



A Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Victoria

18 April 2017

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

There is a renewed push in Victoria and in many other parts of Australia for euthanasia and assisted suicide to be legalised. Misplaced compassion leads some to call for the deliberate ending of life by the direct action of a doctor or by a doctor helping someone to suicide. This is never justified (Catechism of the Catholic Church #2277).

In this latest push the term ‘assisted dying’ is being used to describe both euthanasia and assisted suicide. While it is never easy to face the end of life of a loved one, we cannot support this kind of legalisation however it is described. Assistance in our time of dying is something that we should all want for ourselves and for others – however, this should not involve a lethal injection or offering a lethal dose.

As Pope Francis recently reminded us, “The predominant school of thought sometimes leads to a ‘false compassion’ which holds that it is ... an act of dignity to perform euthanasia. Instead, the compassion of the Gospel is what accompanies us in times of need, that compassion of the Good Samaritan, who ‘sees’, ‘has compassion’, draws near and provides concrete help.”¹

Euthanasia and assisted suicide are the opposite of care and represent the abandonment of the sick and the suffering, of older and dying persons. Instead, we encourage all people of goodwill, to respond to this new challenge with truth and compassion. We wish to affirm that our task is to protect, nurture and sustain life to the best of our ability.

We thank the Government for its recently increased commitment to palliative care. We encourage them, rather than taking the negative path towards euthanasia or assisted suicide, to continue to invest in the care and support of all Victorians in need. There is clearly much more work to be done.

Last year a Parliamentary Committee recommended Victoria move towards legalising assisted suicide and euthanasia. This was endorsed by the Government in December with a consultation currently underway to look at how such laws can be made ‘safe’.

We should be clear – there is no safe way to kill people or to help them to their own suicide. For millennia, the Church and civil society has understood such actions to be morally and ethically wrong. The commandment, ‘Thou shalt not kill’ is both a biblical and civil dictum and should remain so for very good reason.

Since the Northern Territory’s brief experiment with euthanasia in 1996, euthanasia and assisted suicide legislation have been continually rejected in state parliaments around Australia. Why? Because when parliamentarians take the time to debate the issue fully and to consider all the consequences they realise that to legalise euthanasia and assisted suicide would threaten the lives of vulnerable people.

During 2008, this issue was at the forefront of the public debate in Victoria. Since then little has changed. The proposals then, as now, would allow some people to be treated differently under the law, where their lives could be taken at their request. It would create

¹ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141115_medici-cattolici-italiani.html

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a lower threshold of care and civil protection afforded to the sick, suffering and vulnerable. Such a law would serve to exploit the vulnerability of those people, exposing them to further risk.

Such legislation is usually presented as being limited: only for terminal illness; only for those in the last weeks and months of life etc. However, the evidence from jurisdictions where assisted suicide and euthanasia are practiced legally show that incremental changes follow over time once the notion that some lives are not worth living becomes accepted in the community. Euthanasia for children was adopted in Belgium in 2014. Likewise, euthanasia for psychological illness is now legal in Belgium. In Holland, there is pressure to allow assisted suicide for people over the age of 70 who have simply become 'tired of life'.

We must, therefore, urge our elected representatives to resist this 'first step'.

As medical advances increasingly lead to a longer life for many people, we should view older people as a blessing for society rather than a problem. Each generation has much to teach the generation that follows it. We should therefore see care of the elderly as repayment of a debt of gratitude, as a part of a culture of love and care.

The Catholic community already does much to care through our network of hospices, hospitals, aged care facilities and other services. We call on the Catholic community and people of goodwill to continue to care for the frail, elderly, the sick and the dying, at every stage of life. We ask you to continue to journey with those who are sick and in pain, to visit them, and ensure they have appropriate care, support and pain management and most of all someone to remain close to them.

We thank those healthcare professionals and palliative care specialists, nurses, doctors, psychologists, pain management teams, pastoral carers, religious, volunteers and others who work every day to reduce pain as well as social and spiritual suffering, in positive and life-affirming ways.

We ask Victorians to continue to love and care for those who are sick and suffering rather than abandoning them to euthanasia or supporting them to suicide. Our ability to care says much about the strength of our society.

At this time we especially also want to encourage you, our sisters and brothers, to pray and to act. We commend the efforts of lay groups and associations and all people of goodwill who respectfully let their parliamentary representatives know of their concerns.

Please do what you can to stay informed about this issue.

If you would like to contribute to the efforts of your local parish, ask your parish priest how you can be involved. If you would like more information on this issue or would like to find out how you can contribute locally, contact the Life, Marriage and Family Office of the Melbourne Archdiocese on: lmf@cam.org.au or (03) 9287 5587.

In all our efforts, let us never cease to call on Jesus Christ and the intercession of Mary our Mother.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

Most Reverend Denis Hart DD

Archbishop of Melbourne

Most Reverend Paul Bird CSsR DD

Bishop of Ballarat

Most Reverend Patrick O'Regan DD

Bishop of Sale

Most Reverend Leslie Tomlinson DD

Bishop of Sandhurst