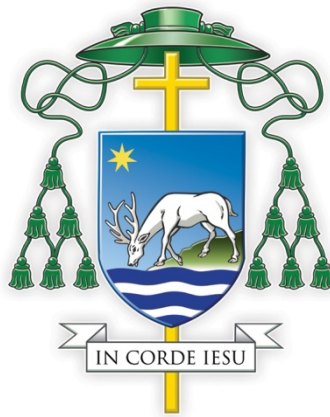


BISHOP OF PORTSMOUTH

Rt. Rev. Philip A. Egan BA, STL, PhD



MESSAGE FROM BISHOP PHILIP

to the Clergy and People of the Diocese of Portsmouth
about the proposed 'Assisted Dying Bill'
and a Holy Hour of Prayer on Thursday 17th July 2014

The proposed Assisted Dying Bill

1. On Friday 18th July 2014, Lord Falconer's Assisted Dying Bill is due to be given a second reading in the House of Lords. The Bill proposes making it legal for a doctor to assist someone to commit suicide by supplying them with lethal drugs. At present, suicide itself is not illegal, but it is a grave criminal offence to encourage or assist another person's suicide. The Bill, if it became law, would allow doctors to enable some terminally ill patients to end their own lives and thus make assisted suicide a normal feature of clinical practice. Lord Joffe proposed a similar Bill a few years ago in 2006. It was rejected by Parliament, although ever since, as if by design, high-profile cases continue to attract media attention. The present Bill leaves it unclear whether, after a doctor has supplied the drugs, it would be lawful for another to assist a patient self-administer the drugs. Is Lord Falconer's Bill a prelude to a much darker ambition, the legalisation of euthanasia, so-called 'mercy killing'? Euthanasia is where a doctor him-/herself administers the lethal drugs. Euthanasia is now legal in three European countries (Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg), where, I am told, death-rates by euthanasia are rocketing, not least among the mentally ill and among children, and where the organs of those euthanatized can be harvested.

A Call to Action

2. I urge the clergy and people of our diocese, and everyone of good will, to do all they can to resist this Bill, with its deadly and morbid trajectory.

For more information about this Bill, see www.catholicnews.org.uk/assisted-suicide-information.

I would encourage everyone to write to peers in the House of Lords to express their strong opposition to this Bill. For help on this, see www.catholicchurch.org.uk/Home/Featured/Assisted-Dying-Bill/Contact-a-Peer.

Above all, I plead with everyone in the diocese to gather for a Holy Hour of Eucharistic Adoration and prayer, the night before the Bill is debated, that is, on Thursday 17th July 2014. Some resources have been sent to the parishes to assist with this (see also below).

Questions people ask

3. Why should we oppose this Bill? After all, should not everyone have a right to die, that is, to decide when and how they die? Why should the dying be forced to stay alive and suffer? If it is legal for British people to go to Switzerland for assisted suicide, why should they not be able to get help at home?

The cultural context: secularism

4. Please bear with me a moment. For the context of this Bill is the secularism now ascendant in our British society and culture. Secularism is a philosophy, attitude and/or way of life that seeks human betterment chiefly through material means, based on debate and a moral code explicitly without the 'sacred canopy' of religion. Secularism strictly separates Church and State, religion and public affairs. Indeed, it seeks to drive religion out of public and political debate and to treat religion as a private matter of spirituality and domestic ritual. By 'ring-fencing' religion in this way, secularism unwittingly dissolves the foundations of public ethics and deprives social life of the impetus needed to put the good into practice. It deprives society of its moral compass. As a consequence, vested interests, focus groups, legal precedent and law enforcement increasingly determine public morality, and this often leads to restrictions, in the name of equality, on personal religious freedom and public expressions of religion.

Britain has been moulded over many centuries by the Christian faith. Even today, our underlying values are still largely Christian. Christianity has given us richly developed notions of truth, justice and love, derived from the natural law and Christian morality, and these continue to steer public life, even if in recent times, with the demise of religious practice, such values are more attenuated. The argument here, however, is that secularism cannot offer a solid or secure alternative. We need to resist the totalitarian ambitions of secularism to 'privatise' religion and to replace religion in the public square with itself. Secularism cannot ground a flourishing, free and pluralist, society and culture. Only Christianity can do that. Secular principles, such as tolerance, decency and freedom of choice, which are overwriting Christ's teaching on self-sacrificing love, are more nebulous. They are 'plastic.' They can be moulded into whatever powerful persons and vociferous pressure-groups desire. These values – which in fact are derived from fundamentally Christian values – are too flimsy a basis for social cohesion within a truly pluralist society. Instead, as Baroness Varsi and other government ministers have argued, we need stronger glue. We need to strengthen our core Christian values and to strengthen the Christian patrimony upon which our culture has been built. If we fail to do this, our society and its values, our great British culture with all that it has achieved, will unravel.

