

The Home of Our Hearts

Fighting for Unborn Children With Disabilities

I have testified before the Indiana State Senate for the past 2 years in favor of the ban on abortion in the case of a prenatal diagnosis of disability. This ban was signed into law by Governor Pence in April, and subsequently challenged by the ACLU and Planned Parenthood. A legal battle ensued and there is uncertainty for the future of establishing this form of protection for infants.

My own battle for infants with disabilities began when my son Tommy was born with Down syndrome almost 9 years ago. My educational background was in developmental disabilities, but the reality that the majority of children with Down syndrome and other disabilities are aborted never struck me until I held my son in my arms. The goodness and gift of his life were so self-evident, and the sweetness of his soul captured our hearts so completely that I was deeply saddened by the relentless assault against the lives of children like him. Saddened as well that despite the laws in our country proclaiming the rights and dignity of those with disabilities, there seems to be a clear consensus in public health policy and prenatal medicine that we would be better off if these children were never born.

My family knows differently. Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche, wrote of individuals with cognitive disabilities: "In a mysterious way, they can lead us to the home of our hearts". Every child is a gift, certainly, but Tommy brings the unique gift of awakening our hearts. Our life has a richness and vibrancy which comes from "living in the moment" with him, as Vanier would say, living joyfully, without the constraint of past worries or future problems. This is not to say that there are no challenges associated with raising a child with special needs, but that these are woven into a life which contains greater joys than sorrows.

This is why, despite any setbacks associated with the new Indiana abortion law, I will continue to fight for unborn children with disabilities. It is a matter of fundamental justice that we fight to live in a society where no lives are deemed less worthy of life because of a characteristic such as a disability. But I fight, too, for the families who are misled into thinking abortion is the best solution. My heart aches for them, that they will never have the experience of the sweetness and gift of a child like my son, who could lead them, perhaps, to the "home of their hearts."

Mary O'Callaghan, SJCRTL Member
ND Center for Ethics and Culture Fellow