News



Nurses provide care to a patient in 2015 at the palliative care unit of a hospital near Paris. (CNS/Reuters/Philippe Wojazer)

Caroline de Sury

View Author Profile

OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Paris — January 31, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

French Prime Minister François Bayrou wants to split an "end of life" bill to separate the issue of "active assistance in dying" from that of palliative care — a proposal seen as a smart attempt to give a pro-life approach to the legislation without antagonizing rival political sides.

"Those are two subjects that need to be examined separately by parliament," Bayrou said Jan. 27 on the French television channel LCI. "We need to be able to vote on these subjects differently if we feel like it."

Launched at the initiative of French President Emmanuel Macron, the current "end of life" bill provides for the authorization of "medical aid in dying," which is presented as a continuation of palliative care.

The French National Assembly was set to vote on the bill on June 18, 2024. But a few days earlier, on June 9, Macron surprised everyone by announcing the dissolution of the French Parliament, following the victory of France's far-right Rassemblement National, or National Rally party, in the European Parliament elections. All legislative work in progress was halted.

Since then, the new National Assembly has been extremely divided between the various political parties, among which the extreme right and left have a strong influence, to the point of paralyzing the country's political life.

It was against this backdrop, and after the failure of a first government, that Macron appointed Bayrou as prime minister on Dec. 13. Bayrou is known as a practicing and devout Catholic who combines his faith with a view to strictly separate political and religious spheres.

Advertisement

In recent weeks, he has received urgent requests from left-wing members of Parliament and Macron's Renaissance party to put the "end of life" bill back on the agenda.

But Bayrou made a surprise move Jan. 21, announcing his intention to split the bill in two. He stated that he wanted to dissociate the reinforcement of palliative care, the need for which is unanimous, from "active assistance in dying," which is much more controversial.

On Jan. 22, the president of the French bishops' conference, Archbishop Eric de Moulins-Beaufort of Reims, hailed this decision as "a wise measure," speaking on France's Info radio station.

"We are placing a lot of emphasis on palliative care and the development of palliative care in France as in all countries," the archbishop said. "It's not just about opening a few extra beds, but about inserting a culture of palliative care into the training of doctors and caregivers in general, from the very beginning of their training."

Moulins-Beaufort stressed that what makes people want euthanasia is the fear of pain at the end of life and that with proper training, financing and access to palliative care "the question of the fear of the end of life that inhabits everyone would be posed in very different terms if we really had the pain management that we are capable of today."

Supporters of "active aid in dying" said they fear that a vote on this could fail if it is separated from palliative care. On Jan. 26, nearly 200 MPs and former ministers from the left and Macron's party called on Bayrou not to split the bill.

"Active medical aid in dying is an ultimate form of palliative care, in continuity with the care already provided," they wrote in an open letter published in the daily newspaper, Le Parisien, on Jan. 27.

"I am absolutely determined that the two questions can be examined," Bayrou replied on Jan. 27. "What I am saying is that they are not the same questions," the prime minister said in the LCI station interview.



Pope Francis meets with French President Emmanuel Macron at Ajaccio Napoleon Bonaparte Airport during his one-day visit to Ajaccio, France, Dec. 15, 2024. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

In France, palliative care is currently accessible to only half the patients who need it, due to a lack of competent staff and adequate hospital structures. The nursing staff concerned had expressed fears that the adoption of a law on "active assistance in dying" would jeopardize their funding.

"For me, palliative care is not a matter of 'right' but of an imprescriptible 'duty,'" Bayrou said. "Our whole society, our whole health care system, has a duty to offer assistance to all those who are so ill," he said of the first part of legislation concerning palliative care.

The second part of the bill, which talks about assisted suicide, "gives rise to extremely strong debates of conscience on both sides," Bayrou continued, referring explicitly to "euthanasia" and "assisted suicide," which are currently legally possible in Luxembourg, Germany, Spain, Austria, Portugal, the Netherlands and Switzerland,

but not in France. "Should our society organize this?" Bayrou asked.

Bayrou referred to the "deeply moving" testimony, aired on French television Jan. 26, of a famous French sports journalist, Charles Biétry, who suffers from an incurable disease called Charcot-Marie-Tooth, which causes nerve damage.

"There are people suffering from this disease who consider that this 'right to die' should be favored," Bayrou pointed out. "But others, suffering from the same disease, do not share this view. And many consider that they do not know where they stand."

"Since I announced my plan to split this bill in two, a very large number of people have told me that they agree with me, from one end of the political spectrum to the other," Bayrou pointed out.

Asked about the impact of his Christian convictions on the issue of euthanasia, which he is personally not in favor of, the new prime minister pointed out that "you cannot uproot what you believe from what you are, it is impossible."

France's prime minister concluded: "What influences the citizen in me on this subject? It is the family man that I am, and perhaps also the son that I was. We are touching on life, and the meaning of life."