Irish National Maternity Hospital: “Keep your rosaries off my ovaries!”

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The determination to give a hospital to a disgraced religious order, in spite of public outrage, is the very antithesis of secularism. But the episode has prompted calls for fundamental changes in the relationship between church and state, writes Keith Porteous Wood.

"Keep your rosaries off my ovaries!" – that was the evocative placard slogan seen when thousands of protesters marched through Dublin in September calling for a referendum to widen access to terminations. At present abortion is all-but prohibited in Ireland.

The placards may have to come out again soon as the controversy over the National Maternity Hospital (St Vincent's) rumbles on.

The state gifted the hospital, which had been built with public funds, to the Roman Catholic Sisters of Charity who owned the land on which it was built. Not only was the taxpayer picking up the tab for building the hospital, they would also be paying the running costs, too. In spite of this, the Church insists that under its ownership the hospital would have to be run with a 'Catholic ethos'.

According to *The Times* the chair of the Hospital Group that includes St Vincent's told the secretary-general of the Department of Health that canon law obliged a hospital on Catholic land (as this is) to operate by Catholic rules. As reported by the *Sunday Times*, Bishop of Elphin Kevin Doran, referring to the Church being "owners of the hospital", asserted that "Public funding … does not change that responsibility [to follow Catholic doctrine]."

And of all hospitals, a national maternity hospital is where that ethos would have the greatest adverse impact. The then-master of the National Maternity Hospital, Dr Peter Boylan, clearly accepts this fairly obvious, unpalatable, point. He told RTE Radio 1's Morning Ireland show that "if IVF, sterilisation, abortion, and gender reassignment were to be carried out at the new National Maternity Hospital, it would be the only hospital in the world owned and run by a Catholic order to allow such procedures." He accuses the hospital board of being "deaf to the concerns of the public it serves."

Dr Bolan was told that his responsibility was to the board and not the citizens of Ireland – the women who will use this facility. Nobly, he resigned his post. And he was not the only top medic to do so.

It is chilling that those accepting these resignations over key principles clearly thought it worth losing such invaluable people to maintain that ethos.

The chairperson of the Association for the Improvement of Maternity Services is squarely on the dissenters' side: "The women of Ireland, the childbearing women of Ireland, they absolutely do not want to find that their bodies are being controlled by religious ethos - or by anybody. They want autonomy over their own bodies and at the moment that is 100 percent not guaranteed."

And there has been a magnificent fight back. In just a few weeks a petition to block the Sisters of Charity as 'sole owners' of National Maternity Hospital attracted over 100,000 signatures, many times more than expected. Even the Sisters of Charity, no strangers to being attacked, couldn't hold out against that. They announced that they "will end our involvement in St Vincent's Healthcare Group and will not be involved in the ownership or management of the new National Maternity Hospital. No cogent reason is given but some pages on we find the curious passage "in the best interests of the patients and children born in the National Maternity Hospital today that they be provided with modern maternity and neonatal services that are women and infant centred". Surely not an admission that women and infant centred services are in the best interests of the patients and children, but that the Sisters cannot deliver this?

And just a word or two about the so-called Sisters of Charity. According to the My Uplift petition site : "The Sisters of Charity is one of 18 residential institutions that is highlighted by the Ryan report 2009 to have been responsible for child abuse. They still owe €3 million to the redress scheme for its survivors. The Sisters of Charity, along with three other religious congregations, were responsible for the management of Magdalene Laundries. In 2013 they stated they would not be making ANY [their emphasis] contributions to the State redress scheme to the women who had been subject [of] abuse in the Magdalene Laundries."

Understandably, the petition website section on the hospital campaign is now emblazoned with the word "Victory!" But it is almost certainly premature to start hanging out the bunting. While their demand to "prevent the Sisters of Charity becoming 'sole owners' of the hospital" was a well-focused first objective, they now need to go very much further. Next should be, I urge, to remove ownership and control to a secular, preferably democratically-accountable, body beyond religious influence. Instead, the hospital is to be transferred to a charity and – most sinister of all as the *Irish Times* concludes – "the ultimate ownership of the company, has not been spelled out". We have no guarantee that the owners of the company will not be religiously motivated. I urge campaigners, keep your eye on the ball and don't give up until St Vincent's is under secular control.

