

CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF SASKATCHEWAN



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Dying with Hope: Living and Walking Together

On February 6, 2017, the Catholic Bishops of Saskatchewan wrote a pastoral letter titled “On Living through our Dying”. In it, we addressed the legalization of euthanasia and assisted suicide, euphemistically known as Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD). The message of “On Living through our Dying” holds even greater significance today as the practice of medically assisted death continues to grow and expand in our country.

We begin this new pastoral letter by repeating the same invitation we offered eight years ago:

Our faith invites us to live and die with trust in the God who gave us breath. We mourn any time a person seeks to end their own life. Our calling at this time and in this place is to form ourselves well in a Christian understanding of living and dying, so that we can witness to the world that there is another way.

The Church’s teaching across the whole breadth of issues touching on human life is consistent and credible. Too often, her stance against the intentional taking of an innocent human life is heard as a “no.” But in saying “no” to assisted suicide, the Church is saying “yes” to accompaniment; “yes” to community; “yes” to solidarity with the suffering; and “yes” to caring for those who need it most. Indeed, it is because of these commitments that we can confidently reject acts that fail to recognize the dignity of each human person.

We Begin by Listening

Many of you have been touched, as we have, by the experience of losing family, friends and community members to assisted suicide. Responses to these situations have been as intense as they are varied. We have heard descriptions of feeling shut out of end-of-life decision making and guilt over not being able to prevent a medically administered death.

Genuine empathy and the influence of romanticized accounts of assisted suicide in the media lead many individuals to sympathize with those who choose a medically administered death. Above all, we hear and appreciate your profound anger and sadness when supporters of assisted suicide portray the Christian gift of accompaniment to natural death as merciless, even cruel. It is still common to encounter the objection that a rejection of assisted death implies an insistence on

using every possible means to prolong life, despite burden or cost. The Catholic Church does not insist on this. There comes a time to accept death graciously. That is far different from willfully causing it.

We recognize that our healthcare system is also struggling. Strained caregivers sometimes feel that death would be preferable to providing inadequate care. As a result, they may offer assisted suicide as a solution to the heart-wrenching suffering that they find themselves unable to relieve. Assisted suicide is also actively promoted by the health care system as a favoured option. Medically administered death is readily accessible and, in some cases, is provided within twenty-four hours of an assessment, whereas support for chronic pain management, daily living, and palliative care can take weeks or months to access.

As Catholic Bishops, we think it is very important that we as Church listen to and also speak on behalf of the vulnerable. Increasingly, vulnerable people are being forced into terrible choices by a system that offers aid in dying but fails by not always offering aid in living. We are called to speak on behalf of faithful health care workers, heirs of a long and proud tradition of compassion and care in our province, who seek the support and resources to provide dignified, life-affirming care. Finally, as Church we are called to give voice to the Word spoken by God, the Lord and giver of life, defender of the weak and the oppressed, who calls us to “never tire in firmly speaking out in defense of life.” (St. John Paul II, *Address to Visiting Bishops*, 3 February 2001)

Christian Hope

Christians are uniquely qualified to imbue the experience of suffering and dying with hope. This is so because we have come to believe and trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ’s victory over death makes us a people of hope. In this world, we strive to be faith-filled disciples of Christ, who is the guarantor of our hope.

At this moment in our history, we wish to repeat the words of Christ: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid” (Mat 14:27). This is the repeated message of the Scriptures. Consider young David as he faces Goliath (1 Sam 17), Moses and the Israelites as they trek through the wilderness (Ex 14 – 40), the woman healed after being crippled for many years (Luke 13:10-17) or the man lame from birth who finds healing at the Beautiful Gate after so much struggle (Acts 3). Life confronts us with many difficult circumstances, but we are assured of God’s unwavering love and guidance illuminating our path: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5).

Our longstanding Catholic commitment to healthcare encourages us to confront the current challenges head-on. We support a vision of healthcare as *medical assistance in living* and assert that the genuine autonomy of vulnerable persons requires uncompromising support for them and their families to live fruitful lives. We do well to ask: Where is our constitutional right to suitable housing, aid for disabled persons and palliative care? Why is a “constitutional right” to death at the forefront of discussion about care for the elderly? What meaning does “autonomy” have when

death is offered while support in living is withheld? In such a context, “choice” is not experienced as freedom, but as a threat.

Christian communities are called to challenge this false notion of autonomy and bear witness to the intrinsic value of those who are dying or living with chronic illness. Our hope is manifest in concrete actions. Every kindness, smile, word of encouragement or difficult administrative decision that testifies to our hope is an embrace, wrapping vulnerable people in the warmth of our love.

Action

Given the challenges that we face today, there are three practical things we encourage you to do:

First, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has developed an excellent program called *Horizons of Hope: A Toolkit for Catholic Parishes on Palliative Care*. This program promotes and assists us in understanding what is involved in living and dying well. Supporting and participating in this program expresses our hope.

Second, entering into conversations about dying can help us to overcome our fear of death. Accordingly, we invite you to fill out a *Faith Based Advanced Care Directive*. This directive is available from the Catholic Health Association of Saskatchewan. It will help to inform your family, friends, health care professionals, and appointed proxy/proxies about your treatment wishes when you lack the capacity to make health care decisions.

Finally, commit yourself to accompanying vulnerable individuals as they navigate our healthcare system, including hospitals, clinics, and long-term care facilities. Increasingly, medical personnel are suggesting the idea of a medically administered death to those who are vulnerable because of a serious diagnosis. Often the patient will acquiesce with devastating consequences. Supporting individuals as they consider complex healthcare decisions or receive care is a gift to both the individual who is seeking care and the person who faithfully stands with them.

Walking Faithfully

In conclusion we want to recall again the message of our pastoral letter “Living through our Dying”:

... God has called us to walk through this life together, and this includes journeying with people to the end of their days on earth. Now more than ever, our world needs to know that we will not leave them to face their dying alone.

May the God who came to earth and showed us how to live and die draw near to us as we walk faithfully in a culture that has forgotten how to die well. May we receive

the courage and strength of the Spirit that we need to be witnesses to the gift of living through dying. And may our hearts be fixed on Jesus, who has walked this path before us to show us the way.

Given on March 25, 2025, the Solemnity of the Annunciation.

Sincerely,



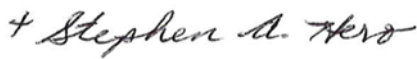
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