News



Protesters hold a placard outside Parliament in London as British lawmakers debate an assisted suicide bill on Nov. 29, 2024. (OSV News/Reuters/Mina Kim)



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When British and French parliamentarians voted to press ahead with bills legalizing medically assisted suicide, the move disappointed Catholic groups who had lobbied hard against them.

Similar laws are already up and running in several European countries and being considered in others. If two more major states now enact them, it could confirm a continent-wide trend.

Yet with opponents vowing to fight on, such a prospect is far from certain.

"Driven by court judgments and political campaigns, assisted suicide is a live issue now," said Vincenzo Bassi, Rome-based president of FAFCE, the Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe. "But decisions on when death should come have always been managed discreetly between doctors and families. It shouldn't be handed over to judges and officials."

The Catholic jurist spoke as British and French members of parliament prepared for follow-up debates, after giving preliminary approval to assisted suicide bills in May.

In a National Catholic Reporter interview, Bassi said European Union leaders had no jurisdiction, under EU rules, over such issues at national level, but were now pressuring the bloc's 27 member-states to approve assisted suicide as a matter of human rights and the rule of law.

Assisted suicide and/or euthanasia is already allowed in Austria, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Switzerland, while debates on whether to legislate for both practices have also been staged intermittently in other countries.

Medically assisted suicide is also legal in Canada and 11 of 50 U.S. states and Washington, D.C., where moral and social trends often influence thinking across Europe. A similar bill was passed by the New York state Senate on June 9 and is on the desk of the governor.



A file photo shows disabled protesters against physician-assisted suicide silhouetted as they hold up a banner outside the U.S. Supreme Court. The New York Assembly passed a bill April 29, 2025, that would legalize medically assisted suicide in the state. State senators passed the Medical Aid in Dying Act 35-27 on June 9. (OSV News/Reuters/Jason Reed)

However, another campaigner who is against assisted suicide legislation told NCR the latest bills contained "profound flaws" and had aroused widespread unease. She urged opponents to continue urging parliamentarians to vote against them.

"Here in the U.K., proponents believed assisted suicide was inevitable — and that also seems to have been the view of our new Labour Party government," said Andrea Williams, CEO of Christian Concern and founder-director of Britain's Christian Legal Centre. "Yet Europe is looking increasingly out of step on this issue with the rest of the world, much of which has traditionally viewed our countries as guardians of good order and cannot comprehend what our parliaments are now doing."

In France, the bill giving terminally ill adult citizens a right to choose "aid in dying" was backed as a "law of fraternity" by the liberal government of President Emmanuel Macron, but delayed by the country's summer 2024 snap election.

Re-tabled this spring, it was passed in the National Assembly on May 27 by 305 votes to 199, with 57 abstentions.

However, critics have warned the bill violates medical norms and will fuel pressure on the elderly, sick and people with disabilities to end their lives. With conservative parties, including France's powerful National Rally, declaring opposition, it could be held up in the Senate upper house.

In the meantime, separate legislation improving palliative care has been backed by France's devoutly Catholic premier, Francois Bayrou.

In the United Kingdom, a "Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill," tabled by Labour MP Kim Leadbeater, will allow assisted suicide for terminally ill people over 18 with six months or less to live, who evidence a "clear, settled and informed wish to end their own life," without being "coerced or pressured."



Protesters hold placards as they gather outside the Parliament as British lawmakers debate the assisted dying law in London on Nov. 29, 2024. (OSV News/Reuters/Mina Kim)

The 43-page text, narrowly approved in November 2024 by 330 votes to 275, cleared its second parliamentary reading on May 16. A vote is expected to take place today (June 20) to determine if the bill will progress to the next stage.

However, while premier Keir Starmer and his powerful Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves, have personally backed the bill, members of their own center-left government are strongly opposed — including the key justice and health ministers, who have warned it will overburden the legal system and National Health Service.

Separate legislation to allow assisted suicide is under consideration in the devolved parliaments of Scotland and Wales, while a law permitting the practice for adults "reasonably expected" to die within 12 months was passed on March 25 in the autonomous Isle of Man.

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Despite such pressure, Williams thinks Leadbeater's bill could still fail.

"This is end-stage legislation, lacking kindness and compassion, and the way it's been pushed through Parliament so far is a terrible advert for anyone watching from outside," Williams said to NCR. "Although it deals with life and death, and would inflict a huge social upheaval, amendments haven't been properly debated and real concerns haven't been dealt with. At a time when many parliamentarians are newly elected, this measure simply won't withstand the test of history."

The Catholic Church's 1992 Catechism of the Catholic Church sanctions the refusal of "over-zealous" treatment for patients, including the terminally ill, provided their "reasonable will and legitimate interests" are respected.

However, the church has unambiguously condemned euthanasia and suicide, and any helping facilitate in them — most recently in *Samaritanus Bonus,* a September 2020 letter by Vatican's then-Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.



Cardinal Vincent Nichols of Westminster, England, is pictured May 19, 2022. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Not surprisingly, the latest laws have been vigorously opposed by British and French church leaders.

