NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

British faith leaders warn Parliament not to legalize assisted suicide

Simon Caldwell Catholic News Service | Jul. 16, 2014
Manchester, England

The leaders of Britain's faith communities have united to warn Parliament against the "grave error" of legalizing assisted suicide.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols of Westminster and Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury joined 21 other of the most senior Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Zoroastrian and Jain faith leaders to protest the Assisted Dying Bill.

The legislation scheduled to be debated Friday in the House of Lords was designed to abolish the crime of assisting a suicide by allowing doctors to supply lethal drugs to people expected to die within six months and who are mentally competent.

But in an open letter Wednesday, the faith leaders said the bill would allow doctors to decide if some people are "of no further value" and that it would place vulnerable and terminally ill people at "increased risk of distress and coercion at a time when they most require love and support."

"This is not the way forward for a compassionate and caring society," said the letter, signed also by Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis of the United Hebrew Congregation of the Commonwealth and Shuja Shafi, secretary-general of the Muslim Council of Britain.

"While we may have come to the position of opposing this bill from different religious perspectives, we are agreed that the Assisted Dying Bill invites the prospect of an erosion of carefully tuned values and practices that are essential for the future development of a society that respects and cares for all," the letter said.

The show of unity among faith leaders followed three senior Anglicans saying they supported assisted suicide.

Lord George Carey, who served as archbishop of Canterbury from 1991 to 2002, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, former archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, each said they were in favor of the practice.

Anglican Bishop Alan Wilson of Buckingham also has declared his support for "assisted dying," making him the first serving bishop of the Church of England to say that doctors should be legally permitted to help their patients to commit suicide.

"Today we face a central paradox," Carey wrote July 11 in the *Daily Mail* newspaper. "In strictly observing the sanctity of life, the church could now actually be promoting anguish and pain, the very opposite of the Christian message of hope."

The Church of England has opposed the bill on grounds of "patient safety, protection of the vulnerable and respect for the integrity of the doctor-patient relationship." This position, according to the Church of England's website, is consistent with successive resolutions against assisted suicide by its governing General Synod.

In his *Daily Mail* piece, Carey announced that he would dissent from such policy and vote for the bill.

"The fact is that I've changed my mind," he wrote. "The old philosophical certainties have collapsed in the face of the reality of needless suffering."

On July 13, Tutu expressed similar sentiments in a column for *The Observer*, a London-based Sunday newspaper.

"I revere the sanctity of life -- but not at any cost," the Nobel peace laureate wrote. "Yes, I think a lot of people would be upset if I said I wanted assisted dying. I would say I wouldn't mind, actually."

However, Welby called the Assisted Dying Bill "dangerous." He argued that an assisted suicide law would exert pressure on the sick, disabled and elderly to "stop being a burden to others."

"What sort of society would we be creating if we were to allow this sword of Damocles to hang over the head of every vulnerable and terminally ill person in the country?" he asked in a July 12 article for *The Times* newspaper.

The Catholic bishops of England and Wales have encouraged the laity to write to politicians to ask them to oppose the bill.

Catholic Bishops Mark Davies of Shrewsbury and Mark O'Toole of Plymouth have issued pastoral letters condemning the bill, and Bishop Philip Egan of Portsmouth has announced that he will open the churches of his diocese for a "holy hour" of prayer and adoration Thursday, the eve of the debate, in the hope that the legislation will fail.

Carey was nominated to Britain's second political chamber on his retirement, but 26 Anglican bishops, including Welby, sit there as "Lords Spiritual" and have a right to vote.

If the bill progresses successfully through the House of Lords, later this year it will go to the House of Commons, where lawmakers will be allowed to vote according to their consciences.

Under the 1961 Suicide Act, the offense of assisting a suicide is punishable in Britain by up to 14 years in prison.

Source URL (retrieved on *05/02/2016 - 08:39*): http://ncronline.org/news/global/british-faith-leaders-warn-parliament-not-legalize-assisted-suicide