End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill

Rev James Naughton

I am writing on behalf of myself and the parishioners at St Athanasius RC church to express our opposition to the End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill. As a parish we have participated in a number of events to the Bill and have discussed the matter in the church. The vast majority of parishioners have expressed their opposition to the general principles of the bill and are concerned that if enacted the Bill would have a detrimental impact on Scottish society. As Catholics we believe absolutely in the right to life but we also understand and appreciate that people wish to die with dignity. That is why we are such keen supporters of the hospice movement and in our parish we regularly make donations to St Andrews Hospice in Airdrie so that they can provide much needed and valued support to people suffering from a terminal illness.

The bill talks of allowing three categories of people to have the right to end their life; those with a terminal illness, those who are permanently physically incapacitated and who find life intolerable. In my role as parish priest I am often in the position of supporting people. In some cases it is as they come to terms with a terminal illness. It is often a traumatic event and they can be in considerable pain. Some days they will be particularly low and may think life is not worth living often because of pain. I know of one case where a lady in this situation asked her husband to consider taking her to the continent where she could be assisted to die. Her husband had agreed but asked her to wait a week so that she was absolutely certain. In that week the lady was taken into St Andrews Hospice, her medication was reviewed and as a result her pain was brought under control. She never mentioned going to the continent again and they enjoyed a further 10 or so months as a family. Time they would have lost but for the effective intervention of the hospice. Many other families talk of how supporting a family member through a terminal illness has brought an intimacy to their relationship, a sharing of bad times as well as good and that has given them strength to carry on. I have also people in my parish who are permanently physically incapacitated. That is of course a very wide group of people. I am Chaplin to Victoria Park School, a school for children with special educational needs. Many of these children have real and profound needs. I have watched them as they have grown up and developed as individuals. In my 9 years at the school there have been considerable advances in the way in which they are able to be cared for and the progress that many have made is remarkable. As they make the transition to adult life the challenges will continue but so too I hope will the advances that are made. That is why this category is too wide as is the qualifying criteria “finds life intolerable”. That is a very subjective criteria and a great deal of evidence would suggest that people usually contemplate suicide when they are suffering from depression, the bill does not appear to be clear what would happen in that situation or if it would even be detected.
At the moment charities and Governments across the world are working to find cures for illnesses such as cancer, MS or Parkinson’s disease. What evidence has been sought as to the impact on that research or the compelling need to find a cure for these illnesses should this Bill become law? What impact will the bill have on the advances that have been made by people with a permanent physical impairment? This is an important concern that has been raised by parishioners that the progress that has been made in recent years has the potential to be hampered by the provisions in the Bill and there has been little work done to assess these concerns.

The right to life is a fundamental human right, It is the view of my parishioners and myself that this Bill would remove that fundamental right, would be detrimental to society and urges the Parliament to vote against the general principals of the Bill at stage 1.

Rev James Naughton
Parish Priest
12 May 2010