

Bishop John's Letter

Note: The following letter was written by Bishop John Guernsey to his diocese following the 2022 Life SUMMIT.

Dear Friends,

Jonah prayed to the Lord and said, "Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." (Jonah 4:3)

The prophet Elijah won a great victory over the prophets of Baal, but then he found himself overwhelmed by despair and a desire for God to end his life. Queen Jezebel was out to get him, and Elijah fled into the desert, hopeless and full of fear. He asked God for assisted suicide: he prayed that he might die. "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life" (1 Kings 19:4). Then he lay down and fell asleep, and you have to think that he was hoping he'd never wake up.

But God did not grant his request. Nor did God grant the requests of Moses or Job or Jonah when they all asked God for assisted suicide. They all wanted God to take their life, but God said no each time.

God opposes suicide, whether assisted or not. He cares deeply for those who are in pain. He has great compassion for all who suffer. But God is the author of life, and we belong to him. The Bible tells us, "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Our life is God's, and it is not ours to destroy. Throughout the Bible, suicide is portrayed negatively. King Saul of Israel disobeyed God and lost the anointing of the Holy Spirit, and then committed suicide rather than be captured by Israel's enemies. And Judas the disciple committed suicide after betraying Jesus.

In both cases, rather than turning to the Lord, they chose to end their lives in despair.

It is clear that the Bible's commandment against murder includes the murder of oneself.

I can't imagine a more central expression of our faith in Christ than the sanctity of life. Of course, there are other priority concerns, and our churches embody many of them.

But the value of human life is foundational. It is rock-bottom biblical truth. It is also a priority concern of our Church. The Anglican Church in North America put in our Canons from day one the directive that "all members and clergy are called to promote and respect the sanctity of every

human life from conception to natural death.”

These issues affect us all so deeply. Across our diocese, I see members of our churches and our communities who are wounded and grieving over past abortions, and they are struggling over end-of-life issues in their own families. They are so very vulnerable to this culture of death that is pressing in on teenagers and the elderly and others to take their own lives. And many know the lasting pain after a loved one has taken his or her own life.

This is not one of those issues where everyone in our society agrees on the goal and just disagrees, however sharply, on how to get there. No, there are forces with growing power that do not share our core conviction about life, and that is seen so very clearly in the push for assisted suicide, now legal in 10 states and the District of Columbia.

The supposed “right to die” often, perhaps inexorably, becomes a duty to die. In Canada, when assisted suicide was first legalized in 2016, the pressure on the vulnerable was immediately evident. Catholic scholar George Weigel recounts his experience in the church he attends in the summer. Three elderly members of that church had recently been diagnosed with cancer. Less than a year after the initial legalization of assisted suicide, the first thing each of these elderly women was asked after being told their diagnosis was, “Do you wish to be euthanized?”

Canada’s new law only permits euthanizing adults, but parents are already pressuring doctors to euthanize their children and the government is proposing euthanasia for so-called “mature minors.”

Wesley J. Smith is a bioethicist who was again this year one of the outstanding speakers at our Diocese’s annual Summit for Life. Smith has written: “Once one accepts the premise that suicide is an acceptable answer to the problems of human suffering and ennui, there are no boundaries that will hold for long.”

Wherever assisted suicide is legalized, purported safeguards are shown to be inadequate and even weak protections are methodically taken away. In 15 years, the Netherlands and Belgium went from euthanizing terminally ill adults, to euthanizing chronically ill adults, to euthanizing physically healthy adults who have lost the will to live, to euthanizing children, to killing those who have neither asked for euthanasia nor consented to it.

In Belgium, one study showed that one-third of euthanasia killings were done without a request or without consent having been given. Almost half of the nurses involved in euthanasia have admitted that they killed patients without consent, despite the fact that involuntary euthanasia is illegal in Belgium and that nurses are not allowed to perform even voluntary euthanasia.

Everywhere assisted suicide has been legalized, the supposed safeguards have been systematically removed. More and more pressure is being exerted on the vulnerable to end their own lives and on medical professionals to participate in the killing.

As followers of Jesus, we are ministers of love and compassion and healing for those who are in great pain, physically, emotionally, spiritually. But suicide is not the answer.

I say to all of us, young people, seniors, those facing great hardship or great pain: Do not succumb to the hopelessness of the culture of death. You are precious to the Lord and to the Body of Christ.

Let's renew our commitment to care for those who are weak and vulnerable: those in our own families, of course, and those in our church family; but we must also reach out in the community to those who are isolated and alone, whether it's the nursing home resident that no one ever visits, or the person battling mental illness, or the pregnant mom in a crisis pregnancy. Let's give of ourselves and honor life.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

The Rt. Rev. John A. M. Guernsey