How secularism enables a redefinition of what it means to be human

5. My point is this. Secularism has opened a space in which alternative versions of what it means to be human can now vie for acceptance. The Assisted Dying Bill is typical of a whole raft of legislation over the last decades that little by little, consciously or unconsciously, has enabled an alternative anthropology or understanding of the human person to develop. Each law passed contained the

seeds of its own extension. One thinks here of such landmarks as the legalization of abortion (1967), the Human Embryology and Fertilisation Act (1990), the redefinition of marriage (2013), and now assisted suicide. What will come next? Is it too fantastical to think of babies by design, eugenics for all, involuntary euthanasia to shorten lives no longer valued, cloning and so on? This is a brave new world. This is not the natural way of life we have treasured. This is not the Christian understanding of the sacred dignity and infinite value of human life, marriage and the family. It is in fact a dark world. It is the 'culture of death' that St. John Paul II spoke of in *Evangelium Vitae* (65-66).

Ethical and practical reasons for opposing this Bill

6. There are many reasons why we should oppose this Assisted Dying Bill. If passed, it would put vulnerable people at risk, putting pressure on the old, the very sick, the unloved to end it all, rather than to 'become a burden.' It would be the triumph of despair over hope, as if society were saying to the dying person, it would be better for everyone if you were dead. It would increase the opportunity for relatives with financial and other interests to manipulate the dying into requesting suicide. Changing the law might help a few strong-minded people do what they will, but it could easily put the vast majority at enormous risk. The Bill contains few clear safeguards, proposing instead a code of practice to be developed in time. It is a Pandora's Box. Once exceptions are made, however well intentioned, the law becomes merely a line in the sand that can be easily crossed and hard to defend. As any police officer who has tried to talk down a suicidal person from a high building will attest, the natural human instinct is to prevent suicide. There is no 'right to die', regardless of how vociferous the euthanasia lobby might be. The law as it stands is clearly understood and widely accepted: it is not permitted deliberately to help bring about another's death.

Why as Catholics we oppose this Bill: suicide is a grave offence against God

7. As Catholics, the chief reason we should oppose this Bill is because suicide is a grave offence against God. It breaks the Fifth Commandment, 'You shall not kill' (Ex 20: 13). Life is God's gift to us and He is our sovereign Master. We are obliged to accept the gift of our life with gratitude to Him and to preserve it for His honour and for our salvation (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2280f.). We are the stewards, not the owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. Our life is not ours to dispose of. Suicide contradicts the natural inclination of every human being to preserve and perpetuate his/her life. It is gravely contrary to a proper love of self. It does grave harm to others and invariably leaves loved ones feeling devastated, guilty or angry. It offends a love of neighbour, because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family and nation, to which we have obligations. It raises anxiety about the supernatural destiny of the one who has committed suicide. Moreover, voluntary co-operation in a suicide is contrary to the moral law and if this Assisted Dying Bill is passed, it would put many doctors in an impossible dilemma of conscience.

Legalising assisted suicide would lead to a catastrophic collapse of respect for the infinite value of each human life and every human person, no matter how weak, vulnerable and 'useless.' Arguably, this is happening already thanks to the legalisation of abortion. The present proposals logically follow on.

Assisted living, not assisted dying: uniting our sufferings with Christ

8. Recently, Pope Francis said that “even the weakest and most vulnerable, the sick, the old, the unborn and the poor are masterpieces of God's creation, made in His own image, destined to live forever, and deserving of the utmost reverence and respect.” Life from conception to natural death is God's gift. It is sacred. As Catholics, we believe in assisted living not assisted dying. The Church supports high-quality care for the weak, the vulnerable and the dying. A true Christian disciple faces the sufferings and trials of this world through, with and in Jesus Christ the Master. This is why we should work lovingly for the truly dignified and generous care of the elderly and terminally ill. Moreover, as Catholics, we are taught to pray for a happy death, a death in a state of grace, aided by the sacramental care of Mother Church and supported, as was the Lord Himself, by family and friends. We never know “the day or the hour” nor the circumstances in which the Lord will summon us to judgment and our eternal reward. We accept whatever death the Lord has prepared for us, conscious that united with Christ, all our sufferings and sickness can be of enormous value as an oblation for self and for others. In a word, a good death is a natural death in God's time.

The Holy Hour on 17th July: meeting Christ the Perfect Human

9. This is our noble Catholic vision. This is why I wish to invite you, on Thursday 17th July, to meet Jesus for a special Hour of Eucharistic Adoration, to ask His protection of human life in its end stages. Even if you are unable to join the community for this Holy Hour, please at least pay a visit to the Blessed Sacrament that day. In meeting Jesus, the Son of God, in the Holy Eucharist to receive His love and life, we are also contemplating the Perfect Human Being. Jesus is the One who shows us in His humanity the Way to true happiness and human flourishing. He calls us to live not for self and for transient goals, but for God and for the love of others. When you meet Him, please pray that Parliament will firmly reject this Bill. Pray too for the terminally ill, and for the generous and selfless doctors, nurses and medical staff who care for them. Pray for those who will die today. Pray for any relatives presently looking after a dying loved one. And pray for our country, that through the intercession of the Blessed Mother, there may be a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. May the Holy Spirit rouse up deeper faith and strengthen our Christian patrimony. May the Holy Spirit guide all our politicians and policy-makers with their onerous and challenging responsibilities,. May the Holy Spirit endow us with great wisdom and lead us along the paths of an authentic humanism.

With my prayers and best wishes,
In Corde Iesu,

+Philip

11th July 2014,
Feast of St. Benedict, Patron of Europe