



7 February 2015

Dear Pastors, Consecrated Religious, Pastoral Leaders and Parishioners,

It is only yesterday that the Supreme Court of Canada eliminated the ban on doctor-assisted suicide. The Court is giving the federal and provincial governments one year to draw up acceptable legislation on the issue. As you all know, this news has been received with horror by some, with joy by others. I am personally saddened by it.

Up until this morning's news reports, this issue has been named "physician-assisted suicide". I noted that in this morning's news on CBC, it has been renamed "physician-assisted death". I suspect that those who have redubbed this issue have done so deliberately, so as to make it friendlier in tone. But make no mistake about it, this is suicide; we should call it by what it is. A person, presumably of sound mind, has made a decision to end his/her life, and they want their doctor to complete the deed.

I have never felt joy in hearing that the cause of someone's death was suicide. Our understanding of suicide has, of course, changed over the years. In years gone by, we hesitated to give a suicide victim a proper funeral, fearing that the act of suicide was an act of loss of faith. We now more properly understand it as a loss of hope – the person felt hopeless about their future, and they saw suicide as their only relief. I have felt the deep pain of family members and others who loved the person, often accusing themselves of not doing more, while honestly wondering what they could have done. For their sake and for the victim, I am happy that we now provide them a full Christian burial.

This is suicide. Although the person may have suffered from ALS or cancer or some other illness, will we be honest and say that they died of suicide? For it is that which will have killed them, not the disease. And we want our physician to do the job. Let me be personal here – I have a very fine physician, and while he is very professional with me, I also know him outside of his practice. I know him to be, like the vast majority of doctors, a very caring and sensitive man. I assume he became a doctor in order to "help people". I cannot imagine what I would do to him by asking him to finish me off. I hear the claim made that no physician will have to disrespect his conscience, but we have not been consistent in respecting that in others: policemen, nurses, pharmacists, marriage commissioners, politicians. It will only take a claim that the doctor is not respecting my Charter rights to put one's conscience in jeopardy.

*10301-102 Street, Grande Prairie AB T8V 2W2*

*Phone 780 532 9766*

*Fax 780 532 9706*

*Email [archbishop.agm@live.ca](mailto:archbishop.agm@live.ca)*

I am not a doctor, as you well know. I cannot argue this matter from a medical point of view. But I have spoken to many doctors who assure me that palliative care has made great advances in the past fifty years. I hear the argument that people don't want to suffer in their last days, and I understand it very well – I also would find comfort in finishing my life without pain. But I am going to trust that my physician can help me deal with this when the time comes. I do want him to “assist me in dying”, by assuring that I die with dignity and with as little pain as possible. We cannot deny death. It is a real part of life. But let nature take its natural course. It is the folly of human pride to think that we can or should control all things.

The Supreme Court of Canada has thrown every Canadian a challenge. We may find this an emotional topic and may try to avoid it. In the coming months, I encourage all of you to let your voice be heard by our legislators. And please, pray for life, gift of the Creator who has made this world to be very good.

Sincerely in Christ the Redeemer,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "+ Gerard Pettipas, C.Ss.R.". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

+ Gerard Pettipas, C.Ss.R.  
Archbishop of Grouard-McLennan