

Zbignevs Stankevičs

Interreligious Cooperation for Family Values: Latvian Experience

Abstract: The stimulus for writing the paper was an invitation to participate in the academic conference “St. John Paul II’s natural law legacy and international human rights: toward a century of persuasion”, organized by Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University and Ave Maria International School of Law. I offered to share the Latvian experience of the last twenty-five years in the field of the defence of family values, taking into account cooperation between different religious communities in Latvia.

The study is based on selected international and Latvian law documents, as well as documents dealing with the issues raised and published in Latvian mass media. In the cited joint letters of religious leaders and my articles from 2002, an analysis is cited regarding the facts and materials in the field of defence of conceived life and family values. The article provides insights into the main topics discussed in Latvian society over the last two decades.

Keywords: Abortion, Civil union, Constitution, Family, Istanbul Convention.

Introduction

Family values are cherished by major world religions and Christians, based on natural law which is also the basis for political and social development processes for the good of any nation. Latvia has incorporated these values in its Constitution which had been originally promulgated on 30 June 1922, was amended in 2005 with the expansion of the concept of marriage: its Article 110 affirms that the state protects and supports marriage – the union between a man and a woman, the family, the rights of parents and children.¹

¹ *The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia*, <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/57980> (12.06.2023).

In the meantime, various ideological conceptions of genderism, *de-facto* and homosexual unions have influenced the Latvian juridical and political landscape. Family values have been endangered by possible or enacted laws and regulations as regards the very notion of marriage and family, gender relations, and assaults on human life in the form of abortion. These proceedings attest to the clashes of such values as life, liberty, human dignity, health, privacy, safety, and integral development. The Roman Catholic Church in Latvia has engaged in close collaborative ecumenical efforts with other Christian churches to promote marriage and family values for the common good amidst the challenges of our times.

1. Law on Civil Unions

The 2020 ruling of the Latvian Constitutional Court provoked renewed efforts to legislate the Law on Civil Unions. In 2020, a woman whose partner did not receive the intended childbirth leave challenged this refusal before the Constitutional Court. The court ruled in November 2020 that the provisions of the Labour Law limiting such leave only to the child's father did not comply with the Constitution.² The Court emphasized that the family is not just a marriage-based union, thereby changing the current concept of family. The Constitutional Court ruled that the state has a duty to protect and support same-sex partner families as well. The legislator needed to figure out how to change the laws to ensure compatibility with the Court's decision by mid-2022, through amendments to the Labour Law or other norms, in conjunction with this decision.

From one perspective, the judgment of the Constitutional Court does not affect the institution of marriage, which is defined as the union of a woman and a man, but many consider that the judgment is a threat to traditional values. Therefore, in July 2021, the Central Election Commission (CVK) has registered the draft law "Amendment to the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia" submitted by the initiative group for collecting signatures – "The Latvian Men's Association", which envisages clarifying the concept of family in Article 110 of the Constitution. Along with the proposed changes, Article 110 of the Constitution would be more specific about marriage and family relationships: *The state protects and supports marriage – the union between a man and a woman – and a family based on marriage, kinship or adoption.* The number of signatures required to submit the draft Constitutional amendment to the Parliament was 154,868, which was not less than one tenth of

² On behalf of the Republic of Latvia Riga, Case No 2019-33-01, 12 November 2020, https://www.satv.tiesa.gov.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2019-33-01_Spriedums.pdf (12.06.2023).

the number of citizens entitled to vote in the previous Parliament elections. Voters could sign the Constitution amendment for 12 months – from 30 July 2021 to 29 July 2022.

The Roman Catholic Bishops of Latvia supported the initiative to define the family in Constitution with the following message on 10 August 2021:

“The Latvian Bishops’ Conference supports the draft law “Amendment to the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia” submitted by the Latvian Men’s Association on 29 July, which intends to define the concept of family more precisely.

