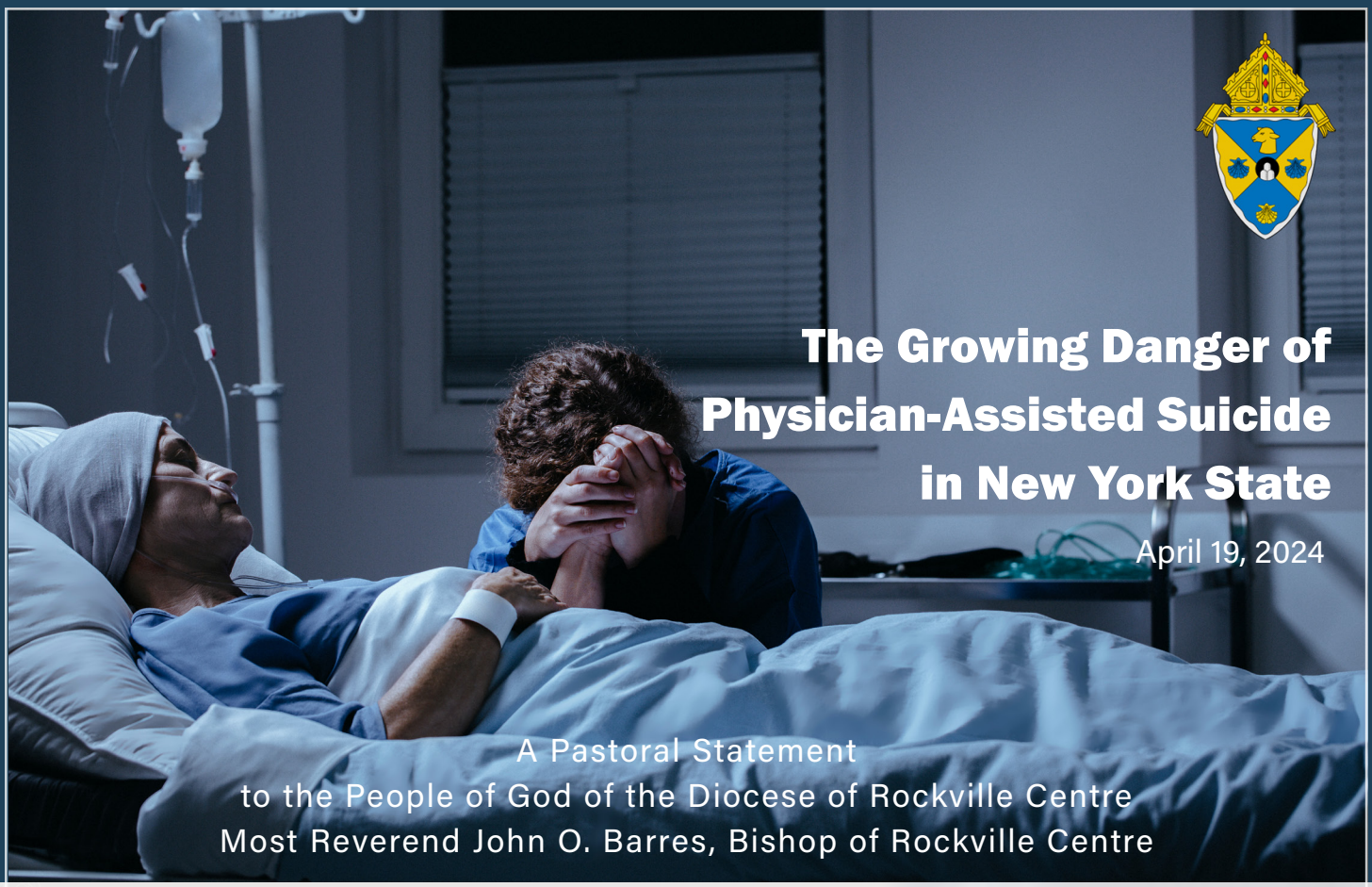

The Growing Danger of Physician-Assisted Suicide in New York State

April 19, 2024

A Pastoral Statement
to the People of God of the Diocese of Rockville Centre
Most Reverend John O. Barres, Bishop of Rockville Centre

