

28th Sunday (B)

13th October 2024

‘The imminent and awful threat of euthanasia’

Wis 7: *wisdom more priceless than gold* Ps 89: *make us know the shortness of our life that we may gain wisdom of heart*
Heb 4: *Word of God alive and active*
Mk 10: 17–30: *Go and sell everything you own*

ARCHBISHOP’S HOUSE — WESTMINSTER, LONDON



**Pastoral Letter on Assisted Suicide
12/13 October 2024**

My brothers and sisters,

This Wednesday, 16th October, a bill will be introduced to Parliament proposing a change in the law to permit assisted suicide. The debate will continue for a number of months, in society and in Parliament, before a definitive vote is held there. This puts in the spotlight crucial questions about the dignity of human life and the care and protection afforded by our society to every human being.

As this debate unfolds there are three points I would like to put before you. I hope that you will take part in the debate, whenever and wherever you can, and that you will write to your Member of Parliament.

1. The first point is this: Be careful what you wish for.

No doubt the bill put before Parliament will be carefully framed, providing clear and very limited circumstances in which it would become lawful to assist, directly and deliberately, in the ending of a person’s life. But please remember, *the evidence from every single country* in which such a law has been passed is clear: that the circumstances in which the taking of a life is permitted are widened and widened, making assisted suicide and medical killing, or euthanasia, more and more available and accepted. In this country, assurances will be given that the proposed safeguards are firm and reliable. *Rarely has this been the case.* This proposed change in the law may be a source of relief to some. But it will bring great fear and trepidation to many, especially those who have vulnerabilities and those living with disabilities. What is now proposed will not be the end of the story. It is a story better not begun.

2. The second point is this: a ‘right to die’ can become a ‘duty to die.’

A law which prohibits an action is a clear deterrent. A law which permits an action changes attitudes: that which is permitted is often and easily encouraged. Once assisted

suicide is approved by the law, a key protection of human life falls away. Pressure mounts on those who are nearing death, from others or even from themselves, to end their life in order to take away a perceived burden of care from their family; for the avoidance of pain; or for the sake of an inheritance.

I know that, for many people, there is profound fear at the prospect of prolonged suffering and loss of dignity. Yet such suffering itself can be eased. Part of this debate, then, must be the need and duty to enhance palliative care and hospice provision, so that there can genuinely be, for all of us, the prospect of living our last days in the company of loved ones and caring medical professionals. This is truly ‘dying with dignity.’ Indeed, the radical change in the law now being proposed risks bringing about for all medical professionals a slow change from a ‘duty to care’ to a ‘duty to kill.’

3. The third point is this: being forgetful of God belittles our humanity.

The questions raised by this bill go to the very heart of how we understand ourselves, our lives, our humanity. For

people of faith in God - the vast majority of the population of the world - the first truth is that life, ultimately, is a gift of the Creator. Our life flows from God and will find its fulfilment in God. ‘*The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord*’ (Job 1:21). To ignore or deny this truth is to separate our humanity from its origins and purpose. We are left, floating free, detached, in a sphere that lacks firm anchors or destiny, thinking that we can create these for ourselves according to the mood of the age, or even of the day.

The clearest expression of this faith is that every human being is made “*in the image and likeness of God.*” That is the source of our dignity and it is unique to the human person. The suffering of a human being is not meaningless. It does not destroy that dignity. It is an intrinsic part of our human journey, a journey embraced by the Eternal Word of God, Christ Jesus himself. He brings our humanity to its full glory precisely through the gateway of suffering and death.

We know, only too well, that suffering can bring

people to a most dreadful state of mind, even driving them to take their own lives, in circumstances most often when they lack true freedom of mind and will, and so bear no culpability. But this proposed legislation is quite different. It seeks to give a person of sound will and mind the right to act in a way that is clearly contrary to a fundamental truth: our life is not our own possession to dispose of as we feel fit. This is not a freedom of choice we can take for ourselves without undermining the foundations of trust and shared dignity on which a stable society rests.

As this debate unfolds, then, I ask you to play your part in it. Write to your MP. Have discussions with family, friends and colleagues. And pray. Please remember: *(i) be careful what you wish for; (ii) the right to die can become a duty to die; (iii) being forgetful of God belittles our humanity.*

May God bless us all at this critical time.

+ Vincent Nichols

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster

Having heard the clear words of Cardinal Vincent, I'd like to add a few brief points, including some *Christian responses* to arguments we might hear in support of assisted killing/suicide.

1. The first is a simple re-iteration of the prohibition enshrined in venerable Judaeo-Christian teaching in the 10 Commandments: "*Thou shalt not kill.*" Jesus repeats many of those key commandments, today, in the Gospel, as He reminds the rich young man how to live this life in view of holiness and therefore of eternity. It is the *perennial teaching of the Church*, consistent with Judaism and indeed many other faiths, that it is God who gives life, and that God who deems when to take it. Our life is not in our own gift — it is *God's gift to us*; we live a human, and therefore spiritual and immortal, life thanks to God's gift of the *soul* when we were conceived. Our soul is created for eternity, for dwelling with God; and it is His precious gift to us. We do not have the right to decide when to cut our ties with this earthly existence. We are *not* masters of this; instead we *submit to God's will* in this. Therefore we do not take innocent life: neither our own in suicide, nor another's in murder, abortion, or euthanasia.
2. Sometimes you'll hear it said (I heard it on the radio news 2

evenings ago): “we wouldn’t even treat our animals like this,” referring to the putting-down of seriously sick pets, for example. True, we may, without sin, put a dog to sleep, or an injured racehorse, or a dangerous boar etc. We can kill animals for their flesh to eat — this is permitted. But this is because animals are *not* spiritual, immortal beings like each and every human person, however small, frail or sick. Animals aren’t endowed with an immortal soul and therefore their life does not carry with it the sanctity that every human life has. We have a perspective that is greater than this life, and in which some degree of suffering can be purgative. Suffering is *not* ‘redemptive’ for animals. One ought not to mindlessly abuse creation, or be cruel to animals, as that would be to mistreat a beautiful part of God’s creation; but one is not duty-bound to protect an animal’s life in the way one is with a human life *until its natural end*.

3. Palliative Care, well-administered, and the heroic Hospice movement, is the right answer to those in serious pain as illness or old age encroaches. “Dying with dignity,” as euthanasia is sometimes (deliberately) mis-framed, cannot be equated with being prematurely killed; *dying with real dignity* is to be cared for with the loving presence and

consolation of family and friends and nursing practitioners, making use of non-lethal (palliative) medicine administered to make one comfortable in the face of pain, even if that means increasing the dose as necessary. This is utterly different from deliberate killing of the patient. Who on earth would wish our valiant medical profession to have their hands soiled by becoming deliberate dealers in death — administering or supplying lethal injections! — instead of healing and caring and making comfortable? Where euthanasia comes in, the Hospice movement shrivels away.

4. The Cardinal asks us to *engage with our MPs in writing*. Immediately on announcement of this Bill, I wrote our MP a quick e-mail. Now, sadly, the MP for Holborn & St Pancras is the Prime Minister himself, who for a decade or more has made clear his pro-euthanasia views; so I am doubting that he is going to be changing his mind in a hurry. Nevertheless, he needs to hear what we say about the horror of this threatened legislation. And many of you will live in other constituencies, whose MP may be open to persuasion that assisted suicide is truly a path not to venture down. So, please do write. I’ll make available to you soon [a tool from SPUC](#) that allows you to write a message to your MP easily.