The draft law envisages a Constitution amendment to Article 110, expressing it in the following wording:

“The state protects and supports marriage – the union between a man and a woman – and a family based on marriage, kinship or adoption. The state protects the rights of the child, including the right to grow up in a family based on a female mother and a male father. The state protects the rights of parents and their freedom to bring up their children in accordance with their religious and philosophical beliefs.

*The state provides special assistance to children with disabilities and parents who take care of them, children left without parental care or victims of violence, families with many children, and mothers and fathers who take care of children without another parent’.*³

The Bishops invite Catholics to join this initiative with their signatures, so that they can collect the necessary votes during the year and hold a referendum on strengthening the concept of the family in Article 110 of the Constitution.

The future of the Church and of all humanity depends on the strength of family ties, the mutual responsibility of its members, and the concern for the welfare of one another. The tensions created by a consumerist and pleasure-oriented

³ On the draft amendments to the Constitution submitted by the Latvian Men’s Association, <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/325057-par-biedribas-latvijas-viru-biedriba-iesniegto-satversmes-grozijumu-projektu> (29.07.2021). Here and below, the translation from Latvian is my own.

individualistic culture threaten the normal development and maturation of individuals in many families.

It is wrong to think that extending the concept of the family could benefit society as a whole. On the contrary, only an exclusive and inseparable union of men and women fully fulfils the necessary social function, guaranteeing stable commitments and enabling children to emerge and grow up in a safe, supportive environment. Therefore, these signatures of ours could be a concrete step in the defence of families. (...)

Thank God that many families, who are far from perfect, live in love, fulfil their calling, and move forward, even if they experience falls along the way”⁴

In response to the November 2020 Court decision, the Ministry of Justice began work on the development of an appropriate legal provision. A working group was set up involving representatives of non-governmental organizations and churches. For a whole year, it worked with a lot of effort to create a sufficiently balanced proposal that would comply with the judgment of the Constitutional Court, would not unnecessarily divide society and would bring the greatest benefit to children.

Therefore, the draft Law on Civil Unions (LCU), which was submitted to the Parliament commissions for discussion on 1 February 2022, caused surprise and confusion.⁵ After getting acquainted with the draft law of the Civil Unions, it can be seen that it does not differ significantly from the liberal draft laws on the registration of spouses and partnerships that were once considered and rejected by the Parliament.

In February 2022, the Ministry of Justice presented a draft law that it had prepared in response to the Constitutional Court’s 2020 judgment on childbirth leave, in which the court recognized that the Constitution imposed an obligation on the legislature to provide legal protection for same-sex families.

The Civil Union Bill provides for the right of two adults, including same-sex couples, to register their relationship in order to qualify for the minimum legal, social and economic protection of the state.

⁴ Conference of Latvian Bishops on amendments to the Constitution, <https://katolis.lv/2021/08/latvijas-biskapu-konference-par-grozijumiem-satversme/> (10.08.2021).

⁵ Civil Union Law, <https://titania.saeima.lv/LIVS13/saeimalivs13.nsf/0/94894F3C9166D-3DEC22588000302475?OpenDocument> (12.06.2023).

However, these couples would not be able to receive the same number of guarantees as are foreseen for spouses who have registered their marriage with the registry office or church, where they have also promised mutual trust.

Looking at the Civil Union Bill, it can be seen that it is essentially a ‘light version’ or ‘surrogate’ of the marriage institution. The Civil Union Law is the first step towards far-reaching change in society. Experience in other countries shows that same-sex marriages sooner or later follow the adoption of a same-sex partnership.

On 23 March 2022, the leaders of Latvia’s Christian churches prepared and sent a Letter to the Latvian Parliament expressing their opinion regarding the draft law on the Civil Unions, which had been discussed in the Parliament Commissions in February. Here is the text of the letter⁶:

“The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by the society and the State. God created man and woman and gave his blessing to a family consisting of a husband and wife, and in this God-blessed family children are born, grown out and raised. The joint upbringing of children by the father and mother is the basis for the moral, religious and social development of a person. Only in the union of a man and a woman can a life be born – a child who needs both parents, i.e. a father and a mother.

