

LETTER TO ALL MEMBERS OF THE PARLIAMENT OF CANADA REGARDING BILL C-384

15 October 2009

To the Members of the House of Commons and the

Honourable Members of the Senate of Canada,

The first hour of parliamentary debate for Private Member's Bill C-384, An Act to amend the Criminal Code (Right to die with dignity), has confirmed that the push to legalize euthanasia and assisted suicide in Canada is far from a consensus.

The Catholic Organization for Life and the Family (COLF) would like to add its voice to those of all Canadian citizens who adamantly oppose the legalization of euthanasia and assisted suicide, recognizing that these practices oppose the fundamental principles that guide Canadian society. Keeping in mind that Canada has rejected the death penalty, it would be a contradiction and an injustice to consider allowing some people to directly and intentionally kill others, especially at a time when they are most vulnerable!

A brief examination of countries in which euthanasia and assisted suicide are legal demonstrates how legalization leads to greater permissiveness and tolerance for such practices by doctors as well as some patients. It is also obvious that safeguards in place to avoid abuses are illusory. For example, according to a report from the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport of Holland (2007), 550 Dutch citizens were euthanized without their consent in 2005. In addition, Holland has not been able to shield itself from the use of euthanasia for eugenics: the Groningen Protocol now authorizes euthanasia for severely disabled newborns. It comes as no surprise that the U.N. Committee for Human Rights has highlighted the large number of euthanasia and assisted suicide cases in the Netherlands (July 2009).

Those who claim the so-called "right to die with dignity" believe that a person who has lost his or her autonomy or who is deteriorating physically or mentally has somehow lost their dignity. Nothing could be further from the truth: the dignity of each human person is not dependant on health or other external circumstances. Human dignity is founded on the inherent worth of each person, which can never be altered.

It is vital to put an end to the verbal engineering that is sowing the seeds of confusion in our present discussion and to focus on the true meaning of words. If increasing numbers of Canadians are supporting euthanasia, it is because they fear that their life will be unduly prolonged. The majority of people will change their minds once they understand that "euthanasia must be distinguished from the decision to forego so-called "aggressive medical treatment", in other words, medical procedures which no longer correspond to the real situation of the patient, either because they are by now disproportionate to any expected results or because they impose an excessive burden on the patient and his family. In such situations, when death is clearly imminent and inevitable, one can in conscience "refuse forms of treatment that would only secure a precarious and burdensome prolongation of life, so long as the normal care due to the sick person in similar cases is not interrupted" (Evangelium Vitae, no. 65).

Facing a person with a chronic illness or degenerative disease, a person with a terminal illness, a man or a woman with depression or a severe disability, an elderly person, or someone who is dying — especially if that person feels that he or she is a burden, has a duty to die or demands death as a right — presents each of us with a responsibility and a calling. We are called to "be with" and to "suffer with" those who face some of the greatest challenges of human life. To "suffer with" — that is the true meaning of "compassion" — as we provide proper care and effective pain control, along with social, emotional and spiritual support. Compassion requires that we support each person who suffers, not that we destroy him or her. Euthanasia (or assisted suicide) and compassion are absolutely incompatible.

No one will deny the suffering endured by those requesting euthanasia and assisted suicide. At the heart of that request

is often a profound fear of the pain the person may have to endure and of being alone in that suffering. When the suggestion is made by family members or doctors it stems from many sources: a misguided understanding of the dying process and the ability of their loved one to move through that pain, a concern for the financial implications, and more heinous, a profound individualism that is radically opposed to the common good.

Since Bill C-384 is a perfect recipe for the abuse of the most vulnerable among us, we must, in the name of public security and social justice, reject all present and future attempts to legalize euthanasia and assisted suicide. By doing so, we will avoid seeing a migration of our elders similar to that experienced in Holland, where some seniors are moving to nearby Germany because they no longer trust their doctors and fear their loved ones will take advantage of their vulnerability to shorten their lives (Jean Leonetti, Rapport d'information Solidaires devant la fin de vie, n. 1287, tome 1, Assemblée nationale française, décembre 2008, p. 136).

For Canadian society to remain just and human, three priorities need to be fulfilled: (1) encourage new research and education on pain relief; (2) provide public funding for more palliative care centers and units in order to ensure that all Canadians have access to end of life care; (3) and develop fiscal measures to allow primary care givers to commit themselves freely to the support of their sick or dying loved ones.

Government and law have a crucial responsibility to protect and support the elderly, the sick and the dying, while each citizen has the power to respond with love and solidarity to the illness of others. Sooner or later, we will all need to count on others to help us make the last moments of our life as meaningful and full of dignity as all other moments of transition. We must all uphold and protect the "right to life" in all circumstances until the moment of natural death.

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