



Diocese of Plymouth
From the Office of the Bishop

Ref: BMOT/1002

PASTORAL LETTER FOR WEEKEND OF 12TH/13TH JULY

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The Bishops of England of Wales agreed that we would write to our dioceses about a very important matter. Next Friday in the House of Lords there will be a debate about a proposed new law, tabled by Lord Falconer. This law would allow doctors to supply lethal drugs to people whom they have diagnosed as terminally ill, and whom they believe to have 6 months or less to live, so that these drugs can be used for purposes of suicide. This is effectively physician-assisted suicide even if the supporters of the bill call it by the less shocking term “Assisted dying”.

In today’s reading from the letter to the Romans, St Paul speaks of the ‘groaning’ of the whole of creation, as “we wait for our bodies to be set free.” I have often thought of that text in accompanying those who are dying. St Paul also reminds us that the sufferings of this present life “can never be compared to the glory, as yet unrevealed, which is waiting for us.” Our experience of death and dying take place against our belief in a transcendent horizon; we believe that every person is made for God and called to be with Him forever.

Our faith teaches us that all human life is sacred. Respecting life means that every person must be valued for as long as they live. Whilst we believe every person should be given appropriate treatment in their suffering we do not always use extraordinary means to extend life at all costs. At the same time it is not acceptable to deliberately put an end to the lives of the disabled, of the sick or of dying people. The Catechism of the Church reminds us of this when it says, “It is God who remains the sovereign master of life. We are the stewards, not owners of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of.”

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.

If this bill were to become law, it would change our society dramatically. We need only look at the meteoric rise in deaths from euthanasia and assisted dying in countries like Belgium and the Netherlands, which introduced this legislation several years ago. Belgium has pioneered the taking of organs from those who have died in this way and more recently demanded that the law be changed to allow voluntary euthanasia of children as well as adults. 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 – but 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 practical or financial burden on family and friends. But to say, as a society, that these are intolerable would ultimately to condemn every disabled, elderly and vulnerable person. It would open the flood gates and put huge pressure on these individuals, too, to seek such ‘assisted dying’. It would make many of us feel insecure about our future and whether we, too, would be pressured not to be a burden.

This country has such a rich tradition of care for the dying. We should invest more in such care. Thankfully modern medicine, too, can deal with most forms of physical pain and distress. We all have the greatest compassion for someone in mental anguish who takes their own life. The law already has the discretion to deal compassionately and sensitively with the difficult case where someone, after repeated pleading, has reluctantly helped a loved one to end his or her life. That is a totally different situation from a state-sponsored licensing system for assisted dying.

The proposed legislation poses real threats to the equality of all people and the ongoing need of end-of-life care in our society. 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, pro-life groups and faith communities, as well as individual activists, researchers, carers and a range of other concerned people.

We must work with such individuals to promote a culture of life rather than in promoting a sense of hopelessness for people in very difficult circumstances. Always we must seek to protect those who are most vulnerable, especially the terminally ill, the disabled and the elderly. We must treasure and value these individuals among us. If you felt able I would be grateful if you wrote to your local MP or to a Member of the House of Lords, expressing your concern about the proposed bill. Especially, I ask for your prayer at this time that we will show, as a society, that we cherish life in all its vulnerability by rejecting this proposed legislation.

I thank you for your attention and I ask you to remember me in your prayers.

Yours devotedly,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Mark O'Toole .". The signature is written in a cursive style with a plus sign at the beginning and a period at the end.

Rt Rev Mark O'Toole
Bishop of Plymouth