

PUSHING BACK AGAINST THE AGE

KEVIN RYAN

I come from a nation that has recently witnessed a direct and quite successful assault on the topic of Professor Matlary's papers, 'The Right to Life and to Set Up a Family'. Less than two years ago, a largely unknown political figure forcefully laid out his political plank regarding the right to life and the role of law and government in front of the nation's leading political advocacy group for unrestricted abortions, Planned Parenthood. In that address, he made it crystal clear that in the coming election a woman's quote 'fundamental right' to an abortion was at stake and that, if elected, he would make 'reproductive freedom' at the center of his agenda as President of the United States. He recited his record before coming to Washington as a state senator, where he fought legal restrictions on abortion, famously including a restriction on partial-birth abortion. He outlined his plan in detail and won the hearts and pocketbooks of his Planned Parenthood audience.

Six months ago he was elected as our president with the support of a majority of the Catholic vote. Now he is putting his and Planned Parenthood's agenda into effect through key cabinet appointments, his judicial nominees, his lifting of restrictions on federal funding for abortion providers overseas, allowing the destruction of human embryos for research, and his targeting of the 'conscience clause' protections for doctors and nurses. All but unchallenged, my new president is using the full instrumentality of the state to implement and, with public tax revenues for all Americans, financially support what Pope John Paul II identified as the 'culture of death'.

Clearly we live in a time of radical cultural swift. Actions, like extracting a child from a mother's womb, were just a few decades ago considered as high crimes in my country and around the civilized world. Legally redefining marriage and family as the consenting sexual and domestic

arrangements of any two individuals would have then provoked laughter.

The prevailing popular culture, driven by an insatiable pleasure principle and an all but unrestrained free market, has spawned a media that in so many cases has replaced the family as children's 'first educator'. We have, also, allowed civil authorities, that is the state, to take over more and more of the traditional duties of the family, witnessing an enormous and quite public violation of the Church's principle of subsidiary.

In my own field of education, state schools, which educated nearly 90% of my country's children from ages 5 to 18, have quite consciously taken over the moral and ethical training of children. Educators have replaced teaching reverence for God with teaching reverence for Mother Earth. Schools are in the forefront of morally legitimizing same sex marriage and the homosexual lifestyle. The point raised by Professor Mlčoch yesterday about the delegitimizing of the concept of 'good' and 'bad' in his university is an active and on-going process in our state elementary and secondary schools. A friend, a professor of history at Harvard University, has written about his experience teaching undergraduate students there and has coined the term 'no fault history', based on his teaching of a course on the history of World War II. He found his students continually justifying and rationalizing Hitler's extermination of the Jews and many of his other atrocities as the result of perhaps bad parenting, having been bullied or poor socialization. They continually explained away man's capacity for conscious evil acts in totally psychological terms. Then there is the treatment of religion in our state schools. All too often our secular state schools are a force separating children from the faith of their fathers and mothers. Through neglect, through trivialization and often through direct attack, state schools are a force separating children from faith of their fathers and mothers.

This educational situation would, I believe, be ameliorated greatly if parents could control the education of their children, a right mentioned yesterday in both morning's and afternoon's sessions. But this right is severely limited in the case in the United States and many other nations. Parents in my country are required by law and by threat of imprisonment to provide an education for their children. And they have in theory a choice among schools. However, because of the exorbitant cost of schooling, the overwhelming majority, 88% of American students, go to state schools. The rest go to a shrinking combination of private and religious schools. Just a few decades ago, the Catholic Church in the United States educated 12% of American students. Now it educates a mere 6% and shrinking. The reason for this is primarily financial. The results are that few families, Catholic or

otherwise, are free to educate their children consistent with their religious or philosophic views. The questionable idea of the secular state controlling crucial questions such as 'What is a worthy life?', 'What is most worthy knowing?' [that is, the substance of what the school curriculum should be] and other life-shaping questions go largely unchallenged.

Professor Matlary makes several points in her paper which both provide insight into our discussions of the right to life and the rights to marriage and the family. Her description regarding how judges are using the 'dynamic legal' theory, in which court decisions are made free of criteria of what are, in fact, human rights, is particularly pertinent for the questions before us. She makes the point strongly that, without a well-established human rights doctrine, clearly grounded on binding common standards for all human beings, discussions and legal decisions will continually be subject to the type of politicalization we have seen in recent U.N. and other world conferences. Her discussion of the tactics of various rights groups, like the homosexual rights community, employed to move from their desires to binding legislation, for instance in forming 'epistemic groups', is particularly instructive and raises the question of what can the Catholic community learn from them to promote the rights and dignity of the human person.

In the quite lucid introduction to this meeting, *Catholic Social Doctrine and Human Rights*, written by our colleagues Minnerath, Fumagalli Carulli and Possenti, they make reference to Christ's dictum, 'Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's'. And go on to state, 'The right to freedom of the relationship with God postulates the right to the freedom of the Church as an institution, which represents the interest of the faithful *before Caesar*. The ultimate foundation of these claims is the defense of the dignity of the person'.

Other than the Gospels, the Church has no greater gift to the world than its annunciation and advocacy for this concept of the 'dignity of the person'. However, buffeted as it is between forces of libertarian individualism, on the one hand, and smothering collectivism, on the other, our understanding of what it means to be a human person is losing ground. It is the family, the original unit of social life, rightly called a 'domestic church', which is the first and most powerful teacher of this concept of intrinsic human dignity.

The social science community, and specifically our academy, is called to do all we can to support the Church and, in turn, to support parents in their work of teaching and actively projecting to their young a clear understanding of the dignity of the human person. Our disciplines must be directed to protecting children from our culture's corrupting assaults on their emerg-

ing understanding of personhood. More than that, we need to enlist and train our children to be warriors again this toxic culture.

The late American writer, Flannery O'Connor, a gentle woman and fierce Catholic, whose recognition in my country grows yearly, captures our duty well: 'You have to push as hard as the age that pushes against you'. This age is certainly pushing hard against our families and our children.