

Backgrounder: Medical Assistance in Dying (“MAiD”)

In 2016 the Canadian parliament legalized euthanasia across Canada under the acronym MAiD: “Medical Assistance in Dying”. In 2022, 836 Albertans died by this procedure, a 41% increase in number of people killed this way in 2021. 2.6% of all Alberta deaths were from euthanasia in 2022, up from 2% the previous year.

These numbers are below the Canadian average of 4.1% which has been elevated by large percentages in British Columbia (5.5%) and Quebec (6.6%). These two numbers represent euthanasia deaths as a percentage of all deaths in a jurisdiction, and are the highest percentages in the world. By way of contrast, in 2021, 4.5% of all deaths in the Netherlands were due to euthanasia. The Netherlands, which legalized euthanasia in 2002, has had lengthy experience with euthanasia dating back to the 1970s. Canadian statistics have increased at a much higher rate year over year since legalization in our country. This is because the categories of patients who are eligible will soon be the broadest in the world, and the Canadian healthcare system has been incorporating euthanasia into its menu of legitimate healthcare options.

As euthanasia becomes more common, it will affect more and more Catholics, directly or indirectly through participation of friends and family members. In addition, a generally positive narrative in the mainstream media in Canada will lead many Catholics to have a favourable impression of this procedure. A 2014 poll by Angus Reid found that among Catholics who had attended Mass at least once in the last month, 70% felt that assisted suicide should be legal.

In an on-line survey of Catholics in the Archdiocese of Edmonton, completed in December 2023, 76% of the 708 respondents agreed with Catholic Church teaching on MAiD. However, respondents said they would like to hear more from the Church on this issue, to reaffirm church teaching and to explain why euthanasia is wrong.

The Magisterium or official teaching authority of the Church has been resolute in its opposition to euthanasia. Euthanasia falls under biblical prohibition against murder, found in the Ten Commandments which, in turn, is expressly incorporated by Christ in his discourse with the rich young man (Mark 1:19). The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: “Whatever its motives and means, direct euthanasia consists in putting an end to the lives of handicapped, sick, or dying persons. It is morally unacceptable.” CCC 2277

The most recent restatement of Catholic teaching on this topic is found in a 2020 document of the then Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (now DDF) called “*Samaritanus Bonus – The Good Shepherd*”. That document reiterates that the act of euthanasia is “intrinsicly evil”. In September 2016 the Catholic Bishops of Alberta and the Northwest Territories published Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons and Families Considering or Opting for Death by Assisted Suicide or Euthanasia which restricts access to the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick for those who have decided to end their lives through euthanasia.

All of these factors taken together create significant pastoral challenges. On the one hand the Church reminds us that euthanasia is an evil activity and beneath the dignity of the human person. On the other hand, the legacy Canadian media, courts, secular health care system and many politicians support it. While the most devout Catholics will likely be aware of this conflict, most other Catholics will not. How will we help parishioners see the contradiction and then live with the cognitive dissonance? How will we respond to the pastoral challenges created by this problem? How will we lead the promotion of a culture both in and outside the church that sees human life as a precious gift of God?

Since legalization in 2016 the Department of Health in Ottawa has published an annual report on MAiD in Canada. This report contains a chart that lists the sources of suffering that people give as a reason they want MAiD prior to it being administered. The chart reveals that many of the concerns are

existential and emotional rather than physical. For instance, 50% of people who choose MAiD indicate that "loss of dignity" is a source of their suffering. It is important to ask the question: "Could many of these concerns be dealt with through proper care, support and counselling?"

Dr Harvey Max Chochinov is a psychiatrist and palliative care expert from Winnipeg. He has written a book called *Dignity Therapy: Final Words for Final Days*. His thesis in writing this book is that patient dignity can be enhanced by interactions and interventions by caregivers and loved ones. Dr. Chochinov lists all of his counselling approaches and interventions on a simple chart which can be of great help to those who are in pastoral care.

By listening to vulnerable people who are considering MAiD we can determine the source of their suffering and come up with alternatives and support that can restore their hope and dignity. This will involve mobilization of church resources and a refocus on the needs of most vulnerable in our midst. Ironically, this may in fact return the Church to its most ancient charism to serve Our Lord and Saviour in the poor and needy.

As we grapple with these challenges, we are reminded of God's words to Moses – *I will never leave you or forsake you*. Deut. 31:6-8

Mary, Mother of the Poor – pray for us!