Life is not always rosy, and a father does not always want or be able to raise a child. As a society, we suffer the consequences of our lack of fathers: substance abuse, destructive behaviour, suicide, premature sex, sexually transmitted diseases, lower levels of education, lower incomes, and so on.

Aware of this, the Latvian National Development Plan for 2021–2027 in the section “Generations of Strong Families” included the task: *Strengthening the Family as a Value in Society* (p. 24).

The plan aims, among other things, to increase social protection for parents, to develop a family-friendly environment, to honour large families, to strengthen the

⁶ The appeal of the leaders of the Christian churches of Latvia in relation to the Civil Union Bill, 23 March 2022, Riga.

role of the father in the family, to improve young people's parenting skills, family and marriage, and the role of intergenerational solidarity in sustainable growth.

Meanwhile, in its 12 November 2020 judgment (case No. 2019-33-01), the Latvian Constitutional Court ruled that the child's father should be replaced by the mother's partner (another woman). In response, the Ministry of Justice began work on the development of an appropriate legal provision.

We appreciated the willingness to do so in dialogue with the society. A working group was set up involving representatives of non-governmental organizations and churches. For a whole year, it worked with a lot of effort to create a sufficiently balanced proposal that would comply with the judgment of the Constitutional Court, would not unnecessarily divide society and would bring the greatest benefit to children.

Therefore, the draft Law on Civil Unions (*CSL*), which was submitted to the Parliament Commissions for discussion on 1 February, caused surprise and confusion. Getting acquainted with the draft law of the Civil Union, it is obvious that it does not differ significantly from the draft laws on the registration of spouses and partnerships that had been once considered and rejected by the Parliament. It is offered to both heterosexual and same-sex couples (see, for example, Article 7 of the Civil Union Bill and Article 84 of the Civil Law; Article 17 of the Civil Union Bill and Article 89.1 of the Civil Law; Article 18 of the draft law and Article 90 of the Civil Law).

An important difference from the duties of the spouses is that the obligation of the members of the Civil Union to be mutually trustworthy has been waived. The *CSL* goes much further than required by the judgment of the Constitutional Court. It allows the registration of same-sex relationships. This obscures the institution of marriage and family protected in Article 110 of the Constitution, and the right of children to grow up with their biological parents may be endangered.

It is in every child's best interests to grow up in a family with a male dad and a female mum. It is the duty of the state and every citizen to support and strengthen such a union as much as possible. Our President Egils Levits, still a judge at the Court of Justice of the European Union, has rightly pointed out that the introduction of a registered partnership open to both homosexual and heterosexual couples, in accordance with the case law of the European Court of Human Rights,

actually leads to the recognition of same-sex marriages. This would be in conflict with the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia.

There is a war going on in Europe and tensions in society. People are already tired and polarized by the time constraints of a pandemic. In our opinion, this is not the time to push the bill through the Parliament, which will further fuel emotions and increase contradictions. We therefore call for the intention not to abandon the goal of achieving a balanced and publicly acceptable framework in working with members of the public.

The judgment of the Constitutional Court can be enforced by correcting the Labour Law. Those living in a joint household have the opportunity to enter into contracts and to have their power of attorney certified by a notary. This system can be further facilitated by offering notarized contract packages. In this way, the legislator would fulfil the obligations imposed by the Constitutional Court and allow the Working Group and other specialists to continue working on a settlement, the necessary elements of which would be outlined in the way people use the solution offered here.

At a time when insecurity about the future, the consequences of relationship instability and the neglect of children are so evident in society, a stable family based on marriage and mutual trust can provide a sense of security and peace.

Therefore, we call on the Parliament deputies to support only such wording of the draft law that will strengthen families and unite our society.”

Despite controversy, on Thursday, 12 May 2022, after a heated debate in the second reading, the Parliament supported the Civil Union Bill, which would allow same-sex couples to register their relations, and forwarded the Bill to the final reading where it was rejected and didn't pass through.