I would not be the least surprised if the transfer of ownership by the Sisters of Charity is just a tactical withdrawal until the dust settles. One attempt to speed up that settling may be seen from Bishop Doran. His assertion to the *Sunday Times* that public funding makes no difference now seems politically inconvenient, even embarrassing. He now claims to the *Irish Times* that he spoke "in general terms" as the proposed site of the National Maternity Hospital is not in his diocese, and that he did not specifically mention the National Maternity Hospital.

And could the Sisters also be rewriting history? It stretches credibility to claim after having recently accepted in principle the gift of the hospital, that "for the last two years we have been actively working to find the best way to relinquish our shareholding of the St Vincent's Healthcare Group (SVHG)".

And the word "relinquish" has been cleverly chosen – not for the first time – for its imprecision. One headline read "Government may ask Sisters of Charity to gift land to State", but let's not hold our breath; we know from bitter experience how money and assets tend very much more to flow from the state to the Church than the other way around.

Readers will sympathise with the CEO of children's charity Barnardos, Fergus Finlay: "I didn't think we would ever have a row again about the state consciously, deliberately deciding to build a maternity hospital, and giving it to the Catholic Church. I just cannot understand … the logic behind the decision. You wouldn't build a university and hand it over to the Catholic Church. It's inexplicable." But Mr Finlay is much too charitable and I don't think it is inexplicable at all.

The Church's little helpers are well ensconced in every place of power and influence. And they can get quite stroppy if they don't get their way. Even the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Brendan Carr, who was one of the few dissenting voices on the board of the National Maternity Hospital, was treated with contempt and described as "intimidatory and bullying" the treatment meted out to those of dissenting views.

Let's not forget that when the compensation fund for victims of the Church's many abuses (which ran into billions of euros) was being negotiated a few years ago, two canny nuns who were sent to make a deal with the Government. They managed, with the help of an accommodating government Minister, to cap their contribution at €128 million, saving the Church hundreds of millions of euros that will now be borne by the taxpayer.

One of the comments in *The Journal* story particularly caught my eye: "Unfortunately there are 'visible', and 'not so visible' religious 'orders'. Opus Dei, for example, are like a virus throughout Irish society, and are in politics, as well as being heavily involved in many schools, colleges and universities. Yes, our young people, to this day, are still being groomed by them. The very real possibility is that we (have or) will have a minister for health that is a member of Opus Dei and, as they are secretive about their membership, none of us will know." The commenter then asks whether there should be disclosure by members of government and the judiciary. It took many questions and a long time for Ruth Kelly who held several ministerial appointments under Tony Blair (who hid his Catholicism while PM) to admit, the first Minister to do so, that she was a full member of Opus Dei.

Such is the de facto absence of secularism that a couple of weeks ago it would hardly have seemed realistic to ask for what is so badly needed: a high level independent inquiry into what lay behind the proposal to gift the hospital, and consider the much wider implications about the Catholic-dominated publicly funded healthcare around the country.

An example of where such an inquiry might have been appropriate is when complaints are upheld by the United Nations Committee against Torture, as was the case over the (Catholic) Magdalene Laundries - forced labour camps mostly run by the RC Church in Ireland until as late as 1996 - and the demands for investigation and reparations are quietly sidestepped by the Government.

Most disturbing and telling of all is the contribution by the minister for health, Simon Harris, who has insisted that Catholic ownership of the hospital will not influence the care it provides.

So far, every move to separate Church and State in Ireland, such as the outgoing Taoiseach's (Prime Minister's) attack on the Vatican, have sadly turned out to be false dawns. But maybe the tide is – at long last – turning. The St Vincent's saga has been described as "10 days that shook the nation". Labour Party leader Brendan Howlin, hugely disappointed at Dr Boylan's resignation, showed impressive vision: "The controversy over the NMH that has ignited will start that debate. … we have to migrate to a different world. … [S]tate-funded institutions that are 100% funded by the taxpayer, that are staffed by people who are 100% paid by taxpayer should be owned and controlled by the taxpayer."

I also take my hat off to Kate O'Connell, the Fine Gael TD (MP) for Dublin Bay South where the hospital is located. She said "this should be the start of a process in which the state divorces itself from the church". Maybe she can enlist the assistance of her newly-elected Taoiseach, Ireland's first openly gay Prime Minister.

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Keith Porteous Wood is the president (and former executive director) of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

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