



"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful."

Pastoral letter from Bishop Alan McGuckian, SJ
Diocese of Down and Connor



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In this month of November, we Catholics turn our hearts to prayer for the faithful departed. Our Irish heritage has blessed us with a profound understanding that death is a natural part of life's journey. We speak of it openly, sharing both laughter and tears as we honour the memories of those who have gone before us. Through our cherished traditions - Requiem Masses, month's minds, anniversaries, and Cemetery Sundays - we find solace and connection with our departed loved ones.

While November's dedication to prayer for our faithful departed acknowledges our grief, we remain, above all, a people of hope. Our faith teaches us that death is not an ending but a transition - not a passing away, but a passing on to God and eternal life.

As we pray for those who have died, I feel called to address the crucial matter of death and end-of-life care. Our society faces important decisions about how we care for those nearing the end of their earthly journey. At Westminster MPs will vote on the Leadbeater assisted suicide Bill at Second Reading on Friday 29 November 2024, which demands our response as a Christian community. Together with fellow Irish Bishops, I invite you to reflect on the Church's essential teachings regarding end-of-life care.

Our Catholic faith proclaims that every human life possesses infinite dignity - a dignity that remains constant regardless of circumstance or condition. A society reveals its character through its treatment of its most vulnerable members: the terminally ill, people living with disabilities, and those approaching life's end. We all deserve care at every stage of life, and those who are dying have the right to holistic accompaniment that honours their dignity.



Those who advocate for assisted suicide often speak from genuine compassion, seeking to end suffering. Some argue that assisted suicide simply respects individual autonomy over one's life. However, when life is taken away, autonomy ceases entirely. It's important to note that the Church has never insisted on using extraordinary means to prolong life, nor does it require patients to accept unduly burdensome treatment. Yet, deliberately ending life prematurely eliminates any possibility of growth or healing and represents a failure of hope. As life draws to its close, spiritual care becomes paramount - which is why assisted suicide can never be the answer and must be firmly rejected by all God's people.

Saint Paul reminds us, "The life and death of each of us has its influence on others." This truth compels us to consider not just individual choices, but their broader impact on our community. Legislating for assisted suicide or euthanasia would undermine the confidence of terminally ill individuals who wish to be cared for and live life fully until natural death. Such legislation would fundamentally alter how we view and value human life, particularly affecting society's most vulnerable members. What our community needs is not assisted suicide legislation, but rather a renewed commitment to comprehensive care for those who suffer. We must work to ensure that quality palliative care services become more widely available in our hospitals, hospices, and communities.



We have to acknowledge that for some people the burden of carrying life-limiting conditions for years can seem to be almost impossible to bear. Still Christ gives us the conviction that, within the darkest moments we need, not death, but hope, love, and the unshakeable conviction that our lives remain precious, meaningful, and valuable, regardless of our circumstances. As your bishop, I urge our parish communities to reach out with practical support and spiritual accompaniment to those who suffer, ensuring no one feels they are a burden to others.



During this time of public discourse, I ask you to:

- Pray for those who are terminally ill and their families
- Support initiatives that enhance palliative and hospice care in our communities
- The Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill 2024-25 has its second reading on 29 November. It's crucial that MPs see that there is a large number of voters in each constituency who don't want this dangerous and extreme change to the law. We must actively oppose assisted suicide legislation, as the promised safeguards often prove temporary, and just as we witnessed with abortion law, what starts as a limited measure can rapidly expand and also arrive to our shores. I urge you to write to your MP to ensure your voice is heard
- Share the Church's teaching on human dignity with clarity and compassion. Parishes may wish to use resources from the Council for Life's "Through the Valley of Death" a warm and insightful reflection on how we accompany people living with terminal illness.



Many of us have accompanied loved ones in their final moments. These times can be very sad but often a blessing as there is an opportunity to express our love, to be reconciled, show our gratitude and say goodbye. Reflecting on the passing of my own family members, I'm reminded of the psalmist's words:

"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful."

Our priests and chaplains frequently share in this sacred privilege. Recently, one of our hospital chaplains described his ministry to me:

"As a priest, I've had the privilege of ministering to many people who were terminally ill or in great pain - physical, mental, or spiritual, some who had tried even to take their own lives. Often, the most important thing I could offer was simply to be there - to listen, to talk, to pray, and to let the person know that they mattered to me.

This is what God asks of all of us - to look after those who are suffering, to care for them, and to be present with them. We must let them know they are not alone and not a burden. We're with them, and God is with them too."

I extend my deepest gratitude to our chaplaincy teams and healthcare professionals who daily demonstrate their commitment to preserving and protecting life. Their vocation to care must be protected, including their right to follow their conscience in refusing to participate in actions that contradict the fundamental principle of protecting human life.



Most especially, I wish to acknowledge the many carers who devote themselves to looking after a relative or spouse, often at great personal cost. I want them to know that their tireless dedication and love provide an inspiring witness of faith to us all. We believe that this generosity will be richly rewarded by God.

At this time we face challenging discussions about life and death. We are invited to hold fast to our faith in God's unconditional love and our belief that every life, at every stage, has meaning and purpose. During this month of remembrance, we hold our departed loved ones in prayer. We pray for all those who are ill and approaching death, that they may find comfort in God's love and in our care.

The 'hour of our death' is immensely significant; that is why we repeatedly ask Our Lady; to pray for us "now and at the hour of our death". We ask her to guide us in protecting and cherishing the gift of life. She stood patiently at the foot of the cross and waited for death to come. Then, she witnessed her Son risen triumphantly from the dead. In these extraordinary times we have much to learn from her witness about the meaning of death and life.

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+ Alan McGuckian SJ

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