

END OF LIFE

United Kingdom, Catholic Church mobilises faithful against assisted suicide

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Catholics and Christians in the UK are being repeatedly urged by Cardinal Vincent Nichols and the Catholic bishops of England and Wales to take a vocal and active stand against a new attempt to introduce assisted suicide as a form of medical treatment in

the UK. The **Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill**, introduced to Parliament last 16 October by Labour MP Kim Leadbeater, (sister of **MP Jo Cox** murdered 8 years ago for political motives) will begin the debating stage in the House of Commons on Friday 29 November.

Almost a decade ago a similar Bill was overwhelmingly defeated in 2015 by 300 votes to 118, partly because the proposal was met with significant opposition from the Catholic Church and other religious denominations. Since then much has changed in British society and politics on the issue, but not for the Catholic Church which on the contrary has drawn on its past experience from 2015 to wager an even more persuasive and timely response against this latest attempt to introduce assisted suicide.

Cardinal Nichols, Primate of England and Wales, was the first to initiate a campaign of information even before the Bill's presentation to Parliament. In a brief but incisive **pastoral letter** to all Christians he identified the three-points to guard against concerning assisted suicide: "be careful what you wish for, a right to die can become a duty to die and being forgetful of God belittles our humanity". "**Write to your MP**. And pray", he added. An invitation to kneel in prayer with him and his fellow bishops followed last November 13, "to pray for the dignity of human life in the light of the upcoming vote on Leadbeater's Bill", he said.

A second wave of appeals came from individual Bishops in their diocese. Archbishop John Wilson of Southwark, Bishop Richard Moth of Brighton and Arundel, and Chair for the Department of Social Justice, Bishop Paul Swarbrick of Lancaster and Bishop Patrick Joseph McKinney of Nottingham were particularly vocal. These initiatives culminated in the document that the Bishops' Conferences of England, Wales and Scotland published on 15 November. In the joint statement (Scotland has a separate bishops' conference from England and Wales), the bishops reaffirmed the Catholic belief in human dignity and the sanctity of life, again calling on the faithful to strongly oppose the introduction of assisted suicide in the UK.

Bearing in mind the low profile generally kept by bishops previously on important high profile end-of-life cases like those of Alfie Evans, Archie Battersbee and more recently Indi Gregory - this mobilisation against the assisted suicide law is even more relevant.

Notably, MP Leadbeater's Bill is very similar to the legislation that did not pass the ballot in 2015 and re-proposes the same old arguments to overcome the resistance of those defending life: the right of people with terminal illnesses to end their lives 'on

their own terms' and the provision of strict limits to avoid possible abuse and attempts at coercion: life expectancy of six months or less, the possibility for the patient to take the fatal drugs alone, and the authorisation of two doctors and a judge.

But the Bishops, in their joint-statement, stress the incompatibility between the ideology of self-determination - which claims the right to decide on one's life and death - and the Christian response to life as a gift from God to be treated with compassion always and especially when death is near. Compassion at the end of life means 'never giving up on anyone or abandoning them. It means loving them to the natural end of their life, even if and when they struggle to find meaning and purpose'. The bishops defend the vulnerable in society who are at risk of becoming the victims of this proposed legislation and call for better funded palliative care in the UK, the only true medical response to terminal suffering. Their statement also states that assisted suicide raises serious issues of principle that cannot be ignored including the fear that a law that allows for assisted suicide could lead some to experience 'a duty to die'.

The timing of MP Leadbeater's Bill is not incidental either. The public debate on assisted suicide resurfaced earlier this year during the election campaign in the UK. Before he became Prime Minister, Keir Starmer said he was in favour of changing the law to decriminalise assisted suicide and that if he was elected he would ensure time in parliament to debate the issue and allow a free vote. Under the Suicide Act 1961, assisted suicide is a criminal offence in England and Wales punishable by up to 14 years in prison. But Crown Prosecution Service guidance says charges are less likely if the victim had reached a voluntary and informed decision and the suspect was wholly motivated by compassion, among other things. Passing the Bill would satisfy this criteria according to its supporters.

The last time MPs voted on assisted suicide in 2015, the Conservatives had a majority in Parliament which suggests that now Labour has a large majority, the outcome should be the opposite. But surprisingly, the government finds itself split. Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson revealed last Monday, she will vote against the bill to legalise assisted dying. "I continue to think about this deeply. But my position hasn't changed since 2015," she said. Health Secretary Wes Streeting, has already confirmed his opposition to the bill while admitting the U.K. National Health Service is "broken." Other important ministers who have said they will vote against the Bill include Deputy PM Angela Rayner, Justice Secretary Shabana Mahmood and Business Secretary Jonathan Reynolds. While, rather curiously, Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who initially said he was in favour of the law, won't disclose how he intends to vote. A number of

MPs have complained that as Kim Leadbeater published her Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill late on November 11, giving them less than three weeks to prepare to vote on such a controversial matter. Moreover, the split over the issue is said to be causing considerable friction within the government.

While the debate continues to rage on, the stories and experiences of those **European countries** where assisted suicide has already been introduced reminds us that the “slippery slope” (the gradual loosening of the law’s boundaries) is real. It is no coincidence: as Cardinal Nichols wrote in his pastoral letter, “a law that approves an action [assisted suicide] changes attitudes and that which is permitted is often and easily encouraged”.