

A PASTORAL LETTER FROM ARCHBISHOP LEO CUSHLEY CONCERNING PROPOSALS TO LEGALISE “ASSISTED DYING”



To all the faithful of the
Archdiocese of St Andrews & Edinburgh

Edinburgh, Sunday 16 October 2022

My dear friends,

The Scottish Parliament is considering proposals to legalise what is being called "assisted dying". This is really a form of euthanasia that would allow a doctor or medical professional to help someone commit suicide. If this law is passed, it will further erode how our society values human life, which has already been grievously undermined by legal abortion.

Those who advocate euthanasia often portray it as a purely personal choice which should be a private matter between individuals and their doctors. Yet the truth is that our decisions and actions are never wholly private. Everything we do affects everyone else for good or ill. As St. Paul reminds us: "The life and death of each of us has its influence upon others" (Romans 14:7). Our attitudes to life at its very beginnings and at its very end will inevitably shape how we approach life at every stage in between, and this in turn will affect what sort of society we build together. The laws we make about how we treat those who are approaching death will gradually inform how human life is valued in every respect.

The consequences of legalising assisted suicide are likely to be serious and wide-reaching, as experience in other countries already shows. In Canada euthanasia was legalised in 2016 with strict limits, applying only to adults who are terminally ill and in exceptional physical pain. Yet within just five years it has been extended to include those with chronic illnesses or disabilities. In Belgium and the Netherlands, the scope of legal euthanasia has been further widened to include people suffering from mental illness and, most alarmingly, this can even apply to teenagers and children.

Legalising euthanasia would send a message across the whole of society that lives which entail physical and mental suffering, or severe physical disabilities, can be considered no longer worth living. This is not only wrong in principle—for no life is worthless—it could also have a terrible and tragic effect on vulnerable individuals at their weakest moments. The availability of "assisted dying" in our hospitals and care homes will damage the relationship of trust between medical professionals and their patients, and it will also undermine trust within families. Those who are frail and elderly easily think that they are a

burden on others and may feel pressurised into asking for help to end their lives.

Someone does not need to believe in God in order to understand these points, but in the light of our faith we can see even more compelling reasons to reject euthanasia. Life is God's gift to each one of us. "We are stewards, not owners, of the life that God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of." (CCC2280/1).

It is true that the prospect of terminal suffering can provoke deep dread, even leading to despair, and we are by no means uncaring about the distress endured by those who face debilitating diseases. But the desire to take death into our own hands, however understandable, is really a failure of trust in divine providence, and is "contrary to our love for the living God." (CCC2281).

Dying is, ironically perhaps, the most significant event of our lives, because it is in dying that we most clearly confront the fact that we are fragile creatures, dependent upon others, and that we are not ultimately in charge of our own destiny. This is why we have a special sacrament of anointing by which the Lord offers us his own strength and peace at such times of existential crisis, and it is also why we should surround the dying with our prayers and the best of care.

There have been considerable advances in end-of-life palliative care in recent years, but there is a real risk that the introduction of legalized suicide would gradually diminish funding for hospices with their wonderful and dedicated staff. It is also likely to reduce investment in further important research into pain management. The overwhelming evidence is that persistent requests for assisted suicide are extremely rare when people's physical, psychological, social, and spiritual needs are adequately met.

This is an issue of the utmost gravity that affects all of us individually and collectively. St. John Paul II warned that: "It is urgently necessary, for the future of society ... to rediscover those ... moral values which ... express and safeguard the dignity of the person: values which no individual, no majority, and no state can ever create, modify, or destroy, but must only acknowledge, respect, and promote." (Evangelium vitae 71)

I urge you, as a matter of Christian duty, to make known your opposition to this legislation by signing the Petition in your Church. The arguments for legalising "assisted dying" are presented as being compassionate and humanistic, but if this law is passed it will undoubtedly further undermine the value our society places on human life, profoundly affecting how we treat those who are suffering and how we care for those who are dying.

Sincerely in the Lord,



+Leo Cushley

Archbishop of St Andrew and Edinburgh