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Long Island is blessed to be home to several of the nation's most renowned healthcare systems. These systems consist of a vast network of physicians, nurses, technicians, and medical professionals of all kinds who live and work in our communities. In my weekly travels across the Diocese of Rockville Centre, I meet so many of these health professionals and I never fail to be inspired by their commitment to accompanying their patients throughout the courses of their lives. This includes the end of life.

However, legislation pending in Albany seeks to upend the doctor-patient relationship at its most vulnerable moment via physician-assisted suicide. The bill, which seems to be gaining momentum, authorizes doctors (whose careers are dedicated to healing and preserving life) to dispense pills that literally poison patients who have been given terminal diagnoses. Such a practice flies in the face of human dignity.

In fact, a groundbreaking new Vatican document approved in April by Pope Francis, titled– appropriately – *Dignitas Infinita* (Infinite Dignity), specifically singles out euthanasia and assisted suicide as grave assaults on human dignity which utilize "a mistaken understanding of human dignity to turn the concept of dignity against itself."

This comment refers directly to the euphemism "death with dignity" that promoters of assisted suicide favor. *Dignitas Infinita* notes that, even in serious infirmity, "human life carries a dignity that must always be upheld, that can never be lost, and that calls for unconditional respect. Indeed, there are no circumstances under which human life would cease from being dignified and could, as a result, be put to an end."

Clearly, Pope Francis views euthanasia and assisted suicide as symptoms of what he repeatedly has called a "throwaway culture" that has taken hold in the West. The pope, in his wisdom, sees what many supporters of this practice do not.

By virtue of their very humanity, people who are ill or who lack self-sufficiency never cease being infinitely valuable, even if society sends them a message to the contrary by urging them to "get out of the way" and end their lives.

What is being peddled by advocates as a last resort for those suffering from interminable pain will very quickly be expanded to resemble the dystopian nightmare we are seeing play out in Canada, which passed a law very similar to the New York bill in 2016 but which already has been expanded to allow people with non-terminal diagnoses to end their lives. In March, an Ottawa judge approved assisted suicide for a young woman whose only diagnoses are autism and ADHD, over her parents' pleading objection. The Canadian law is set to expand again in 2027 – incredibly – to allow people with mental illnesses like depression, anorexia, or bipolar disorder to access suicide pills as prescribed by a medical professional.

Sadly, Canada is not an isolated case. The situation is similar in the Netherlands, the first nation to approve euthanasia, where people living with autism and intellectual disabilities reportedly are being euthanized.

I know that these scenarios are not what people have in mind when they answer a survey question asking if they support "medical aid in dying" or "death with dignity." But we must not fool ourselves. What I'm describing is not fiction or fear mongering; these abuses are really happening today in jurisdictions that have legalized assisted suicide.

The medical professionals whom I speak with in our parishes and at Catholic Health medical facilities understand clearly that assisted suicide is a terrible, untenable policy. They know that when the end-of-life approaches, the answer is not to actively kill patients or to help them to kill themselves. Instead, true dignity is upheld by providing compassionate palliative care which manages patients' pain and other symptoms, keeps them clean, tends to their bodily needs, and spiritually prepares them for their journey home.

As Pope Francis has said, "We must accompany people towards death, but not provoke death or facilitate any form of suicide...Life is a right, not death, which must be welcomed, not administered."

During this time when we celebrate a National Eucharistic Revival, we pray that our reverence for the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ may inspire our witness in New York State's public square to the reverence for the sanctity of human life at every stage of life.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+John O. Barres

Most Reverend John O. Barres
Bishop of Rockville Centre