



OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

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Re: The Decision of the Supreme Court of Canada to Allow Physician-Assisted Suicide

On Friday, February 6th, the Supreme Court of Canada rendered a landmark decision granting legal permission for physician-assisted death in our country. In so doing it agreed with claims that a human person faced with suffering has the right to determine when and how to end one's life, and that the legal prohibition against assisted suicide impeded the exercise of this right and infringed upon their liberty. In its ruling, the Supreme Court outlines the conditions within which the provision or administration of lethal medication to a patient who has requested it would be permissible.

By allowing assisted suicide, our Supreme Court is making legally permissible in some circumstances what is morally wrong in every circumstance: the taking of innocent human life. We must be careful, therefore, not to accommodate ourselves to its decision. Our response to suffering - and, indeed, to all the questions of life - must be informed and shaped not by the Justices of the Court but by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Suffering is a reality that touches each of us. It gives rise to many questions, often anguished, as to its meaning and purpose. Throughout my ministry as priest and bishop I have frequently encountered great pain and hardship among God's people, and have had these very questions posed to me. I admit, the same wonderment has at times inhabited my own heart as I witnessed the suffering and death of loved ones and friends. From experience we know that no amount of interior searching provides a satisfactory answer to the mystery of suffering, and this can deepen the anguish. However, our pain gives way to hope when we turn to Jesus Christ and the enlightenment he alone can give.

Jesus Christ is the Son of God who became a human being, like us in all things but sin. He came to us to preach the good news of the nearness and love of God and the divine will to save us. As he moved among us and taught, he showed a special love for those who suffer. Time and again we hear in the Gospel of the many miracles of healing he worked for those who were sick. At the same time, however, he did not remove suffering entirely from our human condition. Instead, he took it upon himself and offered his own suffering to the Father through his death on the Cross. He did so, confident that the Father would accept it for the salvation of the world. This is exactly what the Father did in raising Jesus from the dead.

From Jesus we learn that we are never alone in our suffering. God draws near. His special love for the sick and his acts of healing call us, too, to be close to any who are suffering and strive to lessen their pain whenever possible. His self-offering on the Cross teaches us that when we offer our suffering through him to the Father, we can have confidence that God will accept and transform it into an instrument for good. In many ways, the mystery of suffering remains just that - a mystery. Yet if in faith we offer it to God we know it is never without meaning or purpose. In Christ we see that suffering in no way diminishes human dignity. On the contrary, when suffering is embraced in faith and offered as a gift to God for the sake of others, that dignity shines forth and the nobility of the human person is made manifest.

Underlying the Christian approach to suffering is the recognition of God's sovereignty. God alone is the author of life, which we receive from Him as a gift. This means that we are always stewards and never masters of our lives. Recall the teaching of Saint Paul: "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." (*Romans 14: 7-8*)

The decision of the Supreme Court to allow assisted suicide rests on the substitution of God's supremacy with that of the individual. It accepts a worldview in which suffering's only discernable purpose is to diminish the subjectively defined "quality of life" of the human person, who, as autonomous, should be free to determine when their life will end and how. Yet human autonomy cannot realistically be posited as an absolute; it is always conditioned by our relationships and limited by the shared responsibility of all citizens for the common good. The well-being of society and our ability to live together peaceably depends upon the recognition and acceptance of our interdependence. More, it requires adherence to the inviolability of human life as an unassailable and necessary principle. The law can only respect the inherent dignity of each Canadian life if it acknowledges that no one has the right to take action that would intentionally end another's life.

It is clear that, given the place of the Supreme Court in our legal and judicial system, this decision will have far-reaching harmful effects in our country. Not the least of these will be subversion of the patient-physician relationship and the erosion of trust that will inevitably follow. In addition to our refusal to allow the standpoint of the Supreme Court to inform our own, we have a duty to act for the good of our fellow citizens, especially for those who, because of disability, suffering or weakness, now find themselves on a slippery slope of increasing vulnerability to state-sanctioned death. For one thing, we can work with our Members of Parliament, now charged with crafting a new law, so that the legislation will severely limit the harm done by the Court decision. Doctors in particular should speak and act decisively to ensure that their right to freedom of conscience and their solemn responsibility to be agents of healing will be protected, and in this I assure them of my support. Even more, we all must consciously and deliberately bear joyful witness to the beauty and dignity of each human life at every stage of existence from beginning to natural end

Above all, we must pray. Let us turn to Mary, the mother of Our Lord. She, too, knew untold suffering as she witnessed the cruel passion and death of her Son. She offered her pain, together with that of Jesus, to God, and experienced the wondrous joy of seeing suffering and death transformed into life. By her intercession, may she help us to bear our own suffering with peace, to stand in solidarity and hope with any who suffer, and enable us by our action and witness to foster the full protection in our country of all human life.

Yours sincerely in Christ,



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