

Archbishop Prendergast's Statement on Bill C-14

It was a sad day in Canadian history when the Supreme Court of Canada struck down the Criminal Code provisions against assisted suicide in the Feb. 2015 Carter decision, opening the way for Canada to join the small minority of countries and legal jurisdictions that allow either the direct killing of a patient or indirectly through prescriptions for lethal drugs.

The Supreme Court decision gave an air of inevitability to the legislation we saw presented in Ottawa April 14. Bill C-14, the Liberal government's so-called "Medical Assistance in Dying" bill will legalize both euthanasia and assisted suicide.

Parliament must pass a law by June 6, otherwise, the Carter decision goes into effect, leaving a legal vacuum on euthanasia and assisted suicide similar to that on abortion. This leaves legislators who oppose assisted death on principle between the devil and the deep blue sea.

The legislation we saw presented in the House of Commons Thursday was not inevitable, however. The previous Conservative government and the present Liberal government had the option of invoking the Charter's notwithstanding clause to suspend the Court's decision for five years. The five weeks Bill C-14 has to pass through the House of Commons, the committee stage and the Senate is not enough time to consider the sea change in our laws and health care system legalized euthanasia and assisted suicide will bring.

The constant teaching of the Catholic Church is life must be respected from conception to natural death. To kill an innocent person is always morally wrong, and Catholics must understand requesting an assisted suicide or euthanasia is also morally wrong and puts their souls at risk. By opting for an assisted death, they will not have the proper disposition to receive the Last Rites which includes Confession, Holy Communion and the Anointing of the Sick.

It is also morally wrong for physicians, nurses, pharmacists to participate in euthanasia or assisted suicide and that includes making referrals. Thus it is disappointing the bill does not include express protection for the conscientious rights of health care professionals and for faith-based health care institutions.

While I am grateful Bill C-14 did not include euthanasia and assisted suicide for minors, for the mentally ill, and for those with dementia provided they made an advanced directive while competent, they are not off the table, and subsequent legal challenges or tweaks to the legislation could widen access to a lethal injection or lethal drug cocktail to these vulnerable groups. The experiences of jurisdictions that have legalized euthanasia and assisted suicide show the criteria keeps expanding and safeguards have not protected vulnerable people against being euthanized without their consent.

Catholic legislators, ethicists, doctors' groups may work to mitigate a bad law by trying to ensure legislation does the least harm possible. However, as a Catholic bishop I must remind all people of good will the taking the life of an innocent human being is always morally wrong and should not be allowed in our legal or health care system. If it is, then the conscientious rights of those who prefer not to participate—both health care professionals and patients who want a hospital or hospice that won't kill them—must be respected.

It says in the preamble to Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms: "Whereas Canada was founded on principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law." Unfortunately, the legislation before us to legalize the direct killing of vulnerable Canadians shows us how far we have slipped away from the principles that made Canada the great country she is.

I exhort Canadians to reconsider the direction our country is taking on euthanasia and assisted suicide and to let their MPs and Senators know they want to protect life, and care for vulnerable people, not kill them.

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