In February, Cardinal Vincent Nichols of Westminster, president of the English and Welsh bishops' conference, accused Starmer's government of being "deeply irresponsible" with regard to Leadbeater's bill, adding that no more than seven hours' debate had been allotted to it, compared to 700 hours assigned to a bill against fox hunting in 2004.

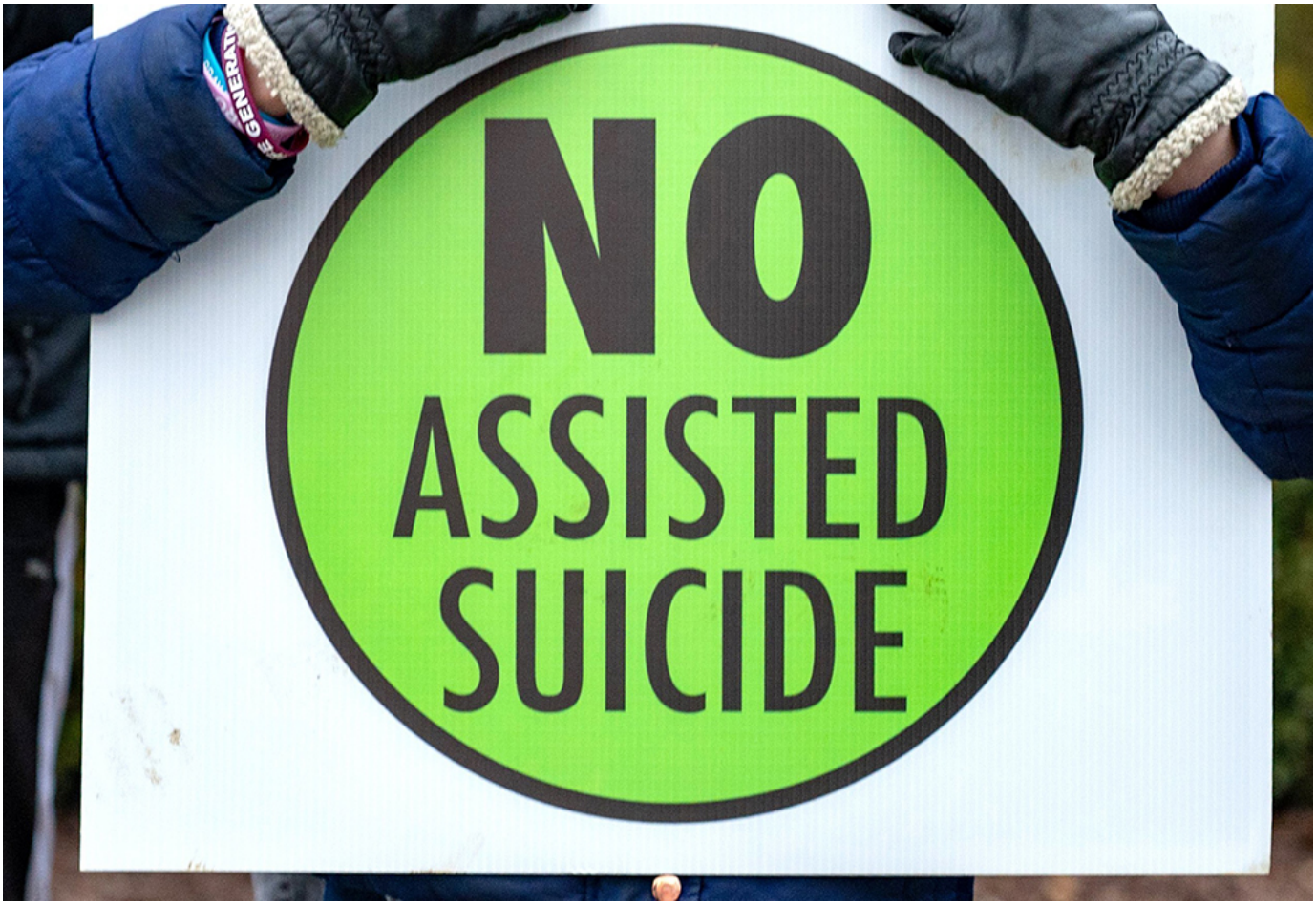
In an April pastoral letter, he warned the bill elevated "the autonomy of the individual above all other considerations," giving it "untold unintended consequences," and urged Catholics to write to their MPs expressing "principled

objection."

"Can MPs guarantee no medical practitioner or care worker would be compelled to take part in assisted suicide? Would this mean the establishment of a 'national death service'?" the cardinal asked of the bill, which has also faced firm opposition from other Christian denominations and faith groups.

"This is no way to legislate on such an important and morally complex issue. ... This measure is being rushed without proper scrutiny and without fundamental questions surrounding safeguards being answered," he said.

In France, similarly, the liberal Le Monde daily conceded that Macron's "aid in dying" bill had provoked a rare degree of mobilization by churches and religious communities, who'd voiced "clear and unequivocal opposition" through social media campaigns and public meetings.



