A reflection on assisted dying

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In reflecting on assisted dying, the basic question that comes to the fore is: who and what are we? What is our place and role in the universe?

We have learnt so much from astronomers in recent years about our universe and our unique place in it. We belong to a small planet of one amongst millions of solar systems and planets in the Milky Way Galaxy. We are told that there are over two trillion such galaxies in the known universe. As far as we know, our little Earth is the only place in this unimaginably vast universe where there is life, and above all intelligent life—which is the human person.

We are so unique, so precious. This is part of what we mean when we speak of human dignity. We are by nature social beings, depending upon one another for both physical and emotional stability and creativity. Yet, we are individuals, and to a certain extent, independent or autonomous. The myriad of laws that govern our lives so that we can live and grow together indicates the limits of our autonomy.

How arrogant it is in the face of the universe and God’s creation to claim absolute autonomy over our life, or any part of our world. We created nothing of it. We can only make things out of what already exists.

For thousands of years, despite wars and conflicts, we have been trying to limit the killing of human persons, and even the killing of animals. Witness the efforts to eliminate capital punishment. We devise all sorts of safety codes to prevent damage to human life. There is ever new medical research to enhance and prolong human life and provide us with good palliative care. Within such a backdrop, what is motivating people to take active steps to end the life of such a marvellous creation—another human person?

Where love and care are offered and recognised, life remains worth living. Monsignor Ronald Knox, the Oxford Don and convert who translated the Bible, summed up the Catholic teaching: "Thou shalt not kill, but need not strive officiously to keep alive."