



PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP
 appointed to be read
 in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth
 on Sunday 27th October 2024, the Thirtieth of the Year.

THOU SHALT NOT KILL

Dear Brothers and Sisters,
 especially those of you caring for the sick and the dying,

I write to you today because our country faces a lethal choice. I refer to the bill before Parliament to legalise what they call 'assisted dying.'¹ I prefer to call it what it is: assisted suicide, helping someone to kill themselves.

"Thou Shalt not Kill"² is an instinctive principle written into every human heart. It grounds the laws that govern every civilised society on earth. It is the teaching of all major religions, and it is fundamental to Christian morality and Catholic social teaching. Yet now, campaigners such as Exit International, want to change this natural law to allow killing in certain circumstances,³ and they are conducting an intensive campaign in the media, highlighting sad cases and making emotional pitches.⁴ Yet if we yield to this and permit killing, we will cross a line from which there is no return. Like using nuclear weapons, once deployed, it's too late; there's only escalation.

Let me give you four plain reasons why assisted suicide and euthanasia is wrong. These four reasons will make appeal to reason, that is, to common sense.⁵ I will then add two more reasons that also appeal to faith, demonstrating why assisted suicide and euthanasia is gravely immoral and an offence against God.

1. The option of assisted suicide would put intolerable pressure on the most vulnerable, upon the sick, the elderly, the disabled, the dying. It would tempt them to feel they are an increasing burden and a financial drain on their family and others. They might start thinking "It would be best to die." In other words, the right to die inescapably becomes a pressure to die and then a duty to die.⁶

2. To legalise assisted suicide would completely undermine palliative care and the work of care-homes. It could spell the end of hospices, since it would be cheaper, more efficient and far less trouble to kill someone - or to permit them to kill themselves - than to care for them and generously fund their care.

3. Assisted suicide would place an unacceptable and immoral demand on medical staff, expecting them to become accessories to killing.⁷ It would undermine the trust we normally place in doctors, making us suspicious of their motives. It would darken the atmosphere of medical wards that care for the elderly, and it would inexorably lead to euthanasia, the right to make another person die, when difficult cases need to be decided by consultants and relatives, or lawyers and the courts. No wonder this legislation is opposed by more than eight out of ten doctors and palliative care specialists.⁸ It's easy to imagine a future in which doctors advise patients to seek suicide rather than treatment.

4. If the legislation is passed, even with the strictest limits for now, the thresholds of eligibility will keep creeping forward to cover ever more categories of persons such as the mentally ill, those with depression or dementia, the severely disabled, sick babies and so on.⁹ There are no limits, and fixed safeguards are unworkable. No government could guarantee that there will not be 'mission-creep'. In fact, mission-creep is happening in every jurisdiction where it is legal. In Canada, for instance, 5% of deaths are now by lethal injection. In other words, suicide, free on the NHS, would in time become socially acceptable, normal.

So four plain reasons. I could give more.¹⁰ Let me now add two further reasons why as Catholics we believe assisted suicide and euthanasia is gravely sinful.¹¹

5. Suicide is a grave offence against God, against neighbour and against self.¹² Against God, Who in His love has given us the gift of our life and so life is not ours to dispose of.¹³ - Against neighbour, because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family and others to whom we have obligations. - Against self, because it contradicts "the natural inclination of the human being to preserve and perpetuate" his or her life.¹⁴ Suicide is totally against the Law of Love.¹⁵

6. Suicide is gravely sinful, although the Church has always shown compassion to those who take their lives, relying on God's mercy whilst wondering whether they were fully aware what they were doing. Yet when suicide is done with full knowledge and deliberate consent, as in an assisted suicide, it is clearly a mortal sin.¹⁶ Likewise assisting someone kill themselves is also a mortal sin. How would it be possible to offer them the Last Sacraments? What justification could a person make when, crossing into eternity after death, they meet the living God to give an account of their life – and their death?

Campaigners for assisted suicide argue persuasively. They say that people should have the right to make their own decisions about their lives, including when and how they die. Yet, civilised societies also have to balance personal freedom with public safety. This is why, for instance, our roads have speed limits.

They also argue that the terminally ill fear severe pain, the loss of dignity and poor quality of life; assisted suicide would offer a quick end to physical suffering and emotional distress. Yet, modern medicine means that no-one need die

without dignity. It is true: frailty, pain and infirmity are a difficult trial. Yet, thanks be to God for the amazing advances medical science has made. Britain is a leader in palliative care with methods and drugs that have the capability to manage pain right to the end. Care is the answer, not suicide. We should continue investing in good palliative care. Care shews real love for the terminally ill, acknowledging their eternal value.¹⁷

Again, some argue that euthanasia for those with little hope of recovery would ease up the pressure on the health services. For instance, a politician in Guernsey has recently argued that “considerable savings could be realised” if assisted suicide were introduced.¹⁸ Yet, as this demonstrates, legalising assisted suicide and euthanasia only opens the door to abuse. If we love and care for someone, efficiency and cost-saving is irrelevant. How can helping someone to kill themselves be compassionate? This is evil masquerading as kindness.