2. The Istanbul Convention Challenges

The Convention of the Council of Europe on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, the so-called Istanbul Convention, was adopted in 2011.⁷

⁷ *Convention of the Council of Europe on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*, <https://rm.coe.int/168008482e> (11.05.2011).

On 18 May 2016, Latvia signed it, but the obligations to fully comply with its provisions would be assumed by the state upon ratification of the document. The situation could be compared to an engagement – a voluntary agreement has been reached between the two parties, but the final step in formalizing the relationship – marriage – has not been taken.

Latvia is among 7 European countries that have not yet done so. Discussions on the usefulness of ratifying the Convention in Latvia are continuing, with opinions “for” and “against” depending on its various ideological presuppositions.

The Ministry of Justice developed a legal analysis of the possible impact of the convention on the Latvian legal system. The conclusion is that the ideology underlying the Istanbul Convention, as well as certain norms thereof, do not comply with the basic principles of the Latvian Constitution and fundamental human rights. Three examples could be provided:

- 1) The Convention obligates the states to refrain from discrimination not only on the basis of sex, but also on the basis of “gender”. In order to observe this principle of non-discrimination, Latvia would, sooner or later, need to start interpreting Article 110 of the Constitution, as well as the second part of Article 35 of the Civil Law in the light of the gender social theory. This means allowing same-sex marriage, without even changing the wording of the first sentence of Article 110 of the Constitution;
- 2) The Convention blatantly ignores the parental rights in children’s education guaranteed both in Article 112 of the Constitution and in international human rights instruments. Furthermore, the freedom of religion for parents, which is inextricably linked to the right to educate their children according to their religious and philosophical beliefs, has not been taken into consideration;
- 3) The first paragraph of Article 12 of the Convention obligates states to make changes in people’s thinking and attitudes. Such a requirement does not comply with Articles 99 and 100 of the Constitution, as everyone in Latvia has the right to think freely, as well as to express their opinions freely, unless they violate the fundamental rights of other people (Article 116 of the Constitution).

On 29 April 2016, an open letter of Christian leaders of Latvia was published, inviting the parliament not to ratify the Istanbul Convention. It had the following content:

“Having become acquainted with the strategy for reducing violence proposed by the Istanbul Convention, we would like to express our opinion on this document, in view of the fact that the result, i.e., its ratification, may affect every inhabitant of Latvia.

First of all, we would like to emphasize that violence against women is contrary to both the Christian faith and humanity, and that violence must be eradicated from human relations in general. Violence must be tackled at all levels, from education and legislation to support for victims of violence. Christian churches address these issues by encouraging people to build relationships based on mutual respect and the authentic benefit of the other person. It is served by preaching the gospel, pre-marriage preparation courses, various family therapy initiatives, and parent education activities. It is also the focus of various Christian organizations that provide specific assistance to victims of violence.

In the Istanbul Convention or the *Convention of the Council of Europe on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*, the states-parties commit themselves to the elimination of all forms of violence against women. Such a commitment is very positive. The way in which the authors of the Convention analyse the causes of violence raises questions and concerns, treating as causes not human vices, mistakes and weaknesses, but traditions, culture, religion, and the institution of the family. The Convention does not address the promotion of violence in the media and pornography, which objectifies women in the most degrading way. The Convention does not raise the issue of alcohol or drug abuse, which is most closely linked to domestic and non-domestic violence. Nor does the Convention protect conceived children from such extreme forms of violence as abortion. Instead, the Istanbul Convention on Violence – in a European context! – links it to the “historically unequal distribution of power between women and men”. Of particular concern is Article 12 of the Convention, which states that “Parties shall take the necessary measures to promote changes in the social and cultural patterns of behaviour of women and men with a view to eradicating prejudices, customs, traditions and all other practices which are based on the idea of (...) stereotyped roles for women and men”.⁸ It is not specified which roles of women and men the Convention considers to be conducive to violence. This allows the Convention

⁸ *Convention of the Council of Europe on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence*, <https://rm.coe.int/168008482e> (11.05.2011).

to be interpreted very broadly, and additionally to be directed against important values and the institution of the family as such.

