
Austria: Bishops react to Court judgement decriminalising assisted suicide. “A slap in the face of humanity. Protect right to life”

The decision by the Austrian Constitutional Court to decriminalise assisted suicide has triggered harsh criticism in the Catholic world. It would be “unconstitutional” - the Court ruled on Friday, 11 December - to outlaw all forms of assistance to suicide, because this would infringe on the right to self-determination. Euthanasia remains excluded, but from 1 January 2022, assisted suicide will be allowed under specific conditions. According to Bishop Benno Elbs of Feldkirchen, the ruling is “a slap in the face of humanity” and “raises more questions than answers”. “Do we protect the right to life, and with it the weak and the sick among us, or do we close our eyes and make death and illness a social taboo, under the pretext of self-determination?”. Mgr. Josef Marketz (Carinthia) appealed “to do everything possible to ensure that the smallest possible number of people express the desire to commit assisted suicide, above all because such a desire is often a secret cry for help, affection, closeness and compassion”. We do not need help to die, but accompaniment for the dying. In an article published in the Kronenzeitung yesterday, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna predicted that “there will be increasing pressure on sick, tired and suffering persons, to the point that they will see themselves as a burden to others” and suicide as a way out. The Bishops called on Parliament to get to work now to oppose the ruling and increase the availability of palliative facilities for the elderly. Commenting on the judgement in an interview with Kathpress Agency, theologian Paul Zuhlenner said that “we first need to clarify what we mean by ‘dignified death’ in a culture of solidarity and ‘unbearable pain’ at a time of highly specialised medicine”. And he warned against the risk that “secondary interests, such as the burden of care or the costs of an often-slow dying”, may infiltrate the argument of self-determination.

Valentina Bombelli