



The **Catholic Bishops**
of **Alberta** and the
Northwest Territories

Les **évêques catholiques**
de l'**Alberta** et des
Territoires du Nord-Ouest

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*Remaining True to Christ
Now and at the Hour of our Death*

**A Pastoral Letter
from the
Catholic Bishops of Alberta and the Northwest Territories**

Introduction

The legalization in Canada of euthanasia and assisted suicide occurred in 2016. Now, people can request their own death in certain circumstances, and in advance of possibly intolerable pain or difficult situations. Since legalization, and as of the end of December 2019, more than 900 people in Alberta have chosen to die by these procedures. Nearly all of them have been euthanized.

In response to a recent ruling of the Superior Court of Quebec, the federal government is now planning to change the law to expand eligibility for assisted suicide or euthanasia beyond people who are nearing the end of their lives. Further review of the legislation could well lead to allowing advance consent, and extending access to euthanasia and assisted suicide to people who suffer from dementia or other mental illnesses, and even mature minors. As we see this unfold, the Bishops of Alberta and the Northwest Territories wish to encourage our people to remain steadfast in fidelity to the teachings of our faith. Although euthanasia and assisted suicide, commonly referred to as “MAiD,” are in some circumstances legally allowed, nevertheless they are never morally permissible according to the commandments of God.

Euthanasia and assisted suicide stand in stark opposition to the Christian way of living and our belief in the sanctity of human life. The Cross of Jesus Christ reveals that death and dying is a process to be accepted in obedience to the will of the Father. In contrast, euthanasia, which is the deliberate act of killing a person with the intention of ending their suffering, and assisted suicide, which consists in helping someone to take his or her own life, are self-willed and intended to end that life prematurely. Neither is permissible, since they violate the prohibition against taking innocent human life and stand as a rejection of God’s absolute sovereignty over life and death.

Surrender in Faith

Our foundational point of reference in all things is the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Following Jesus means that, just as he did, we surrender the entirety of our lives to the Father, including our death, trusting in God's nearness at every moment and in the goodness of His sovereign will. By the self-offering of Jesus on the Cross and his rising from the dead, God has rendered our human death the gateway to eternal life in the blessedness of heaven. Therefore, having lived in communion with Jesus through Baptism, and placing our hope in the mercy of God, we can face the end of our earthly journey and the judgment that awaits us with faith, serenity, and courage. As Christians who pray daily to the Father "thy will be done," we acknowledge that it is not for us to determine when our lives will end, nor to bring about our own death or ask others to end our lives for us.

Much of the messaging today concerning euthanasia and assisted suicide, which are morally wrong acts, presents these procedures as compassionate, dignified, and loving. Even the terminology chosen in Canada, "Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD)," sounds caring, gentle and helpful. It is therefore necessary to be vigilant and on guard not to allow euphemisms to mislead us by masking reality. All of us are in need of support and welcome assistance at the time of our dying. Assistance *to hasten* our death, though, is a very different matter. By engaging in the acts of euthanasia and assisted suicide, one is terminating innocent human life. This is never morally permissible.

Preparing for a Holy Death

From a Christian perspective, dying is one of the most important moments in our journey with God. We look forward in hope to being in the House of the Father, and so desire to be prepared and ready for that moment when God will call us to Himself. The sacraments given to the Church by Christ are a source of great spiritual comfort and assistance at this time. The mercy God bestows in the confession and absolution of our sins, the Sacrament of the Sick, and the Eucharist received as *Viaticum* ("food for the journey"), leads us to the grace of a holy death. We also prepare well by reconciling with others and taking leave of our families, trusting that after our death they will remember and pray for us as we go forward to our eternal rest.

Having the support of family, friends, pastors and health care professionals who acknowledge these spiritual realities is of great importance during this stage of our journey. Indeed, the Christian community earnestly desires to draw near to those who are preparing to die. Pope Francis strongly urges us to accompany people in all circumstances of life. This is especially significant as one enters the end stages of life and is near death. To persons at the end of their lives or experiencing severe suffering, the offering of consistent and loving support affirms their inestimable value and dignity as human beings created and loved by God.

A Call to Advocacy

Among the ways to accompany people and assist them to die well, and that do not deliberately or intentionally bring about their death is the offering of excellent quality palliative care. The Catholic Church strongly advocates for this holistic medical care – physical, emotional and spiritual – at the end of life, and that all people have access to it for the alleviation of their suffering. This medical care is generally available in most large jurisdictions in Canada, but not everywhere across the country. Therefore, we urgently need to remind our lawmakers that palliative care – which by its very nature does not include assisted suicide or euthanasia – is of vital human importance for people who are dying and their family members. We must encourage them not only to extend the availability of palliative care to the whole population of our land, but also to guarantee that palliative care providers will not be forced to participate in MAiD.

Our advocacy must also embrace the need to protect the conscience rights of healthcare professionals, who give their lives to accompany and care for the sick and suffering but conscientiously object to cooperating in euthanasia and assisted suicide on moral or religious grounds. They know these procedures are ethically wrong, and contrary to their reasons for choosing the medical profession in the first place. Canada is a democratic country that, in its *Charter of Rights*, proclaims liberty of conscience and freedom of religion as first among all rights. Let us urge our lawmakers to uphold the *Charter* by preserving these freedoms, which are essential for maintaining the common good in our pluralistic society.

Pope Francis reminds us in his message for the XXVIII World Day of the Sick (February 11, 2020): “Life must be welcomed, protected, respected and served from its beginning to end: both human reason and faith in God, the author of life, require this.” The most effective way in which to express our consistent opposition to assisted suicide and euthanasia, and advocate for excellent quality palliative care and the protection of conscience rights, is by direct contact with our Members of Parliament. We strongly encourage you to reach out to your elected representative in defense of the dignity and sanctity of human life.

Conclusion

The Catholic Church, faithful to Christ her Founder, teaches and gives witness to the reverence that is due to every human life. She believes and affirms that life in all its mystery is a gift to us from God our Creator, never to be rejected but always protected from beginning to end, from conception until natural death. Let us lift up our prayers on behalf of anyone who may be in danger of seeking to die by euthanasia or assisted suicide. With the help of our prayers and the support of our accompaniment, may they choose instead to surrender to the mystery of God’s sovereign and loving will. We must pray, too, for their families, anguishing over the suffering of their loved one and sometimes forced to grapple with this immoral legal option.

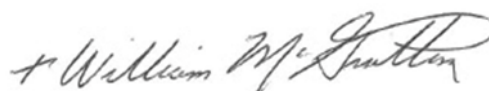
May they seek and find the Lord's presence with them, and know his gift of peace and consolation as they place their trust in him. Our prayers must also embrace all the healthcare professionals who, faithful to the witness of their conscience, promote the dignity of every human life, especially as they care for the dying. Let us ask the Lord to keep all of us true to him, in every moment of life and at the hour of our death.

Yours in Christ,

Catholic Bishops of Alberta and NWT



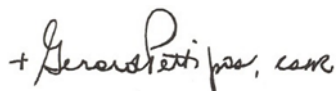
Most Reverend Richard W. Smith
Archbishop of Edmonton



Most Reverend William McGrattan
Bishop of Calgary



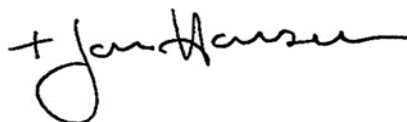
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Bishop of the Ukrainian Eparchy of
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Bishop of Mackenzie-Fort Smith

15 January 2020