Similarly vague, paragraph 85 of the Convention's Explanatory Report states: *Parties to the Convention are therefore required to take measures that are necessary to promote changes in mentality and attitudes.*⁹ It has not been said which gender stereotypes need to be changed.

In general, it can be stated that the convention does not call for combating the real causes of violence, but opens opportunities to impose on Latvia a project for the transformation of society based on the ideology of gender, which would be in conflict with the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia.

We, the leaders of Latvia's Christian churches, call on politicians, governments and officials to see the need expressed in the title of the Istanbul Convention as an incentive to do everything possible to tackle the real causes of domestic violence, thus combating violence against women. As for the content of the Convention, we believe that it is not acceptable in its current form, as it contains significant shortcomings that allow for biased, ideological explanations, even those that have nothing to do with the elimination of violence. Should the Parliament still have to ratify the Istanbul Convention, we call for ensuring that the values enshrined in the Constitution and laws of the Republic of Latvia be protected".¹⁰

On 18 April 2018, a meeting of the Expert Council "On the Istanbul Convention" was held, organized by the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Latvian Academy of Sciences. The aim of the Council was to assess the scope and significance of the Istanbul Convention in Latvia.

The experts sought answers to the following questions:

1) Is the Istanbul Convention only about gender equality? What areas are affected?

⁹ Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, 11.05.2011, Council of Europe Treaty Series – No. 210, p. 16, <https://rm.coe.int/ic-and-explanatory-report/16808d24c6>.

¹⁰ Open letter from the leaders of Latvian Christian churches on the Istanbul Convention, <https://katolis.lv/2016/05/latvijas-kristigo-baznicu-vaditaju-atklata-vestule-par-stambul-konvenciju/> (2.05.2016).

- 2) What is violence and equality / equality in everyday life, how does it manifest itself, and how can it be reduced or prevented?
- 3) What happens if Latvia does not ratify the Istanbul Convention (possible penalties for non-compliance with EU discipline, lost gains, lost losses)?

The Council results were summarized in the “Council Conclusions” and passed on to the responsible state institutions, experts, mass media and published in the media of the Academy of Sciences.¹¹

The decision of the expert council was as follows: until the ambiguous issues are clarified, and their impact is studied and explained to the public, the Istanbul Convention could be used as an ideological tool; the Council thus called for postponement of the ratification of the *Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* (Istanbul Convention).

3. Abortion Legislation in Latvia

In 1955 in the USSR, including the Latvian SSR, after a 19-year ban, abortions were allowed to be performed freely. This gave every woman the possibility to terminate her pregnancy by its 12th week.

The current “Sexual and reproductive health act”, which legalizes abortion, was passed on 31 January 2002. Article 25 of the Sexual and Reproductive Health Law of the Republic of Latvia authorizes abortion at the woman’s request until the 12th week of the pregnancy.¹²

In the spring of 2002, when the law was passed, Christian political forces collected signatures to propose a referendum on a much stricter law that would allow abortion solely to save a woman’s life and in case of rape. This attempt failed.

Legal vicissitudes notwithstanding, the number of abortions has fallen steadily since independence. If in 1991 there had been 38 000 abortions in Latvia, then in 2010 the number dropped to 7 400, whereas in 2020 – to 2 800. This is largely due to the

¹¹ Conclusion of the Expert Consilium “On the Istanbul Convention”, organised by the Division of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Latvian Academy of Sciences, http://www.lza.lv/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4425&Itemid=47 (4.06.2018).

¹² Sexual and Reproductive Health Law, <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/58982-sexual-and-reproductive-health-law> (01.07.2019).

active pro-life movement, which involves Latvian Christians of various denominations. The director of the Catholic Pro-life movement in Latvia is a Lutheran. An ecumenical campaign “40 days for life” has been running twice a year since 2014.

In January 2002, as a Roman Catholic priest, I published an article in public media to promote the discussion on abortion. It stated:

“Both I and each of us may not have been born and may have been destroyed in an abortion due to various circumstances. However, our parents have decided in favour of us and life when it comes to our birth”.¹³ We now have a duty to build what we want to call a democratic and legal society, the state and its laws.