A person is pictured in a file photo holding a sign against physician-assisted suicide. (OSV News/Catholic Review/Kevin J. Parks)

While many Catholic bishops have issued their own statements against the legislation, they also joined the Conference of Religious Leaders in France, or CRCF, in a definitive joint declaration in May, warning that it risked undermining their country's "social and ethical foundations."

Many health care professionals had expressed "dismay" that they might be "tasked with causing a patient's death," seeing it as a "radical transgression of their mission," the conference cautioned.

The very term, "assisted dying," masked the "true nature" of what was being proposed.

"Behind an apparent desire for compassion and supervision, this text brings a radical shift," said the declaration, co-signed by the bishops' conference outgoing president, Archbishop Éric de Moulins-Beaufort of Reims, and Protestant, Orthodox, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist leaders.

"Legalizing administered death will not signify progress, but an ethical, social and medical regression. … Describing it as 'natural' is an untruth that aims to numb consciences and weaken public debate," the declaration said.

Bassi is sceptical about the public impact of statements like this. He fears the growing use of human rights logic by assisted suicide supporters has diverted attention from practical concerns towards more "abstract notions and models."

Williams is adamant that church leaders should nevertheless remain firm. So is Catherine Robinson, spokesperson for the campaigning group, Right to Life UK.



A woman is pictured in a file photo holding up a sign during a rally against assisted suicide on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Ontario. (OSV News/Art Babych)

Experience from other countries, notably Canada, has shown how assisted suicide laws tend to expand from their initially restricted scope, Robinson told NCR.

They've also turned assisted suicide into a business, typified by Switzerland's now-famous Dignitas clinic, and created a "perverse incentive" to "push assisted suicide on patients to maximize profits."

"Introducing assisted suicide here would be a disaster waiting to happen, made potentially even worse if outsourced to the private sector," Robinson said to NCR. "Instead of being assisted to die via today's flawed and unworkable legislation, terminal patients should be helped and encouraged to live through improved palliative care and other forms of support."

For now, the acrimonious debate looks set to drag on.

In their joint declaration, French religious leaders accused supporters of assisted suicide of fueling "ethical confusion," and said its inclusion in their country's Public Health Code would "violate the Hippocratic Oath" and "distort medicine."

It also risked fueling "toxic guilt" in patients who feared "becoming a burden," the declaration noted, as well as a "worrying decline" in palliative care investment across the country, which became the world's first, in March 2024, to guarantee a right to abortion in its constitution.



Lawmaker Kim Leadbeater reacts during a demonstration in support of an assisted suicide bill, which she introduced, outside the British Parliament after lawmakers voted in favor of the law, in London on Nov. 29, 2024. (OSV News/Reuters/Mina Kim)

In Britain, critics have accused Leadbeater of packing the 23-member parliamentary committee which scrutinized her bill with pro-suicide MPs, while allowing little time for submissions by key experts and institutions.

One key safeguard, requiring all death applications to be approved by a high court judge, was scrapped in March, while dozens of amendments protecting the disabled and mentally ill were also rejected, prompting recent warnings about a lack of safeguards from Britain's Royal Colleges of Physicians and Psychiatrists.

In late May, Liverpool Archbishop John Sherrington, who leads on life issues for the English and Welsh Catholic bishops, warned the bill would cause "irreversible harm," by placing care-providing Catholic religious orders and hospices in "untenable positions" and enabling National Health Service and local officials to withhold funding from those which sought to opt out.

Williams thinks arguments like these have been largely ignored by those seeking to push assisted suicide at any cost.

Leadbeater's bill is by no means the first. At least a dozen others have been tabled over the last four decades before the U.K.'s Westminster Parliament and other regional legislatures; and if this one is voted down, another will take its place soon enough.

"Yet its rejection would also send a profound message internationally — that the direction of travel over this issue isn't predetermined," Williams said to NCR. "As Christians, we shouldn't be ashamed of our faith, particularly on life-and-death matters like this. We all face eternity — and catapulting people to eternity prematurely isn't a good idea. Those promoting such agendas now operate on a strategic global level, and those of us who are defending the civilised norms of life, marriage and family need to do the same."

Bassi agrees. The assisted suicide debate taps into profound contemporary anxieties, he thinks, about pain, loneliness, choice and free will.

Meeting in Rome on May 31, during the church's Jubilee of Families, Children, Grandparents and the Elderly, Catholic organizations like his unveiled plans for a new international federation, tasked with popularizing alternatives to the current "anti-life culture."

Bassi hopes Pope Leo XIV will give this his backing, enabling a much stronger Catholic voice to emerge in national and international debates.

"Given today's intergenerational imbalance, and the growing costs of the welfare state, people are asking why we should bother caring for the sick and elderly — whether it isn't easier and cheaper just to help them to die, rather than trying to build a community around them," he said to NCR.

"We need to offer positive models, lobby professionally and invest human and material resources in pro-life causes, as well as cooperating more effectively in proposing the solutions offered by Catholic social teaching," he said.