getting together to fight for the freedom to live, for the freedom of conscience and to basically suppress this bill. Let us hope that in my next letter I will be able to inform you that the voice of reason has won. I wonder!

Summer is drawing to a close, and today is the last day of the hottest month of the year, according to tradition: May 31, 1980. It was, despite the heat, most heartening to read that our Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, declared that India would accord equal respect and honor to all religions, while speaking at the centenary celebrations of an Islamic institution in northern India. At that meeting she is reported to have said "that diversity can be, and is, a source of strength, when different groups of people or different streams of thought come together. Sometimes there can be a

conflict but often there is interaction. . . . While Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism were born in India, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam came from neighboring countries. But they have never been considered outside religions." She quoted Emperor Ashoka's saying that "he who does not honor another man's religion cannot truly honor his own," and observed that only such an outlook of tolerance can insure peace in the troubled world of our times. She added: "We have found that diversity can be and is a great source of strength just as an alloy is stronger than the elements which go into its making."

The Prime Minister emphasized her government's determination to protect the minority communities in the country. "It has been our solemn endeavor and we will continue to do everything in our power to safeguard the rights of the minorities and insure them safety, honor and jobs," she said.

Members of the minority religious communities, comprising those professing Islam, and Christians of all hues, are awaiting with bated breath the decision of the government on various problems such as euthanasia and the very occasional but strident call for recourse to compulsory sterilization. Fortunately, Mrs. Gandhi has said publicly on more than one occasion that she would not accept the "compulsions" of the past even though she did believe that it was most important to reduce the growth of our population if we are to survive and grow satisfactorily beyond 2,000 A.D.

Time has flown by once again and while I would have normally added a postscript to my letter, I find that I must place on record the death of Mr. Sanjay Gandhi, member of Parliament, and son of the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, who died in a most tragic accident while flying an airplane in New Delhi. Whether one agreed with his policies or not, there can be no doubt whatsoever that he influenced the politics of the country to a very significant extent. It was basically his drive that brought victory to the

Congress Party at the hustings during the recently held state elections all over India. Now, he is no more and confusion has set in amongst his own followers belonging to what is called the Youth Congress (I). Time is too short for people to have recovered from the shock of the accident, but I will hopefully be in a better position to report on the future of our country in my next epistle.

Forgive me for ending on a personal note, but I should like you to know that I am personally looking forward very much to participating in your annual meeting in Chicago. See you then.

While it may be months from Christmas, this report will precede the festivities by only a few days. Permit me, therefore, to wish you, on behalf of all the Catholic physicians of India, a very happy and holy Christmas.

— Dr. C. J. Vas
Bombay

Letter from Finland

As of March 1, 1977, we have a law prohibiting tobacco advertising and restricting smoking. For example, smoking in public places like post offices, waiting and assembly rooms and in public means of transportation including elevators is no longer allowed. Selling tobacco to children under 16 years of age is likewise prohibited. Manufacturers of tobacco products are compelled to label their goods dangerous to health as well as to see to it that the tobacco they are selling contains no more tar and nicotine than the law allows. The law states also that 0.5 percent of the tax on these products is to be reserved for spreading information and doing research on the dangers of smoking.

The effects of the law have recently been reviewed in our *Medical Journal*. The information seems, indeed, to have reached the consumer: regardless of social rank, age or sex, all groups interviewed knew more about the risks and consequences of smoking in 1978 than when the law was enforced a year before. But the final goal — decreasing smoking — has not been reached, not at least among the adult population. Children and young people, however, do seem to have lost the taste for smoking. All in all, it seems as if smoking habits are most altered by changing the price of tobacco rather than by information. When prices go up, smoking goes down, and when prices don't keep pace with inflation, smoking increases.

The 0.5 percent for spreading information, which would have meant quite a sufficient amount, has never been reached. Rather, by special arrangements, our Ministry of Finance has seen to it that maybe one-fifth of that sum has been provided. This naturally makes it difficult to fulfill the idea of the law.

As such, however, the law has been much complimented, also from abroad, including the World Health Organization. This law is to be wished all the best for the future also.

Since last spring the public has had the opportunity of following a rather complex series of trials against a number of physicians accused of breaking regulations on prescribing narcotics. In Helsinki some five or ten doctors have, during the past years, prescribed hundreds of thousands of tablets of methadone to patients allegedly being treated for morphinism. Some prescriptions have been for 1,000 tablets. In return, the good doctors have received considerable remuneration in the form of money and goods, often stolen. The cases are juridically tangled and complex, and there seems to be no end to illegalities and malpractice. So far, two or three doctors have had their right to practice withdrawn. The Board of Medicine has, in turn, tightened the rules for prescribing narcotic

preparations and is planning to computerize the business — doctors prescribing, patients consuming, quantities, addresses, everything. Methadone will shortly be drawn off the legal market. This has disconcerted the police, who are troubled by the vacuum which will be created by the withdrawal. They even fear that

heroin, which has never been a problem here, might find its way to our illegal drug markets. It may well take a few years before the waves of the scandal have subsided.

— Robert Paul
Loimaa

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