We are now faced with a choice: do we have the right to enshrine the rule of ‘abortion’ in law and to accept the human right to destroy another person? The question of ‘for’ or ‘against’ abortion opens the door to a debate in which a large section of society, including members of the Christian denomination, is currently involved at various levels, although the question of the separation of national law may be questioned.

The latest statistics show that Latvia has the lowest birth rate and the highest mortality rate in Europe (8.3 and 13.8 per thousand inhabitants, respectively). The Church has a duty to uphold the right to life of every human being, and it cannot remain silent when it concerns the most vulnerable. For this reason, the Church is unequivocal in her pro-life, pro-public health position, recognizing that without life, the very existence of the state as such is in doubt. Being open to a dialogue full of mutual respect, Christians want to substantiate their position by explaining that the theological arguments expressed in the commandment “Thou shalt not kill!” is not at all contrary to legal, scientific and universal arguments, but even stands in direct harmony with them.

A legal assessment of induced abortion and its legalisation in law requires some reflection on the foundations of national law. A country that wants to become truly democratic and governed by the rule of law must allow human rights to permeate both public and private law, whereas increasingly permeating private law. If the state wants to identify possible courses of action in private law, it should address these

¹³ Zbigņevs Stankēvičs, “Kāpēc man ir paveicies?” (“Why am I a lucky man?”), *Diena*, 23.01.2002, <https://www.diena.lv/raksts/pasaule/krievija/kapec-man-ir-paveicies-11226015> (28.08.2023).

issues through the prism of human rights. By supplementing the Constitution with a chapter on human rights, these rights have been recognized as binding on the state, stipulating in Article 93 that “everyone’s right to life shall be protected by law”.

From a legal point of view, everyone or every person acquires the rights and freedoms provided for him or her at birth. It would be logical to conclude that the rights of the unborn are therefore not protected. This argument is also one of the most frequently used statements in defence of a woman’s right to destroy an unborn child. Elsewhere in Europe, the natural human right – the right to life – is used as a yardstick for assessing other rights, and a part of the Latvian civil law inheritance law also provides for the right of an unborn child to inherit.

Abortion is a violation in the context of natural law, as the mere fact of life provides a basis for the exercise of other rights. The preamble to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that “the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth”. However, it should be added at the outset that, from a legal point of view, this issue has not yet been fully resolved and is still subject to various interpretations. National legislation has now made women’s rights more important in reconciling the rights of women and their unborn children. However, if a national law denies a group of people (including unborn children) the protection that this group is legally entitled to, then it denies the equality of all persons before the law.

Abortion would not be a violation of human rights if a conceived child was not considered a human being until a certain age. Leaving for each subjective question the question of how the direct sexual contact of two human beings of the opposite sex can biologically result in “something other than a human being”, let us sketch out the scientific side of the question in an attempt to find the answer to “how and when a human being comes to existence”. The question of the beginning of human origin cannot be interpreted as broadly as the question of the origin of all civilization, because the moment of human origin can be traced almost in detail and this origin can be confirmed by the facts of natural science.

Researchers acknowledge that the very moment a sperm fertilizes an ovule, the general and individual characteristics of the person conceived – sex, eye, hair and skin colour, facial features, etc. – are determined. The new cell, which is made up of an ovule and a sperm, contains the genetic code of a conceived human,

splitting the chromosomes in the nucleus of the cell about a day after conception, forming two and then countless cells with the same genetic characteristics. Four or five days after conception, the new body is implanted in the womb, the embryo is soon formed, and three weeks after conception, the little person's heart begins to beat, although the woman herself is not yet aware of the new life. A closed blood circulation and other blood composition independent of the mother's blood circulation is formed on the 21st day after conception. What is said here allows us to conclude that a person starts from the moment of conception and is subject to all legal norms on the protection of a person's person.

