



PASTORAL LETTER FOR WEEKEND OF 29th Sunday, 19/20 October 2024

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I write to you about a serious matter. A bill has been introduced in Parliament which, if passed, will allow doctors to supply lethal drugs to people with an incurable illness, in effect physician-assisted suicide.

In today's readings we are reminded that Jesus Christ entered fully into our suffering. "It is not as if we had a high priest who was incapable of feeling our weakness", the letter to the Hebrews reminds us (Hebrews 4; 15). Jesus knew the reality of suffering and death from the inside. He gave His life for us all. Our experience of death and dying takes place against this transcendent horizon. We believe every person is made for God and called to be with God forever.

All human life is sacred. This message is not just for people of faith, but for all people of goodwill, because the proposals for physician-assisted suicide are not just contrary to the dignity and sanctity of life, they pose grave dangers to vulnerable people. Cherishing life means building a society where every person is included and the diversity of individuals is not seen as a burden.

If the bill were to become law, the experience of countries such as Canada, Belgium, Netherlands and some parts of the USA, shows that the most vulnerable very quickly feel at risk. In Oregon, often suggested as a model by proponents of assisted suicide in the UK, over 47 per cent of those who accept it cited being a burden on family, friends and caregivers as a reason. Belgium has extended an initial permission to adults, to allow voluntary euthanasia of children. It has seen some extraordinary individual cases – euthanasia for anorexia nervosa, euthanasia for someone who regretted gender reassignment, euthanasia of twin brothers who feared losing their sight.

Supporters of the bill will say that these cases are not possible under the proposed law in our country. Yet the history of such legislation shows that once permission is given for one set of circumstances it will soon be extended. We should not only be concerned

about this “slippery slope” in the proposed law. Nor should supporters of the bill try to see our opposition as a merely religious matter. The deeper question is the inherent dignity of every person, especially in relation to those who are disabled, elderly or vulnerable. If, as a society, we facilitate suicide for certain categories of people – in this case those who are terminally ill – and seek to prevent suicide of others – the healthy and the young – then what we are ultimately saying is that some lives are less worthy than others.

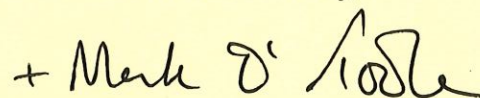
Those who argue for a change in the law say it is about dying, not about other vulnerable people. However, in framing their arguments, they appeal not to the reality of someone’s approaching death. They speak rather about the alleged indignity of being dependant on another, or of reduced mental capacity, or the fear of being a burden on family and friends. But to say, as a society, that these are intolerable would ultimately be to condemn every disabled, elderly and vulnerable person. It would open the flood gates and put huge pressure on the most vulnerable. There would be a sense that there was a duty to die. Many would feel insecure about the future and conclude that they are a burden on loved ones and the health service.

The new bill marks a very serious moment for our country. It raises serious questions about what sort of society we want to be. Especially of concern is whether we will continue to promote a proper care of the dying, and of those who are vulnerable through disability or age. We must treasure and value these individuals among us. Our countries have such a rich tradition of care for the dying. We should invest more in such care.

It is good to see that those opposed to a change in the law includes a diverse group of medical professionals (especially, but not only, from the field of palliative care), disability rights organisations, researchers, carers and a range of other concerned institutions and individuals.

I urge you write to, or email, your local MP, to express your concerns about the bill. There is information on the *Right to Life* - <https://righttolife.org.uk> - website and poster of how to do this. Thank you and please pray for me.

Yours devotedly,



Most Rev Mark O’Toole
Archbishop of Cardiff-Menevia