

Assisted Dying Bill – Interview with Bishop Sherrington (22 March 2025)

When the Private Members' Bill seeking to legalise assisted suicide passed its Second Reading and vote back in November 2024, it felt like a dark day - one that could lead to a fundamental shift in our culture regarding end-of-life care. Not only that, concerns were aired and remain that the most vulnerable could be coerced into a bad choice, or be made to feel a real burden on those around them.

Now in the latter weeks of the Committee Stage ahead of the Report Stage, attention is also falling on the myriad of problems with this Bill. The Bishops are opposed in principle but, in addition, the Bill clearly generates more questions than it answers.

Will the hospice movement be allowed to continue to punch above its under-funded weight to deliver the end of life care services it is heralded for? Will palliative care be invested in and bolstered in all areas of England and Wales? Will healthcare professionals, many Catholic, be afforded the freedom of conscience not to participate in an assisted death? Will the trusted doctor-patient relationship be forever changed? If made law, would this grease the 'slippery slope' pulling other vulnerable groups into scope? Clearly this is something we have witnessed in other jurisdictions where assisted suicide is legal.

Safeguards were promised. A key assertion was the need for a judge to sign-off on a request for an assisted death. No longer necessary, apparently. However you cut it up and amend it, this remains a flawed bill that has not been given the time, and indeed scrutiny, required to legislate on a crucial matter of life and death.

Interview

Now is the time to act ahead of the Third Reading and vote at the end of April or start of May. You can still make your voice heard to oppose assisted suicide. "All is not lost, and we must continue to fight this Bill, especially for the Third Reading," says Bishop John Sherrington, the Lead Bishop for Life Issues. "It's really important that people write to their MPs. You can either write a letter, use the cards that come from Right to Life, or use the e-campaign link. But we need to tell MPs of our concerns and why we're opposed to this Bill."

Bishop Sherrington was speaking on our Catholic News podcast. The 25-minute interview, that you can listen to or watch here, sees Bishop Sherrington talk about our objection to the Bill in principle, and goes into detail about the fundamental problems with this piece of proposed legislation.

Church teaching on the dignity and value of all human life is well documented. Poignantly, Bishop Sherrington gives an interesting personal insight, explaining his passion for pro-life work:

"I remember when I was about seven, my grandmother had a massive stroke and then lived with us. In those days, the treatment for strokes was not as good as it is now. She had mobility, but she'd lost a lot of her speech, though her mind was very sharp. Of course, she'd become very frustrated in trying to express herself. As a child, I spent a lot of time with her, trying to help her to do that. Those family relationships for all of us are so important. They shape who we become. Having grandparents who were sick and loving them made me want their lives to continue, made me want to be with them and accompany them.

"The idea of ending a life because of suffering is just incomprehensible when I think of them. One grandmother was on her own, my other grandparents were together, but the way they managed each other's old age was lovely to see and the love between them. So that must have begun a process in me of getting more concerned about the sacredness of life and the gift of life."

Visiting Lourdes also had a profound impact on Bishop Sherrington:

"Having been to Lourdes a number of times with pilgrimage groups, the Across Trust, and then the diocese, working with people who were terminally ill or perhaps living with disability, again made me value their lives as well as the gifts that I have. So all that shapes how we see life. That's deepened in the light of the Gospel and the gift of life that God gives us and understanding the sacredness of life in the knowledge that Jesus shared in our human life fully."

It's also particularly poignant during Lent for Catholics, not just here in England and Wales, but around the world, to consider how we accompany people through suffering and ill-health. Millions are looking to Rome's Gemelli Hospital, praying for Pope Francis as he continues his treatment for double pneumonia.

"At the moment, I think Pope Francis wants to be a witness to suffering and living with his medical conditions. But we see him making the most of each day - phoning the parish community in Gaza, for example. He's loving and concerned for them," says Bishop Sherrington. "He's still sending us messages of encouragement and the importance of loving and living with suffering. So the Pope gives great encouragement to those who are sick or dying at this time."

So, keep your foot on the gas and be vocal in your opposition to the bill, that's the message from Bishop Sherrington who stresses the importance of sharing human stories and experiences:

"We've got all our reasons, we've got our arguments, but the use of the stories, the use of the experiences - especially from people who have nursed a sick member of the family, and those who have been present at that sacred moment - that needs to be shared because it's significant and it's holy, and it's important for us to recognise that."

Take action

You still have time to make your voice heard and oppose assisted suicide becoming law in England and Wales. Use Right to Life UK's simple and easy web form to ask your MP to vote 'no' to assisted suicide at Third Reading. <https://righttolife.org.uk>