

CONSCIOUSNESS OBJECTION

Nuns take state of New York to court over assisted suicide law

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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Can the law compel someone to participate in an act that goes against their religious beliefs and natural law? In theory, the answer is clearly no, but in practice, this is precisely what the state of New York is attempting to do with its assisted suicide law.

The legislation was signed in February 2026 by Governor Kathy Hochul of the Democratic Party, and it is due to come into force on 5 August. Barring certain exemptions, the new law effectively compels virtually everyone — including healthcare facilities run by religious congregations — to participate in assisted suicide procedures. However, some intend to resist this diktat.

On 17 July, four congregations of nuns and Monsignor John Barres, Bishop of the Diocese of Rockville Centre (a suffragan diocese of New York), represented by lawyers from the [Becket Fund for Religious Liberty](#), filed a lawsuit against the state, which will now be examined by the relevant district court. Bishop Barres and the four religious communities — the Carmelite Sisters for the Elderly and the Sick, the Little Sisters of the Poor, the Dominican Sisters of St Rose of Lima (or of Hawthorne) and the Missionary Sisters of St Benedict — have stated that they cannot under any circumstances participate in assisted suicide due to their Catholic faith.

The historical account that the appellants provide at the start of the 109-page [appeal](#) in support of their inability to take part in an intrinsically evil act such as assisted suicide is of great significance. "For centuries, Catholics in New York have put their faith into practice by caring for the sick with dignity and respect, often regardless of their ability to pay. Since at least 1849, when Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton [**the Sisters of Charity of New York, founded by St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, Ed.**] opened the city's first Catholic hospital to care for New Yorkers during the cholera epidemic, such care has been provided through explicitly Catholic institutions guided by religious faith in serving one's neighbour.

The appellants have put into practice the teaching to see Jesus himself in their patients, applying the principle that they should 'to cure if possible, and always to care'. The Catholic faith leads the nuns to accept death as the natural end of life, thereby rejecting excessive medical intervention and withdrawal of treatment. Instead of recognising their commitment to helping the most vulnerable, the petition emphasises that the State of New York is forcing the nuns to choose between 'renouncing their religious beliefs regarding the sanctity of life or facing substantial fines and penalties'.

The law, due to come into force on 5 August 2026, is titled the *Medical Aid in Dying Act*. This is based on the requirements set out in the *Palliative Care Information Act*, which has been in force in New York State since 2011. This Act obliges doctors to provide information on both palliative care and the end-of-life options available to patients diagnosed with terminal illnesses. This confirms that, in the US as well as much of the West, advocates of euthanasia are infiltrating and contaminating the field of

palliative care in various ways, step by step constructing a legal framework that not only 'permits' assisted dying, but actually compels participation in it. After all, the situation is very similar to that surrounding abortion, with conscientious objection under constant attack.

In the State of New York specifically, appellants complain that the combined effect of the aforementioned two laws may compel them, under threat of civil or criminal penalties, to engage in actions contrary to their conscience. These include providing patients with information and advice regarding assisted suicide, allowing employees to participate in assessing patients' suitability to receive lethal substances, referring patients to healthcare professionals and facilities willing to assist them in taking their own lives, and being unable to take disciplinary action against employees who provide such information in breach of the religious institution's principles. Furthermore, there are exemptions that do not apply to the Missionary Sisters of St Benedict and the St Joseph's Care Home. Under the Maid Act, these institutions must allow their residents to commit suicide on their premises. Another possible consequence, depending on the exemptions linked to their respective legal status, is that they may be obliged to make false statements on death certificates by stating that death was caused by illness rather than by the lethal substance ingested by the patient.

The lawsuit argues that the new law violates the First Amendment to the Constitution in five ways, particularly with regard to the free exercise of religion and freedom of expression.

In short, the stage is set for a long legal battle in the tradition of those that have characterised the early 21st century in the United States, with individual believers and entire congregations having to resist – and still resisting – regulations such as the 'contraceptive mandate' approved under Obama and various LGBT 'rights'. The plaintiffs certainly have no intention of giving up. 'We will never submit to New York's culture of death,' said Monsignor Barres, describing assisted suicide as 'a grave moral failure' and adding: 'Christ, the Divine Physician, calls us to accompany the sick and dying with compassion, not abandon them to death. The court should protect this age-old mission.'