**Bishops mobilise Church against assisted dying Bill**

Catholics must actively oppose the latest attempt to legalise assisted suicide, the bishops of England and Wales have said in a letter to the laity.

The Assisted Dying Bill of Baroness Meacher represents an “unprecedented attack on the sanctity of life” which must be combatted actively through prayer, lobbying and witness, the bishops said.

The attempt to mobilise the Church against the Bill came in the form of a letter from Auxiliary Bishop John Sherrington of Westminster, the lead bishop for life issues, which will be sent to all parishes.

The same day, Dignity in Dying – the group formerly known as the Voluntary Euthanasia Society – announced that the Second Reading of the Meacher Bill will take place in the House of Lords on October 22.

In his letter, Bishop Sherrington made clear that the Bill sought to permit the taking of human life by assisting in the suicides of people deemed to be terminally ill and approaching death.

“Those in favour of the bill are making good use of language to confuse the issue and call it a compassionate and caring approach to redefine the question and obscure the actual reality and consequences of such legislation,” he wrote.

He then quoted the observation of Pope Francis that “physician-assisted suicide is part of a ‘throwaway culture’ that offers a ‘false compassion’ and treats a human person as a problem’”.

The bishop said: “Importantly, at this stage we need to argue the dangers of the introduction of assisted suicide, which include the safety of people who are vulnerable due to external pressures, and the later liberalisation of the law which is evidenced by other countries which have introduced assisted suicide.

“Many voices from the world of disability-rights and other allies are also very fearful and fighting this bill. Whilst there are clear arguments to support Catholic teachings, it is important to remember that this position is not only a matter of faith but also human reason.”

He encouraged all Catholics to pray over the coming weeks that the Bill would be defeated and to write to peers and MPs, particularly if they have strong personal stories and testimonies based on experience.

He also asked Catholics “to engage and share stories and reasons against the Bill on social media”.

Briefing papers will be available on the bishops’ conference website to assist Catholics as the work of the Church develops.

Baroness Meacher, chair of Dignity in Dying, said the potential of her Private Member’s Bill “to transform all our lives and deaths for the better is colossal”.

She said: “It strongly supports access to the best possible end-of-life care alongside this option, which would enable terminally ill, mentally competent people whose suffering is beyond palliation to die on their own terms, should they wish.

“It would also provide invaluable peace of mind and control to countless more who may never avail themselves of this option but would be comforted by the simple fact of its existence. This Bill is an insurance policy against intolerable suffering which benefits us all.”

The Bill proposes limiting assisted suicide by the provision of lethal drugs to mentally competent adults with six months of life remaining, subject to approval by two doctors and High Court judge.

But doctors from countries where assisted suicide or euthanasia is already legal this week warned Parliamentarians that once such a law was introduced it would soon widen in scope.

Dr Brick Lantz, an Oregon physician and the Oregon state representative for the American Academy of Medical Ethics, said patients often died long and complicated deaths after taking.

“Do not legalize physician-assisted suicide,” he told a meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Dying Well. “Do what is right for your country.”

Ontario palliative care specialist Dr Leonie Herx, past president of the Canadian Society of Palliative Care Physicians, said euthanasia in Canada has spread to non-dying disabled people and the mentally ill in just five years, and campaigners were now championing euthanasia for children.

Doctors who dissented from euthanasia were bullied and marginalised, she said, and many were abandoning palliative medicine.

“Do not be deceived,” she said. “Administering death is cheaper and easier than providing care and it will quickly become the solution for any form of human suffering, as we have seen in Canada,” she said. “It is not a slippery slope, it is a logical progression.”

Professor Timothy Devos, a haematologist in Leuven, Belgium, said that palliative care had been radically undermined by two decades of legal euthanasia

Many Belgian doctors were now afraid to propose palliative care in case they were accused of erecting a barrier to euthanasia and infringing the legal rights of patients who seek it, he said.

Prof Devos said: “Be aware that once the door of assisted suicide/euthanasia opens, it will always open more.

“That’s the way it has gone in Belgium and in all the countries, without exception, where euthanasia has been legalised. You would be deluding yourselves if you imagined that it would be any different in the UK.”

The Bill is expected to reach the House of Commons next year.

In May Bishop Mark Davies Shrewsbury issued a pastoral letter inviting Catholics to oppose the Bill and last week Bishop Patrick McKinney of Nottingham recorded a video message urging Catholics in his diocese to do the same.

(from *The Catholic Herald*)