STATEMENT BY THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF NORTHERN IRELAND ON THE INTRODUCTION OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND (EXECUTIVE FORMATION) ACT

At midnight last night, 21 October, all explicit protection for the unborn child up to 28 weeks of pregnancy was removed in Northern Ireland, leading to potentially one of the most liberal and unregulated abortion regimes in the world. This is a tragic day for the unborn children who will now never bless our world with their unique and precious lives. It is also a sad day for our local democracy.

For the past three months, with tens of thousands of others, we have been calling on our political representatives to restore the NI Assembly, not only to address the pressing economic, social, health, welfare and educational issues of these times, but especially also to debate and halt the Abortion legislation which was rushed through the Westminster Parliament in July 2019.

To describe as a 'stunt' the efforts of thousands of citizens from all sections of our community to make use of the democratic system to address an issue of such fundamental importance is deeply offensive. The unavoidable truth is that our locally elected representatives had the time and the power to prevent this draconian Westminster abortion legislation being introduced over the heads of local citizens but chose not to do so. It is the duty of citizens to hold their elected representatives accountable for the decisions they have made.

Abortion is a brutal violation of the precious gift of life. The right to life is not given to us by any law or government. Any human law that removes the right to life is an unjust law and must be resisted by every person, every voter, every political representative. For Catholic politicians this is not only a matter of protecting the human right to life but also a fundamental matter of Catholic faith.

We have consistently said that the equal right to life, and love, of a mother and her unborn child is so fundamental to the common good of every society that citizens deserve the fullest participation in the democratic debate about the legislation which governs it.

Similarly, the freedom of conscience of healthcare professionals needs to be respected and they should never be required to lend their support to an action which conflicts with their commitment to uphold life.

We are also concerned at the redefinition of marriage which effectively places the union of two men, or two women, on a par with the marriage relationship between a husband and wife which is open to the procreation of children.

Our locally elected representatives still have the power to bring together the Assembly to deal with the introduction of this legislation and the range of other issues such as welfare, health and education that urgently demand attention for the sake of the most vulnerable in our society, especially unborn children and their mothers. We appeal to all local parties to redouble their efforts to restore the Assembly and power-sharing Executive, to give expression to the democratic will of local citizens and to address the urgent need to build a society based on respect for the right to life and concern for those most in need, who are most affected by their ongoing failure to agree.

We ask all voters to respond to the forthcoming short consultations on the Westminster legislation that has been introduced today and to leave their representatives in no doubt as to how they feel in these matters. We also call on people to continue to pray for a society which respects the equal right to life and care of a mother and her unborn child, with a compassion that welcomes every child as a unique and wonderful gift.