

General Synod of the Church of Ireland

Kilkenny, 9th – 11th May, 2007

Bill 3 (concerning Suicide)

Proposal Speech by the Bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross
The Right Reverend Paul Colton

When it comes to proposing a Bill that relates to our response to a death by suicide I am profoundly conscious that we are treading on the holy ground of not only other people's tragedies and emotions, but also our own.

In March and April last year, a survey was conducted by the Irish Association of Suicidology in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It found that 74% of people in the Republic and 59% of those in Northern Ireland had known someone who had died by suicide. This was not just a casual knowing or awareness. In both jurisdictions, the person who died by suicide was a friend, a neighbour or a family member. This is a tragedy that impinges on all too many of us.

In 2003 in the Republic of Ireland there were 497 deaths by suicide. The most recent finalised figures are for 2004 (figures for subsequent years are provisional and are, sadly, likely to be underestimates, therefore).¹ In 2004 in the Republic of Ireland, there were 493 suicide deaths. This compared to 335 road traffic accident deaths in 2003 and 374 in 2004. In other words many more deaths by suicide than by road traffic accident.

According to the 2005 report – *Reach Out* – of the Irish National Strategy for Action on Suicide Prevention,

'Suicidal behaviour represents a global public health problem and its prevention continues to provide a major challenge to health and social services at all levels of Irish society.'

As I told you last year, my concern about this stems from two of my interests. First, canon law, and in particular a canon law that ought to be in every respect applied ecclesiology. The laws we make as a Church should reflect the sort of church we believe we are called to be: in worship, mission and pastoral care. And second, from my association with the National Suicide Research Foundation as one of its directors. The Foundation consists of a multi-disciplinary team and is recognised by the Department of Health and Children as an official research unit to contribute to the prevention of suicidal behaviour in Ireland.

Last year you resoundingly gave me permission to return this year with a bill which, if passed, will delete the words '...or had committed suicide ...' from Canon 32. You can see the effect of this change in the Explanatory Memorandum to the Bill.

As our procedures require, we have all had a year to reflect on this proposal.

My reasons for suggesting this change have not altered since then. I have been hugely encouraged also by the many contacts of support I have received from around the Church of Ireland, and more formally, from two Diocesan Synods.

¹ Statistics for subsequent years are provisional.

My first reason for asking you to support this Bill arises principally and most importantly from pastoral concern for the bereaved family following a suicide. Our understanding of suicide will never be complete. The bereaved are invariably left with many questions, most of all “why?” One element in the *Reach Out* (National) Strategy is that those affected by a suicide death or deliberate self-harm receive the most caring and helpful response possible. This canon, if it were ever invoked following a suicide, would, I believe, be far short, of that vision: it would be neither caring nor helpful. On the contrary if no burial service or only a truncated one were to be offered, hope may be decimated, subjecting the bereaved to further anguish and suffering. It would be they who would suffer, not the deceased, who has been entrusted to the keeping of God.

My second reason is that our world view has changed. In one of the churches where I served all the graves but one were on one side of the avenue into the churchyard. The suicide was buried away from the rest. Gone are those days I hope, and the days, when according to the ancient law suicides were buried at cross-roads with a stake driven through the heart, to prevent vampirism – a barbarous practice only prohibited in the U.K since 1882.² The Christian perspective was shaped in large measure by medieval canon law. We now have to hand modern multi-disciplinary developments in understanding suicide from the perspective, for example, of psychiatry, psychology, sociology, and epidemiology.³

Again, according to *Reach Out*

Through the ages, suicide came to be condemned as sinful and as an act against God by the main monotheistic religions However, the religious sanctions imposed following a death by suicide have long ceased in Ireland and elsewhere. Today, churches and church organizations have a more open, caring, pastoral attitude towards mental health issues, suicide and suicide bereavement. All churches have a supportive role to play in the aftermath of death by suicide and also have the potential to promote positive mental well-being.

This is not strictly accurate – our Canon 32 as it stands still leaves open the possibility of a religious sanction imposed following a death by suicide. I believe we need to remove that as it does not truly reflect the caring approach that we do, in fact, as a Church have to mental health issues.

Third, the concept of *Felo-de se* – felon of himself - has been removed from the statute book. It is not a crime and, therefore, it cannot be committed, in that sense. Suicide was decriminalised in England and Wales in 1961,⁴ 1966 in Northern Ireland and in Ireland in 1993.⁵ As it stands, the wording of Canon 32 doesn't reflect the fact that suicide has been decriminalised.

Moreover, and fourthly, the terse use of “committed suicide” in contrast say, to canon B38 (2) of the Church of England doesn't accurately reflect the nuanced legal distinctions between those of sound and unsound mind embodied in the state law in which this approach had gestated.

² Interments (Felo-de Se) Act 1882

³ Epidemiology is the scientific study of factors affecting the health and illness of individuals and populations, and serves as the foundation and logic of interventions made in the interest of public health and preventive medicine. It is considered a cornerstone methodology of public health research, and is highly regarded in evidence-based medicine for identifying risk factors for disease and determining optimal treatment approaches to clinical practice.

⁴ Suicide Act 1961

⁵ Criminal Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 1966; Criminal Law (Suicide) Act 1993

Fifth, in spite of its long provenance in canon law, suicide was not explicitly included among the exceptions listed in the Canons of 1603, 1635 or, indeed, our Church of Ireland Canons of 1871, 1879, 1889, 1899, 1909, 1926, 1934, 1946, or 1960. My understanding is that it was added in 1974 in order to make the canon consonant with the rubric at the start of the Burial Service in the then Book of Common Prayer. However, in 2002 you, the General Synod, already voted to delete that rubric.⁶ It is interesting to note that not long after we put suicide in for the first time, the canon law of the Roman Catholic Church was amended in 1983 to remove it.⁷

The denial of a Church funeral to one of its members is an extremely sensitive issue. My bill would seek the removal of the words "or had committed suicide" from the list of exceptions. In doing so, I believe a balance is not jeopardised between, on the one hand, a necessary discipline, and, on the other, a true understanding of the mercy of God, revealed principally in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Finally, we should observe that the Funeral Service outlines succinctly what its purpose is:

- to remember the person who has died before God
- to give thanks for his or her life
- to leave him or her in the keeping of God – creator, redeemer and judge
- to commit the body for burial or cremation
- to comfort one another in our grief
- and all in the context of Christian hope

I believe that that, as a pastoral church, for the reasons I have given, we would always want and never not want to do all of those things following a death by suicide. When it comes to a death by suicide our liturgy has the right balance: it entrusts these things to God: God's perspective and God's mercy. We are left with the pastoral care, under God, of the survivors, and therefore, I propose this Bill.

⁶ Statute of the General Synod 2002, C. iv and v

⁷ Code of Canon Law Canon 1184 See in contrast Code of Canon Law 1917 CC 1240