

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH NOW DEMANDS HUMAN SACRIFICE

Here we go again.

In response to the death of a pregnant Indian woman who died last October in an Irish hospital after being denied an abortion (<http://gawker.com/5960436/woman-in-ireland-dies-after-being-denied-abortion-was-told-this-is-a-catholic-country>), the Irish parliament now seeks to prevent any more such deaths—by means of a bill that would legalize abortion under life-threatening conditions. Doctors could abort a foetus to avert a suicide or if-- and only if-- two doctors (one of them an obstetrician or gynecologist) certify that delivery of the foetus would pose a “real and substantial risk” to the life of the woman.

But this scrupulously humane bill has been condemned in the strongest possible way by the Roman Catholic church.

In a joint statement, the Irish Catholic Bishops have called the legislation “a dramatically and morally unacceptable change to Irish law.” In other words, regardless of her conscience, her religious beliefs, or her personal values, the bishops are determined to sacrifice on the altar of foetal sanctity any Irish woman whose pregnancy threatens her life.

From the Vatican, this screw of ecclesiastical intimidation has been given a further turn by Cardinal Raymond L. Burke, former archbishop of St. Louis and now head of the Vatican Court. In February, Cardinal Burke urged Irish priests to deny communion to any legislator who votes for the bill: in other words, to excommunicate any lawmaker who votes to de-criminalize a life-saving operation.

In making this statement, Cardinal Burke echoes the words of Cardinal Charles Chaput of Denver, Colorado, who in 2004 threatened to excommunicate any Catholic in his diocese who voted for John Kerry.

(Though Kerry was then the first Roman Catholic candidate for president in 44 years, he committed the unforgivable sin of declining to urge that abortion be re-criminalized.) Just like Archbishop Chaput, Cardinal Burke wholly ignores the fundamental distinction between sin and crime, and thereby forgets—if he ever knew it—something clearly explained by two of the greatest saints in the history of Christendom: Augustine and Aquinas.

As I have explained before on this site (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-heffernan/why-cant-i-be-pro-choice_b_126462.html), both of these saints argued against criminalizing all moral evils—even grave ones. While Aquinas considered prostitution a “mortal sin” binding the soul to spiritual death, he also insisted that civil authorities should tolerate it because—in the words of Augustine, which he quotes—“if you do away with harlots, the world will be convulsed with lust.” Since human law aims not to promote eternal salvation but to ensure temporal order, Aquinas wrote, it cannot “forbid all vicious acts.”

What then would Augustine or Aquinas say about a law that aims to save the life of a pregnant woman by tolerating what the Catholic church of our time considers a vicious act? Would the two great saints insist on excommunicating any legislator who voted for such a law? Or would they assign the Irish bishops and Cardinal Burke to a crash course in moral theology?

You be the judge.