Seemingly defending a woman's rights, it is explained that she has the right to decide for herself, on her bosom, prompting her to believe that having an unplanned child violates her rights. In another aspect, the issue should be addressed if the sexual contact was violent or unwanted, but even in this case the child is not the property of the woman who conceived him and is not part of the womb in which he is carried. He has been a completely new, unique and independent being since conception. It has already been said that the protection of women's health, the quality of life, the protection of privacy and, ultimately, the freedom and right to take care of one's own body are some of the arguments of supporters of abortion.

However, children's right to life is not incompatible with their parents' right to comfort. The theory of human rights states that some human rights may be restricted in order to protect the fundamental rights of others. Such a restriction of a woman's rights is justified not only for the sake of the life of the child, but also for protecting the woman herself from the consequences of abortion. The claim that abortion is desirable and even advisable mentions both possible abnormalities in the development of the foetus and maternal endocrine problems, extragenital, viral and other illnesses, harmful habits, psychological and many other reasons that make a woman choose to murder her unborn child.

Nevertheless, just as many, if not more, arguments are in favour of the same woman's health if the child is retained. Often, the changes that have already taken place in her body, which occur immediately after conception, as well as in the short time before the abortion is performed, are not even mentioned or are only sketched. The woman is introduced to the possible psychological consequences of abortion, but it is less often mentioned that abortion can also cause mental disorders, not just uncertainty about the possibility of a future pregnancy.

Gynaecologists acknowledge that there are difficulties in identifying the consequences of abortion, as women who have had abortions are more likely to feel guilty about their choices, regardless of the reasons for those choices. The most common reason for abortion among women themselves is the lack of support from others, and only then are the economic and legal problems mentioned as a priority by abortion advisers. 20% of women who have an abortion are by about 12% more likely than other women to consider suicide at some point, and abortion can only increase the risk of breast cancer, as terminating a pregnancy also violently stops breast development and the development of cells that have not yet developed; additionally, sensitivity of yet underdeveloped cells increases the risk of growing a tumour.

The so-called PAD, or post-abortion distress, which appears as early as three months after an abortion, manifests itself as physical and mental pain and a sense of great loss, and so on. The PAS, or post-abortion syndrome, which begins only a few years after an abortion, manifests itself as anxiety for no apparent reason, dissatisfaction with life, loss of meaning, hopelessness, and depression.

Although this discourse does not presuppose that God's word is the main and decisive argument, since theological arguments will not convince a person who does not believe in God's authority, apart from the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" mentioned at the beginning of the article against abortion, Jesus' words "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it for me" are other words that exclude further discussion (Matthew 25:40, NIV). The early Christian churches, in opposing the prevailing Roman and Greek practices of abortion and the destruction of unborn children, have stated that the foetus cannot be killed by terminating the pregnancy and that the newborn child should not be killed. As stated in the Bible, responsibility will be claimed for the life of every person, because man is created in the image of God. In the Psalms we read, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth" (Ps 139:13-15, NIV), and the blood of a slain man is called to heaven (cf. Gen 4:10). God loved us before we were born, saying, "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee, and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee" (Jer 1:5, REV). Thus, Christians recognize human life as sacred, emphasizing that it must be respected and protected from the moment of conception.

The Church has always affirmed that any intentional abortion is morally evil. Also in the text of the Hippocratic Oath, which was drafted in accordance with moral and ethical requirements and universal principles, the doctors undertook to “(...) give no sort of medicine to any pregnant woman, with a view to destroy the child.” New life has always been created as the fruit of love, not just pure sexuality, and love is recognized as a moral value even among non-Christians. To Christians, “(...) God is love” (1 John 4:8), which is understandable to everyone, regardless of their level of education, and Christ says, “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you” (John 13:34).

