



Archdiocese of Winnipeg

Office of the Archbishop

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A PASTORAL INSTRUCTION REGARDING MEDICAL ASSISTANCE IN DYING

To the Clergy, Religious and Faithful of the Archdiocese of Winnipeg,

"We are called to be disciples who honour and respect the dignity, value and equality of human life, by reaching out as Jesus did, to the poor, the marginalized and the lost, regardless of their human condition".

Disciples on the Way-Post-Synodal Proclamation for the Archdiocese of Winnipeg

Introduction

As Catholics, we are deeply committed to the Church's teaching on the sanctity of human life from conception to natural end. We find, however, that Canadians live in a society where there are no laws governing the practice of abortion and in the last few years, physician assisted suicide and euthanasia have become legally permissible. Furthermore, a debate has now begun as to whether mental illness would qualify a person for Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID). Considering these facts, our Christian belief in the value and inherent dignity of every human life leads us to advocate for the protection of human life and to encourage greater knowledge and access to hospice and palliative care for people who are vulnerable with terminal illness. We believe that these compassionate services are also of great assistance to the families of individuals facing grave medical conditions.

In our recent Archdiocesan Synod, we determined that one of our three Over-Arching Themes was: **Outreach to others especially those in need and those on the peripheries**. Keeping in mind the teaching of Pope Francis that the Church is meant to be a Field Hospital, it stands to reason, that the pastoral work of promoting the dignity of human life, is in fact a ministry of protecting the vulnerable. Furthermore, in two of our Synod proposals (# 14 and #42), we were called to raise awareness of our responsibility to advocate for the most vulnerable in society. In fact, by doing pastoral care for the sick and the dying we are directly ministering to the most vulnerable among us.

Our Pastoral Approach to MAID

The practice of MAID is an unfortunate and sad reality in Canada today and it brings with it very difficult and divisive situations within families, church communities and in our society. We recognize that terminal illness brings emotional, moral, psychological and religious challenges which are hard to face. Yet, we must not ignore the fact that physician assisted suicide and euthanasia are affronts to the dignity of human life and are never morally justified. For this reason, as pastoral agents, we cannot be collaborators with MAID or support its philosophy of the permissibility of the termination of human life. As priests, permanent deacons, religious or lay ministers we cannot be part of the process of MAID, support it, or witness to it.

Considering this, how are we to respond to individuals who are seeking to end their lives through MAID, or indeed, to respond to requests for funerals afterwards? Let it also be said that most people live and die within the context of a family, so this too must be considered. Ultimately, our concern must be for the salvation of souls and for the preservation of the faith that has been handed on to us. It should also be remembered that the sacraments are, in themselves, mysteries and signs of faith. They are saving encounters with Christ.

With these things in mind, when faced with the complexity of human situations relative to MAID, we must first remember that we are indeed pastoral agents of Christ. Our focus must be to bring spiritual awareness and if possible, spiritual healing to people who find themselves suffering and in despair and possibly asking for MAID.

Pastoral Accompaniment

In our encounters with people who find themselves in such situations, we must first practice genuine patience in listening to their anxieties and seek to understand their sufferings and indeed to reflect on how they feel in their circumstances. It is helpful here to call to mind what the Bishops of Saskatchewan wrote regarding pastoral accompaniment: *“At the heart of our Christian faith is the conviction that God’s love is revealed most profoundly in the dying and rising of Jesus, and that in our living and dying, we are drawn into this pastoral mystery, which opens onto eternal life”*.

In our pastoral accompaniment with people in such circumstances, it is essential that they are loved and given spiritual support during their struggle, even if they are seriously contemplating MAID. Pope Benedict XVI, in *Deus Caritas Est*, reminds us that *“Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave”* (#18). It is precisely here, that we need to ardently call on the Holy Spirit to enliven his seven-fold gifts within our hearts so that hopefully through our conversation, presence and love, a transformation of the heart and mind will occur. Again, I quote the Saskatchewan Bishops: *“We place ourselves and our circumstances humbly in God’s hands; we commit ourselves to working faithfully to the best of our ability to be artisans of Christ’s healing and agents of the hope and love he came to bring”*.

Regarding the Sacraments, let us remember that the Sacraments are acts of faith and require an assent of faith and a willingness to walk in Christ’s way and turn away from sin. It would not be appropriate to celebrate the Sacraments when the intent to receive MAID remains firm. On the other hand, sincere prayer and the ministry of presence remains vital even when death may not be far off. It should also be added here that wherever possible, prayer with the family should be sought if there is an attitude of openness. In the end, even though our efforts at times may seem fruitless, we must remain confident that Christ will take our spiritual efforts, perfect them and use them according to his will.

Funerals

When a funeral is requested, we may experience a certain conflict within us due to the sad circumstances surrounding a death caused by MAID. This is completely understandable, yet a funeral service, whether it be Holy Mass, a grave-side committal, or a para-liturgy, is essentially for the soul of the deceased and for the family left behind. On the Cross, Our Blessed Lord prayed for those committing sin against him with the words: *“Forgive them Father, for they do not know what they are doing”* (Lk.23:34) These words, spoken at the moment of our redemption, are words of Jesus’ intercession for our salvation. Can we do less, in offering prayers for those who have ended their lives ignorant of the truth about human life?

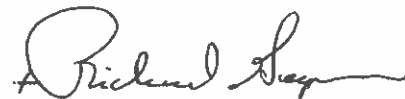
By so doing, we should choose the prayers and the readings very carefully to reflect the reality of the situation-this is indeed an opportunity for Evangelization. A liturgical theme of the reality of human sinfulness and God's mercy would be appropriate. We must not make the Liturgy a place of judgement upon a person but of humility and hope in God's greatness.¹ At the same time, attention should be paid to a family's request for a eulogy. This is a very difficult moment and whatever is said should in no way express sympathy with or agreement towards the actions taken by the deceased. It is strongly suggested that the words of the eulogy, if there is one, be carefully reviewed beforehand.²

Final Considerations

As clergy and pastoral workers, we should remember that we do not function alone. In facing situations involving MAID, each situation can be unique and sometimes there is need to consult others to help us discern the best path to walk. This may include the competent pastoral authority, including the archbishop. It is often helpful to share with others a particular pastoral burden that we may be facing.

A final consideration in our pastoral response to situations involving Physician Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia, would concern education and formation. The parish community and the Catholic school are places where formation and awareness of the issues surrounding Medical Assistance in Dying must occur. There needs to be opportunities to learn what the Church teaches about this subject and there is a need to encourage a discussion of this question frankly and clearly. This will present an opportunity for healthy and formative conversations and discernment in helping believers to understand the mystery of suffering and death and the formation of a Christian conscience. There are many good resources available. I might suggest an excellent Canadian resource produced by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, entitled, "*Horizons of Hope: A Toolkit for Catholic Parishes on Palliative Care*". This is available on the CCCB website: www.cccb.ca

Yours in Christ,



✦Richard Gagnon
Archbishop of Winnipeg

¹ There are very few suitable options under "Masses for the Dead" which would be appropriate for such funerals (except perhaps, #5, p. 1385). In the "Order of Christian Funerals", there is a little more flexibility for funerals outside of Mass. In this case, options A, C, F, might be selected for the Opening Prayer and one of the suggested options for the Prayers of Final Commendation. When it comes to grave-side services and para-liturgies, a greater flexibility in choice would be permitted.

² It would be advisable for a eulogy to be given at a social gathering afterwards. If the family persists in a eulogy in the Church itself, then before the start of the service would be appropriate.