Dear Diocese of Portsmouth, I am asking you to mobilise! Pray earnestly that our legislators will see sense. Correct those who use the double-speak of ‘assisted dying’; call it what it is: ‘assisted suicide.’ Don’t be seduced by the emotionalism of the media. Say a prayer for the terminally ill and for those who care for them. Speak out. Lobbying MPs works, so I attach a letter for you to send to your MP to ask him or her to vote against this sinister proposal. All you need do is to write your name and address on the top and put it in the post. Or you can download it from the diocesan website and send it by email.

In today’s Gospel the blind beggar cried “Son of David, Jesus, have pity on me”.¹⁹ That is our prayer too. To permit killing is wrong. It is to cross the line. It would be a shift of historic significance. It would be to capitulate to the very ideology Britain fought against in the Second World War.²⁰ So we need to mobilise. We need to campaign, and I’ve provided you with materials to help. And we need to pray. Please attend Mass; please undertake fasting; please offer every day a Decade of the Rosary for God’s grace and mercy and for the demise of this bill.

In Corde Iesu
+Philip
Bishop of Portsmouth

¹ Kim Leadbeater (Labour, Spen Valley) ‘Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill’, a Private Members Bill that had its first reading in Parliament on Wednesday 16th October 2024. See <https://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2024/october/mps-present-private-members-bills-to-parliament/> (October 2024)

² Ex 20: 13

³ Exit International was founded in Australia 1997 by Dr Philip Nitschke under the name the Voluntary Euthanasia Research Foundation (VERF). The organisation rebranded in 2001 as Exit International. Its founder has developed the “Sarco” pod, a capsule enabling a person to kill themselves. Like a gas chamber, when the user lies back and the lid is closed, s/he presses a button to activate it. Four litres of liquid nitrogen flood the cabin, causing the oxygen level to drop to less than 5% in under a minute. The user will at first feel a bit dizzy but then rapidly lose consciousness and die. See www.exitinternational.net (October 2024).

⁴ Well known here are the views of Dame Esther Rantzen, the journalist and BBC presenter: see for instance, ‘Esther Rantzen urges MP lobby over assisted dying’ (BBC 16th October 2024) on <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cgj4q4z3yvdo> (October 2024)

⁵ I am reminded here of something the Second Vatican Council said: “Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or wilful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working

conditions, where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others like them are infamies indeed. They poison human society, and they do more harm to those who practise them than to those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonour to the Creator” (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 27.)

⁶ In Oregon, 46% of those requesting suicide cite the sense of burden on family: see D. Lawson ‘Euthanasia is for Pets. Humans are Different’ *The Sunday Times* (October 13, 2024) 20

⁷ “Most people regard life as something sacred and hold that no one may dispose of it at will, but believers see in life something greater, namely, a gift of God's love, which they are called upon to preserve and make fruitful... No one can make an attempt on the life of an innocent person without opposing God's love for that person, without violating a fundamental right, and therefore without committing a crime of the utmost gravity” Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on Euthanasia*, (Vatican: 5th May 1980) ‘I. the Value of Human Life’: see www.vatican.va. (October 2024)

⁸ Lawson ‘Euthanasia is for Pets. Humans are Different’

⁹ This is already happening even before this bill has been passed. There are many who feel its scope is too limited. See, for example, *Right to Life News* ‘Labour MPs call to extend assisted suicide to people without terminal illness’ (8th October 2024): <https://righttolife.org.uk/news/labour-mps-call-to-extend-assisted-suicide-to-people-without-terminal-illness> (October 2024)

¹⁰ For an extensive exploration of the ethics of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide, see N. Pier Giorgio Austriaco *Biomedicine and Beatitude* (Washington, CUA Press: 2011)

¹¹ St. John Paul II gives an extensive treatment of assisted suicide and euthanasia in his Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae*. See John Paul II *Evangelium Vitae* (London, CTS: 1995) 64-67: available online at www.vatican.va (October 2024)

¹² See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* – henceforth *CCC* - (London, CTS: 2016) 2281 and 2325.

¹³ “We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us” *CCC* 2280.

¹⁴ See *CCC* 2281.

¹⁵ “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Mt 22: 37-40)

¹⁶ “Mortal sin is a radical possibility of human freedom, as is love itself. It results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God's forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ's kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom has the power to make choices for ever, with no turning back.” Even so, “although we can judge that an act is in itself a grave offense, we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God” *CCC* 1861.

¹⁷ “Whatever you did to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me” (Mt 25: 40)

¹⁸ ‘Assisted dying would help States save money’ *Guernsey Press* (August 30, 2023):

<https://guernseypress.com/news/2023/08/30/assisted-dying-would-help-states-save-money/> (October 2024)

¹⁹ Mark 10: 46-52.

²⁰ In summer 1940, the Church in Germany became aware that the Nazi regime was quietly euthanatising sick and disabled people. Despite the grave personal risk such actions against the regime incurred, they resisted. Priests and bishops preached against it from the pulpit; people took to the streets in protest, and the Pope publicly condemned the policy: “This procedure is hailed by some as a manifestation of human progress, and as something that is entirely in accordance with the common good. Yet who that is possessed of sound judgment does not recognize that this not only violates the natural and the divine law written in the heart of every man, but that it outrages the noblest instincts of humanity?” (Pius XII *Mystici Corporis Christi* [Rome 1943] 94: available online at www.vatican.va). Our response today must be no less heroic and no less bold than that of the German church in the 1940s. We need to oppose this attack on the dignity of human life and on the lives of our most vulnerable brothers and sisters. We must consistently and forthrightly oppose it.