In the light of the above arguments in support of the Christian view, it can be directly concluded that the Church of Christ cannot accept the legalization of abortion as required by the Latvian Sexual and Reproductive Health Bill. However, given the painful and difficult nature of this issue, we cannot stick to a simple ban by saying a pointed ‘no’ to abortion. Christians of all denominations in Latvia try to protect their new lives to the best of their ability. For example, the “Steps” (*Pakāpieni*) mission has been operating for several years, accepting new mothers who have been rejected by their loved ones and the public. There also exists a family support centre called ‘Let’s Protect a Miracle’ (*Sargāsim brīnumu*) and a movement ‘For Life’ (*Par dzīvību*), but this is still not sufficient to solve these painful issues. There is a need for a nationwide programme that also includes appropriate changes in legislation to help women in difficult situations, and Christians are ready to work together to put this into practice.¹⁴

My 2002 Articles generated some interest, but no major discussion leading to the legislative changes on life issues. Christians in Latvia continue to write and speak on pro-life aspects, including the euthanasia challenge, still awaiting serious evaluation by the society and citizens. Currently, it seems that other socio-economic problems have taken the political lead; however, all the while the people of good will should be alert and guarded in order not to pass by sudden ideological assaults carried out under various slogans.

Conclusion

In Conclusion, the Latvian experience in defence of family values has been greatly enriched by interreligious and ecumenical cooperation. Christians in Latvia have

¹⁴ Zbignevs Stankēvičs, “*Aborti, cilvēktiesības un baznīca*” (“Abortion, human rights and the Church”), *Delfi*, 24.01.2002, <https://www.delfi.lv/news/versijas/zbignevs-stankevics-abortil-cilvektiesibas-un-baznica.d?id=2540534> (28.08.2023).

been united on the issues so important for the development of any society and nation, especially that of Latvians, whose number decreases due to emigration and demographic decline. At the same time, Christians should be more motivated and formed to engage in social and political areas. More effective results could be achieved when Christians and their communities or parishes develop their updated marriage and family preparation programmes, and promote synodal engagement and integral family support in various situations, needs, and crises. Christian married couples and families might indeed be major agents of authentic social and cultural change against any form of violence, when they consciously live in accord with the Gospel of Life, Family, and Love in Christ Jesus; when they experience the Church in a true synodal way as Communion.

Bibliography

- Civil Union Law (2022), <https://titania.saeima.lv/LIVS13/saeimalivs13.nsf/0/94894F3C9166D3DEC225880000302475?OpenDocument>.
- Conclusion of the Expert Consilium “On the Istanbul Convention”, organised by the Division of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Latvian Academy of Sciences, http://www.lza.lv/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4425&Itemid=47.
- Conference of Latvian Bishops on amendments to the Constitution (2021), <https://katolis.lv/2021/08/latvijas-biskapu-konference-par-grozijumiem-satversme/>.
- Convention of the Council of Europe on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (2021), <https://rm.coe.int/168008482e>.
- On behalf of the Republic of Latvia Riga, Case No 2019-33-01, 12 November 2020, https://www.satv.tiesa.gov.lv/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2019-33-01_Spriedums.pdf.
- On the draft amendments to the Constitution submitted by the Latvian Men’s Society (2021), <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/325057-par-biedribas-latvijas-viru-biedriba-iesniegto-satversmes-grozijumu-projektu>.
- Open letter from the leaders of Latvian Christian churches on the Istanbul Convention (2016), <https://katolis.lv/2016/05/latvijas-kristigo-baznicu-vaditaju-atklata-vestule-par-stambulas-konvenciju/>.
- Sexual and Reproductive Health Law, <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/58982-sexual-and-reproductive-health-law> (01.07.2019).
- Stankēvičs Z. (2002), “*Aborti, cilvēktiesības un baznīca*” (“Abortion, human rights and the Church”), *Delfi*, 24.01.2002, <https://www.delfi.lv/news/versijas/zbignevs-stankevics-aborti-cilvektiesibas-un-baznica.d?id=2540534>.
- Stankēvičs Z. (2002), “*Kāpēc man ir paveicies?*” (“Why am I a lucky man?”), *Diena*, 23.01.2002, <https://www.diena.lv/raksts/pasaule/krievija/kapec-man-ir-paveicies-11226015>.
- The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia*, <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/57980>.