

Assisted dying threatens frail and sick, warns Pope's envoy

By John Bingham and Nick Squires

THE legalisation of assisted suicide in the UK would lead to "horrible consequences" for the frail, elderly and sick, Pope Francis's personal representative has said.

Archbishop Antonio Mennini, the Apostolic Nuncio to Great Britain, condemned moves led by Lord Falconer, the former Lord Chancellor, to relax the euthanasia laws as an attack on "human life as a gift from God".

He urged opponents to expose what he called the "reality" of Lord Falconer's "nice, politically correct and compassionate" term "assisted dying" to mean a form of euthanasia.

In a rare public intervention into a domestic political matter, the archbishop singled out the issue as a litmus test of whether Britain remains, in the words of David Cameron, a "Christian country".

His remarks, in a private address to the Roman Catholic bishops of England and Wales, echo those of Pope Francis, who

has attacked assisted suicide as an attempt to "eliminate" sick and disabled people.

And he pointedly offered them the personal support of the Pope on the matter, setting the Church on course for another battle with politicians in the wake of the row over gay marriage.

Supporters of a change in the law last night claimed that Archbishop Mennini was "on the wrong side of British public opinion".

Members of the House of Lords are preparing to debate proposals, tabled by Lord Falconer, to allow doctors to prescribe a lethal dose of drugs to terminally ill patients in the next few months.

Mr Cameron and Nick Clegg, who oppose the change, have promised MPs and peers a free vote and some ministers have signalled support.

Under the 1961 Suicide Act, it is a crime to help someone to take their own life, but guidelines now make clear that many who do so will escape charges.

Supporters of Lord Falconer say a

change in the law is urgently needed but opponents claim that safeguards written into the Assisted Dying Bill could be swept away.

They point to the extension of assisted suicide in Belgium to children as proof that it would be a "slippery slope".

Archbishop Mennini said that although Britain had been "profoundly formed by Christian values", the influence of the faith had undoubtedly declined.

"In this regard, I cannot fail to express concern about the Assisted Dying Bill," he said.

"May I encourage you to announce the gospel of life among our people, as well as in society in general, presenting the reality which hides behind the 'nice', 'politically correct' and 'compassionate' expression 'assisted dying'."

Sarah Wootton, of the campaign group Dignity in Dying, said: "Everyone's opinion on assisted dying must be respected and if Archbishop Antonio Mennini does not want the choice to control the manner of his death, that is his decision."

Dying The Legality of May 2014