

Pope offers support to parents of Charlie Gard

Philip Willan Rome

The Pope has expressed his support for the parents of the terminally ill baby Charlie Gard and "their right to accompany and care for their child to the end".

A spokesman for the Pope said that he was praying for the family, who lost their final legal appeal to take their son to the US for experimental treatment for a rare genetic condition. "The Holy Father follows with affection and compassion the situation of Charlie Gard, and expresses his own closeness to his parents," Greg Burke said in a statement.

On Friday, the day that Charlie was originally supposed to be taken off life support, the Pope wrote on Twitter: "To defend human life, above all when it is wounded by illness, is a duty of love that God entrusts to all."

Protesters gathered outside Buckingham Palace yesterday, calling for Charlie to be given treatment or at least be allowed to die at home.

Conservative Catholics had criticised the Pope's earlier reluctance to get involved. Judges in the UK ruled that further treatment for his degenerative brain disease would cause Charlie significant harm. A statement issued three days earlier by the Vatican's Pontifical Academy for Life had appeared to sympathise with the judges' reasoning.

Italian politicians have used the case to attack the EU after the European Court of Human Rights refused an appeal by Charlie's parents. The hope of a journey to the US had fallen on deaf ears "in this little Europe that's insipid and soul-less," said Beppe Grillo, founder of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement.