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Irish bishop: No matter government's decision, abortion is immoral

by John Cooney

Croagh Patrick, County Mayo — A senior prelate used the annual pilgrimage up Ireland's holy mountain, where St. Patrick fasted 40 days and nights in the year 441, to underscore the church's continued fight against a bill that would for the first time make abortion in Ireland legal in limited circumstances.

In his homily at Mass atop the 2,500-foot-high Croagh Patrick, Archbishop Michael Neary of Tuam told an estimated 20,000 pilgrims that the church would continue to proclaim the equal right to life of a mother and child, even if abortion becomes enshrined in Irish law.

Even if abortion becomes legal in Ireland, it will continue to be immoral as far as the church is concerned, he said.

Ireland's two Houses of Parliament approved the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Bill 2013 earlier this month. The bill provides for a woman's right to an abortion if her life is at risk, including from suicide. The bill has sparked great debate, but the House of Representatives, the lower house, approved the bill 127 votes to 31. The upper house, the Senate, voted 39 to 14 in favor.

Before it is enacted, Irish President Michael Higgins must review the bill. Higgins convened his adviser body, the Council of State, Monday to discuss the bill. Higgins must decide this week on whether the bill will go to the Supreme Court to test its constitutionality or if it will pass. If it goes to the high court first and the court finds it constitutional, the bill cannot be challenged in court later.

The Catholic church has staunchly opposed the bill. Abortion is illegal in Ireland for any reason despite a 1992 Supreme Court judgment, known as the X case, that ruled that abortion should be allowed if a

woman's life is at risk. The 2013 law was drawn up following the October death of Savita Halappanavar, who died after being denied an abortion as she miscarried 17 weeks into her pregnancy.

In his homily Sunday, Neary defended the church's participation in public debates concerning the common good, and he prayed for legislators.

Calling for the religious voice to be heard in public debate, he said a truly liberal society not only permits the church to voice its views but encourages it.

"We allow each other's voices to be truly heard, trusting in the integrity and goodwill of all and remembering those who as yet have no active voices in our society but still exist and claim our protection and our love," he concluded.

The Croagh Patrick district is part of the constituency represented by Enda Kenny, the Taoiseach, or prime minister, and leader of Fine Gael, the country's biggest political party. The traditionally conservative Fine Gael and the more liberal Labour Party introduced the abortion bill.

Despite speaking against the legislation in the prime minister's home constituency, Neary told *NCR* it would be wrong to read his statement as an intrusion into politics.

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Archbishop Charles Brown, the papal nuncio to Ireland, who climbed with Neary and concelebrated Mass at the top of the mountain, declined comment. He told *NCR*, "I am here to pray."

He told *The Irish Independent*, "It was a great joy for me just to see the faith of the people and the big crowds at Mass and ton of confessions at the top. It's really beautiful, a great sign of vitality in the Catholic church in Ireland."

Each year, an estimated 100,000 climb Croagh Patrick. Approximately 15,000 pilgrims make the climb on the last Sunday in July, known as Reek Sunday. This year's pilgrimage drew an usually large crowd because of the sunny weather. Most pilgrims climb with sturdy shoes and stout sticks, carrying backpacks with snacks and bottles of water, but an ascetic minority walk barefoot.

Catherine Kelleher and her son, Naoise, 13, from Boston enjoyed their second Reek Sunday climb.

"This year was tougher because it was warmer, but it won't put us off for next year," Catherine Kelleher said.

Jeffrey and Connie McCafferty, from Emlymoran, Corballa, in the neighboring County of Sligo, climb the mountain annually on Reek Sunday. They said the conditions this year were ideal; the recent prolonged spell of sunshine made the ground exceptionally dry.

It takes at least two hours to climb and an hour and half to come down. The approach to the summit -- and more especially the return descent -- can be slippery because of its long slopes and heaps of loose rock in the upper reaches.

Two men were ferried by the Air Corps to Mayo General Hospital in nearby Castlebar after suffering suspected heart attacks and a woman in her 50s sustained a head injury near the summit.

[John Cooney is a Dublin-based journalist and historian.]

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