Be compassionate
A statement of the Catholic Bishops of England, Wales and Scotland

As Catholic Bishops in England and Wales, and in Scotland, we believe that genuine compassion is under threat because of the attempts in Parliament to legalise assisted suicide. 'Compassion' means to enter into and share the suffering of another person. It means never giving up on anyone or abandoning them. It means loving them to the natural end of their life, even if and when they struggle to find meaning and purpose. Compassion means accompanying people, especially during sickness, disability, and old age. This kind of genuine compassion is witnessed through the care and respect we show to people with terminal illness as they complete their journey in this life.

We appeal to those who share our Catholic belief in human dignity and sanctity of life, including fellow Christians, other religious people, and people of reason and good will, to join with us in defending the weakest and most vulnerable who are at risk through this proposed legislation.

Life is a gift to be protected, especially when threatened by sickness and death. Palliative care, with expert pain relief, and good human, spiritual, and pastoral support, is the right and best way to care for people towards the end of life. More adequate funding and resources for hospices and palliative care teams authentically serve and honour our shared human dignity. In the discussion around assisted suicide, so much is made of freedom of choice and autonomy; but autonomy is not absolute and must always be placed within the context of the common good of society as a whole. People who are suffering need to know they are loved and valued. They need compassionate care, not assistance to end their lives.

Assisted suicide raises serious issues of principle. The time given for Parliament to consider the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, which will permit assisted suicide is woefully inadequate. Although the Bill indicates safeguards will be in place, the experience of other countries where assisted suicide has been introduced shows that such promised safeguards are soon forgotten. In Belgium, the Netherlands, Canada, and parts of the USA, the criteria for assisted suicide have been expanded significantly, in law or in practice, often to include people with mental illness and others who have no terminal diagnosis. It is not always easy to predict the length of time a person with a terminal illness has to live, making this Bill unworkable.

We are alarmed by the impact that legalisation will have on the most vulnerable members of our society. The option to end life can quickly, and subtly, be experienced as a duty to die. Some may well feel their continued existence is a burden to others, and, implicitly or explicitly, be pressured into assisted suicide. This includes people who are elderly, infirm, and living with disabilities. The protection of such people is the foundation of civilised society. It is at the heart of good government.

We are also concerned that this Bill will fundamentally damage the relationship between medical practitioners and their patients. It will potentially lead to pressure on medical staff to recommend or facilitate such procedures. Will the right to conscientious objection for individuals and institutions be guaranteed? The impact on hospices, care homes, and those who work in social and community care cannot be underestimated. It will radically alter the ethos of trust and support which underpins our service to those in need and their families.

We urge all people of good will to oppose this legislation and, instead, to advocate for better funded palliative care which is consistently available to everyone in need in England, Wales, and Scotland. Please inform yourself and others about this issue and contact your Member of Parliament to make your opposition known, asking him or her to oppose or not support the Bill.

As Catholic Bishops, we call upon all Catholics, and invite all those who share our Christian faith, to turn in prayer to God our Father. Please pray that the dignity of human life will be protected and defended. On the cross, Christ united Himself to every form of human suffering and every person who suffers. In Him, life is changed, not ended. He shows us, in His own crucified and risen body, that love is always stronger than death.

14 November 2024