



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on April 19, 2013

Prayer Walk Planned to Keep Ireland “Abortion-Free”

Anyone who has ever told peace activist and  human rights crusader Patrick J. Mahoney to “take a hike” should be happy. The Presbyterian minister from Fredericksburg, Virginia, will be in Ireland May 11-18, leading a 100-mile prayer walk from Belfast to Dublin to “keep Ireland abortion-free.”

“Ireland is an inspiration to the world, especially here in America, in the pro-life community,” Mahoney told a gathering of about two-dozen people in a living room in Bedford, New Hampshire. “Ireland is an example for us.”

The director of the Christian Defense Coalition in Washington, D.C., Mahoney has been active in establishing medical clinics, soup kitchens, and food pantries for the poor, and he once slept in a dumpster to call attention to the plight of the homeless. His 61 arrests include apprehension by Chinese authorities in Tiananmen Square. He is pleased to say he has been “banned from China forever,” though he plans to return anyway, bringing with him a rosary made by women who have fled from China’s forced abortions. Dublin, Ireland, and Bedford, New Hampshire are but two of the many stops he’s made in 30 years of combining evangelizing with social activism.

The cleric’s visit to the Granite State is part of his public awareness campaign about efforts to legalize abortion in Ireland, one of the only three European nations — along with Vatican City and Malta — where abortion is still illegal. The right to life of an unborn child is affirmed in Ireland’s Constitution, Mahoney noted. But the nation’s Supreme Court ruled in the famous “X Case” in 1992 that a suicidal tendency arising from a pregnancy may be grounds for abortion, since that mental state poses “a real and substantial risk” to the life of the mother. The death last November of a woman from blood poisoning after she was denied an abortion has sparked a movement in the Irish Parliament, led by Prime Minister Enda Kenny, to pass legislation that would codify the language of the “X case” ruling.

That in turn brought 35,000 people to a pro-life rally against changing the nation’s abortion law. Given the size of Ireland’s population (4.4 million), the rally drew the equivalent of 2.8 million in the United States, said Mahoney, who contrasted that with the response in America to the 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court. “What would have happened in 1973 if people of good will and the faith community rose up and said ‘We’re not going to accept abortion.’ We don’t have to fantasize about that,” he said. “We have Ireland as an example.”

Mahoney’s hike next month will reverse the direction of the prayer walk he led from Dublin to Belfast in 1990 during an era of violent uprisings between Catholic and Protestant factions in Northern Ireland. This march presents a “greater challenge,” he said, since it is aimed at ending “not sectarian violence, but the violence of abortion.” He’s allowing seven days for the 100-mile trek that he and others made in five days 23 years ago. But, of course, he was a lot younger then.

“I’m not in bad shape,” Mahoney, 58, said in a light-hearted reference to the toll years and miles can take on a human body. “My hip, my knees, I don’t know,” he said, while expressing faith in the power of prayer to make the walk a success.

Ireland’s abortion ban is part of the 1861 Offense Against Person’s Act that remained in effect when the



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former British colony became the sovereign Republic of Ireland in 1922. After abortion laws had been repealed or overturned by court rulings in the United States and Europe, Irish voters approved in 1983 the Eighth Amendment to nation's constitution, [declaring](#):

The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right.

The amendment was approved by 67 percent of the voters, with 33 percent opposed. After the "X case" ruling, however, two efforts to amend the constitution to exclude risk of suicide as grounds for abortion were defeated in referenda. The highly publicized death of Savita Halappanavar at Galway University Hospital in November has spurred renewed debate over the "real and substantial risk" standard. Halappanavar, a 31-year-old Indian dentist, died of blood poisoning following a miscarriage at 17 weeks. Her request to have her dying unborn infant aborted was denied by a midwife who told her an abortion couldn't be done because "Ireland is a Catholic country."

Dr. Peter Boylan, a former master of the National Maternity Hospital in Ireland, testified at the coroner's inquest that it was "highly likely" the patient would have survived if the abortion had been granted when requested.

"The real problem was the inability to terminate prior to Mrs. Halappanavar developing a real or substantive risk to her life," Dr. Boylan said. "By that time it was effectively too late to save her life." Others have argued the abortion ban was not the reason the patient died. Writing in the UK's *Independent*, Eilias Mulroy [observed](#): "In this kind of situation the baby can be induced early (though is very unlikely to survive). The decision to induce labour early would be fully in compliance with the law and the current guidelines set out for doctors by the Irish Medical Council."

Professor John Bonnar, former chairman of Ireland's Institute of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, noted in a [report](#) to the Irish Parliament: "We consider that there is a fundamental difference between abortion carried out with the intention of taking the life of the baby, for example for social reasons, and the unavoidable death of the baby resulting from essential treatment to protect the life of the mother."

Dr. Katherine Astbury, who treated Halappanavar, cited "system failures" at the hospital, including a failure to notify Astbury of the patient's blood test abnormalities and an infection, she said. The jury in the inquest decided in a unanimous verdict Friday that Halappanavar's death was the result of ["medical misadventure."](#)

Mahoney said Ireland has one of the world's lowest maternal death rates, five times lower than in the United States, where abortion has been legal for the past 40 years. Rather than saving lives of women, he said, abortion is often used as a means of sex selection to kill baby girls before they are born. In some parts of the world, Mahoney said, "The three most dangerous words in the world are, 'It's a girl.'"

The prayer vigil he led 23 years ago brought Catholics and Protestants together in prayer, and he anticipates more of the same on this trip. "Certainly we are united as we come crying out to God to save children in Christ," he said.

"Why does this matter?" he asked rhetorically. To the predominantly Catholic audience, the Presbyterian minister quoted a statement of John Paul II: "The gospel of life must be proclaimed and the human life defended in places and at all times."



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