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Parents' heartbreaking decisions - Greatest love may be to say goodbye

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It was Pádraig Pearse who wrote "Lord, thou art hard on mothers: We suffer in their coming and their going."

They may also suffer in between, caring, nurturing and worrying about the children they love unconditionally.

Proof that a mother's love is the heart of any family comes from a letter published in yesterday's Irish Examiner and available to read online at irishexaminer.com.

It was addressed to Disability Minister Finian McGrath in response to his comments suggesting that some parents were "dumping" their children in institutions.

The open letter, written by Ina O'Dwyer from Cahersiveen, Co Kerry, reveals the hurt and dismay she feels at the minister's remarks which have left her reeling in shock, horror and disbelief.

But it was much more than that; it was also a love letter to her son, Bernard, who endured an horrific birth in 1976 that left him severely brain damaged.

She writes about the heartbreak of seeing Bernard grow up, knowing that he would never experience the normal trajectory of childhood or achieve the small but important steps of going to school or making his first Holy Communion.

She recounts the harrowing years of watching her "beautiful and precious son" in pain, the endless procession of doctors and the hopelessness of trying to find a cure for his condition.

Through it all, his every need has had to be catered for but her love for him has never diminished. As she puts it, "my baby, soon to be 41 years old, is still just that — a baby. He can neither walk nor talk... he wears nappies and always will."

She gives thanks to the Franciscan Sisters in Beaufort, Killarney for the care and support they have given Bernard since he was five, helping him thrive in their care while facilitating home visits.

Neither is Ina's letter in any way one-sided. She acknowledges her wishing that he would be like everyone else until a beaming smile from him brought the realisation that her son was happy in his own world and that his life was a blessing, not a burden.

She tells the minister: "What matters most is that we find happiness, and my son, through all his pain and suffering, has discovered this beautiful gift and shares it with the rest of us."

In fairness to Minister McGrath, he said his comments were not meant to refer to people like her or her family but were directed at the small number of families who do not visit relatives in care. Offering to

meet Ina, he explained that “as a parent with a daughter who has an intellectual disability, I totally understand her feelings.”

Sometimes the greatest love that a mother — or father — can show their child is to say goodbye. That was the heartbreaking decision made by Connie Yates and Chris Gard whose terminally ill son Charlie was the subject of a lengthy legal battle in Britain to keep him alive.

Like all good mothers, if Ina O’Dwyer or Connie Yates had to choose between loving their children and breathing, chances are they would use their last breath to tell them.