



The Catholic Bishops
of Alberta

Les évêques catholiques
de l'Alberta

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February 11th, 2016
World Day of the Sick

The Honourable Rachel Notley
Premier of the Province of Alberta
Office of the Premier
307 Legislature Building
10800 97 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta T5K 2B6

Dear Premier,

As you are well aware, the Supreme Court of Canada's decision in February of 2015 to strike down Canada's existing laws prohibiting assisted suicide has opened a wide debate on the subject. Following upon a positive and cordial meeting last December to discuss this matter with the Honourable Sarah Hoffman, Minister of Health, we wish now to convey in writing our deepest concerns with respect to the impact of the decision upon our fellow citizens of Alberta.

The Catholic Church is committed to protecting and caring for the most vulnerable people in our society; this includes, of course, those who suffer and dying Albertans. Catholic healthcare in Canada, and in our province, has given witness to this from our earliest history. We are encouraged by your government's generous efforts not only to provide sustainable funding for healthcare, but also to improve access to essential services, including high quality palliative care understood to exclude physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia. Informed by our faith and tradition of caring for people who are poor, sick, or dying, we are convinced that excellent palliative care is the ethical way to ensure that all Albertans can die in a manner that respects their true human dignity.

We want to be clear that, from a Catholic perspective, the intentional, willful act of killing oneself or another human being is morally wrong. Therefore, no Catholic - including elected officials and healthcare professionals - may advocate for, or participate in any way, whether by act or omission, in the intentional killing of another human being either by assisted suicide or

euthanasia. This is a position that is informed not only by our faith and tradition but also by reason. It is a stance that is commonly shared by other faith groups, medical professionals, and Albertans alike who are opposed to the killing of those most vulnerable. When any life can be taken at will, the dignity of all lives is seriously eroded and respect for human life in our society as a whole is diminished.

Given the Supreme Court of Canada's decision, the pending deliberations of our Canadian Parliament, and the pressure imposed by other jurisdictions in Canada, we would like to take this opportunity to address some key considerations as fellow Albertans.

The Need for Consultation

First, if laws and regulations governing the legalized acceptance of assisted suicide and/or euthanasia are to be adopted, then we must accept that they will, in principle and practice, affect all Albertans. Therefore, we ask that your government undertake a consultation process open to any and all who wish to speak to the issue. Although this will take time and effort, nevertheless the seriousness of the matter renders extensive consultation necessary. After all, openness to all opinions and concerns is the heart of our democracy.

Protection of Vulnerable Persons

Second, we are gravely concerned that the legalization of assisted suicide and/or euthanasia will place certain members of our common home at serious risk. In jurisdictions that have already adopted laws permitting euthanasia and assisted suicide, what are purported to be "safeguards" against abuse of the law have proven in practice to be no safeguards at all. The measure of a just and ethical society is the extent to which it cares for - and protects - its most vulnerable members.

Like the rest of Canada, Alberta has an aging population. Together with other Albertans, we are gravely concerned about the rise of elder abuse in our families and communities. This abuse takes many forms, including the emotional abandonment of many seniors. A just and ethical Alberta will be as committed to excellent homecare, hospice and social services for seniors as it is to palliative care. These are our mothers and our fathers; they built our homes and our province. They are not a burden, and they must not be led to feel that way through our individual and collective indifference.

In our recent past, reductions in healthcare funding often began with deep cuts to the care and treatment provided for people with mental illness. Even today, many of these people often experience unjust discrimination and the sting of stigma from their family, friends, colleagues and society. In other jurisdictions, this group has in particular been disproportionately represented in cases of assisted suicide and euthanasia. Protection of mentally ill people requires that mental illness is not an acceptable reason for providing euthanasia or assisted suicide. The presence of depression, or other mental illness, can also seriously affect the ability of a person with physical illness or disease to give free and informed consent. A responsible safeguard not only would exclude those who, because of their mental illness, do not have the capacity to give consent, but also would include a serious commitment to treat them.

Persons with disabilities are equally at risk. Like those with mental illness, they also suffer stigmatization. In a truly just and ethical Alberta, those with disabilities would be embraced as sharing in the beauty that is our common humanity and celebrated for their unique gifts. There is an intrinsic value in each human being in every stage and circumstance of life.

Upholding Conscience Rights

Third, other provincial jurisdictions in Canada have proposed regulations that undermine the conscience rights of physicians and other healthcare workers. This must not be allowed to happen here. Physicians, other medical professionals, and our institutions have to be allowed the freedom that is theirs by right to exercise their conscience, not only to accord with our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, but also as a matter of good medical practice. Morally wrong in itself, the attempt to force a physician to assist in a suicide or to kill another by euthanasia would also fundamentally redefine what it means to be a doctor. Killing is not medicine. Likewise, from an ethical perspective, and certainly from that of Catholic moral teaching, a physician who conscientiously objects to these practices must not be coerced into referring a patient to another professional for assisted suicide or to be euthanized. This would, in fact, be complicity and thus a violation of the person's right to freedom of conscience. Furthermore, medical professionals who refuse for reasons of conscience direct or indirect participation must also be protected from intimidation and discrimination.

Patient rights and the rights of family members must also be respected – that is, their civil right to access medical care for themselves and their loved ones in which there is no pressure to request or to submit to terminal sedation, and indeed their natural right to be served by doctors and institutions that practice only medicine and are not involved in state-sponsored killing. This is essential to maintaining the relationship of trust between patients and doctors or other care-givers. A great many citizens still intend that their doctors, and the institutions to which they entrust themselves at need, be committed to the Hippocratic oath. They must not be deprived of access to such just because there are other citizens who desire assistance in committing suicide. If they are so deprived, this will have far-reaching consequences, disrupting the relationship of trust with the state as well as with the medical community.

Premier Notley, we are grateful for the work that your government does daily to improve the lives of all Albertans. We look forward to working with you to uphold the dignity of all human life, to promote a just and ethical Alberta, and to protect the legitimate rights and freedoms of all Albertans that we cherish as Canadians.

Sincerely,

Catholic Bishops of Alberta



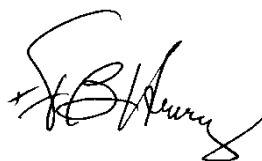
Most Reverend Richard W. Smith
Archbishop of Edmonton



Most Reverend Gregory J. Bittman
Auxiliary Bishop of Edmonton



Most Reverend David Motiuk
Bishop of the Ukrainian Eparchy of Edmonton



Most Reverend Frederick Henry
Bishop of Calgary



Most Reverend Gerard Pettipas CSsR
Archbishop of Grouard-McLennan



Most Reverend Paul Terrio
Bishop of St. Paul

- c. The Honourable Sarah Hoffman, Minister of Health
Members of the Legislature of Alberta
Members of Parliament from Alberta