



**ORGANISME CATHOLIQUE POUR LA VIE ET LA FAMILLE
CATHOLIC ORGANIZATION FOR LIFE AND FAMILY**

Our Civilization is at a Turning Point

**A reflection submitted to
the Special Joint Committee on Physician-Assisted Dying**

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Introduction

In submitting these thoughts to the Special Joint Committee on Physician-Assisted Dying, the Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF) would first like to focus on some of the risks associated with the legalization of “physician-assisted dying”. The experience of Belgium and the Netherlands has much to teach us in this regard.

By legalizing euthanasia or assisted suicide – which allows one person to kill another or helps that person commit suicide – we would violate the inalienable right to respect for human life, especially with reference to the most vulnerable. We would undermine the foundational assurance that human life will always be protected – an assurance which is essential to the functioning of every society.

If we allow assisted suicide or euthanasia for those terminally ill or not – when requested on the basis of unmanaged suffering, autonomy or individual self-determination over life itself – how can we refuse it to the depressed, the disabled or the frail? How can we defend and uphold the rights of conscience of medical practitioners and health care workers who object in the strongest possible terms to being implicated in any way in killing (even by referring a patient)? Euthanasia and assisted suicide are crimes which no human law can pretend to legitimate. Legislation of this kind far from imposing obligations of conscience creates a serious obligation to resist by conscientious objection.

In this context, the elderly and the vulnerable risk being pressured to consider the option of an early death; the so-called “right to die” could soon become a “duty to die.” And such pressure is likely to increase as healthcare resources decrease. Thus “physician-assisted dying” could become the most deceptive form of violence, the ultimate abuse of seniors already, and too often, victims of physical and psychological violence.

At a crossroads

It cannot be said strongly enough: the help that patients really need is the kind of medical and spiritual care which does not intentionally seek to hasten their death. If we allow doctors to intentionally cause the death of patients in order to end their suffering, we will irreparably undermine in the minds of Canadians the essential relationship of trust that must exist between doctor and patient. We will further cloud the true role of medicine which is to heal, to relieve the sick and to accompany the suffering.

We are at a crossroads. Our decisions today will define the kind of country we want to bequeath to our children and grandchildren. Let us remember that the measure of a society’s civilization is its respect for human life and its attitude towards its most vulnerable members.

Will we allow ourselves to be touched and upset by the vulnerability of the sick and dying, in order to remain faithful to one of the most beautiful and noble traits attributed to Canadians: our spirit of solidarity towards the weakest and most helpless? Will we choose to take care of them, with dignity and nobility, by offering them quality care until natural death? Or do we want to become a society eager to help its most vulnerable citizens end their lives? Do we want to come to the point where euthanasia and assisted suicide are also made available to the depressed, to disabled newborns and children with cerebral palsy – as is done now in the Netherlands? Will we entrench ourselves in an individualism which prefers to eliminate persons who need only our time, energy and affection?

The priority: palliative care

To avoid such a deplorable societal failure, the new government must at all costs act to counter the harm caused by the decision of the Supreme Court and to defend the inviolability of human life because the human person is created in the image of God (Genesis 1: 26-27). In this decisive hour of Canada's history, we encourage the new Government to work toward a real humanization of end of life care by developing a national strategy based on three priorities:

1. promoting research and education in the field of pain relief;
2. devoting more public resources to the creation of palliative care units or health centres with a view to providing access to all citizens who need them;
3. adopting more generous tax measures that will allow caregivers to devote themselves more freely to supporting their sick or dying relatives.

In 2011, the Parliamentary Committee on Palliative and Compassionate Care found—significantly—that 71% of Canadians want more investment in palliative care. In an important report entitled “With Dignity and Compassion – Care of Vulnerable Canadians”, this Committee proposed a comprehensive look at palliative and end of life care – including pain management and support for family caregivers. Its concrete recommendations definitely deserve to be implemented: restoration of a Palliative Care Secretariat; development and implementation of national strategies for palliative care and end of life care, and suicide prevention; creation of a Bureau for increased awareness and prevention of elder abuse, and implementation of a national strategy to prevent abuse against seniors.

Fundamental trust

We must at all cost resist the temptation to authorize the deliberate killing of any citizens. By falling into such a trap, the Trudeau Government would be committing Canada to a path unworthy of a civilized nation.

The legalization of euthanasia and assisted suicide would spell the end of our shared duty to protect each other. If we want our country to remain a safe place for all its citizens, even the most vulnerable – the disabled, the elderly, the seriously ill, the dying –we cannot give some people the power to kill others, whatever the circumstances.

We are at a decisive turning point in our history. Clear and courageous choices are necessary in order to uphold the importance of human life in our nation!

The Catholic Organization for Life and Family (COLF) was jointly founded by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Supreme Council of the Knights of Columbus, to promote respect for life and human dignity and the essential role of the family.
