



11 October 2020

A PASTORAL LETTER TO
the People, Clergy and Religious
Catholic communities of Queensland

Voluntary assisted dying (VAD) is legal in Victoria and Western Australia. In Queensland, the Law Reform Commission has been asked to draft legislation that would legalise voluntary assisted dying (VAD). Legislation has not come before the current Parliament, but it may in the future, whatever the outcome of the forthcoming election.

The Catholic Church is opposed to voluntary assisted dying. However, the Church strongly supports high-quality palliative care, respect for patient autonomy, preservation of personal dignity and a peaceful end to life. Nobody is morally compelled to suffer unbearable pain, nobody should feel like a burden, and nobody should feel that their life is worthless.

It is clear from appeals across the world to legalise some form of assisted suicide or euthanasia which in Australia is called voluntary assisted dying, that people are afraid of losing their freedom, their dignity, their worth, as they face what they believe will be a terrible process of dying. The Catholic Church maintains – based on its theological and philosophical beliefs on the nature of human beings, and on the empirical evidence of high-quality specialist palliative care – that none of these things need come true. Freedom, dignity, worth, and minimal suffering can all be achieved. Dying need not be horrifying. This is not to glorify or minimise how challenging the process of dying is. But it is a process that we as a society and as individuals must face in a way that respects and preserves those principles of freedom, dignity and the minimization of harm that we all hold dear.

Research also shows, however, that many people do not understand the Church's position on end-of-life care. Misunderstandings may lead people to support voluntary assisted dying (VAD) legislation on mistaken assumptions about what dying entails and how the Catholic Church teaches one should respond to it. There is confusion about the right to refuse or end treatment, about the moral legitimacy of advance care planning, about the use of pain-relieving medications, and about when hastening death may be morally acceptable.

Moreover, many people struggle to see the potential implications for society as a whole of legalising intentional killing of another person, even in strictly limited circumstances. The sanctity of life is not about doing everything possible to stay alive for as long as possible regardless of whether there is any real benefit or regardless of how severe the burden may be for the individual, their family, or society. Rather, the sanctity of life is about recognising that all life, all of creation is sacred because it is the foundation, the necessary condition of all meaningful and purposeful endeavour. Societies in which life is cheap suffer from many maladies and injustices. But where the meaningfulness and purposefulness of life are held sacred from cradle to the grave, for the just and the wicked, for rich and for poor, in short, for all, a society can genuinely care for the common good. Because in such a society there is always the opportunity for a change of heart, for a conversion of the mind, for love and mercy to shine through.

Regardless of what happens with the proposed bill to legalise voluntary assisted dying (VAD) in Queensland, the Church, tasked by God to care for both the dignity and salvation of individuals and to work for a just and humane society, recognises the need to help people better understand what choices they already have and what pathways already exist to ensure a dignified and peaceful death. People need assistance – not to end their lives but at the **end of their lives** – in ways that they feel fully recognise their autonomy and dignity. Finding ways to improve understanding, access, and assistance may also have the effect of delaying or preventing the legalisation of voluntary assisted dying. Even if voluntary assisted dying (VAD) should be legalised, then this important service offered by the Church may help to ensure that voluntary assisted dying (VAD) is seldom utilised. Moreover this service to the People of God, and to all of society, becomes a prophetic voice affirming the dignity and worth of all life against a belief that a life can be meaningless and purposeless on the one hand or that one's own freedom is all that matters.

We are challenged now to approach death and the dying differently, accompanying every person on the way to death and allowing them to love and to be loved to the very end and into eternity. Pope Francis has encouraged Catholic people everywhere to resist euthanasia and to ensure that the elderly, the young and the vulnerable are not cast aside in what he has called a "throw-away culture". Instead, the Pope calls us as Catholics to follow Jesus Christ by accompanying people at the end of their life with all the skill of palliative medicine and all the compassion of the human heart, since true palliative care embraces the whole person, physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. That is the 'care-first' approach which the Church supports being made available on a statewide basis – an alternative path to that of assisted dying legislation.

To that end the Church is investigating the development of a training program within Catholic communities to help people better understand what choices they already have and what pathways already exist to ensure a dignified and peaceful death.

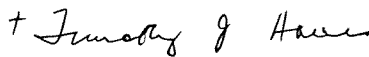
The aim is to train facilitators who can guide people to the experts they need and who can provide opportunities for those experts to interact with people in their particular contexts from time to time in a formative way. This is the type of care that Pope Francis envisions the Church being able to offer as an accompaniment to those coming to the end of their life. It should be well within our capacity to offer.

If this type of ministry is one that would appeal to you, then there is an Expression of Interest form that you can fill out through the parish. It is not a binding commitment, merely an indication that when more detail is fleshed out on the availability of the short course, most likely provided through Australian Catholic University, you will be contacted again to see if you wish to pursue taking it up.

Yours in Christ,



Archbishop Mark Coleridge
Archdiocese of Brisbane



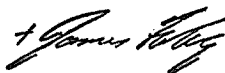
Bishop Timothy J. Harris DD
Diocese of Townsville



Bishop Robert McGuckin DD
Diocese of Toowoomba



Bishop Michael McCarthy
Diocese of Rockhampton



Bishop James Foley DD DPh
Diocese of Cairns



Bishop Ken Howell PP SLL
Auxiliary Bishop of Brisbane