



Created in the
Image
and
Likeness
of
God

*A Ukrainian Catholic Response to
“Medical Assistance in Dying”*
Pastoral Letter to the Faithful of the
Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Edmonton

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Dear Faithful,

The Supreme Court of Canada’s 2015 decision to strike down a ban on physician-assisted suicide sparked a huge debate in Canada on end-of-life issues.

How do we as Ukrainian Catholics respond to those who are faced with the age-old questions of life and death? How do we remain faithful to the teaching of the Church, and at the same time journey with those in the midst of suffering and loneliness?

It must be emphasized that, by offering a Ukrainian Catholic perspective, we share the same faith in Christ that all Catholics hold—because there is only one Christ who is “the same yesterday, today and forever” (*Hebrews 13:8*).

Yet, it is our approach to these questions that differs from that of Roman Catholics. It is the way we understand and express the meaning of the gifts of Creation and Resurrection that characterizes our particular standpoint.

By way of background information, worthy of reading in their entirety, are several excellent and complementary Canadian pastoral letters on why the Church opposes assisted suicide and euthanasia:

- Alberta and Northwest Territories Roman Catholic Bishops, *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons and Families Considering or Opting for Death by Assisted Suicide or Euthanasia*;
- *Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops of Saskatchewan on the Legalization of Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia*;
- Atlantic Roman Catholic Episcopal Assembly, *A Pastoral Reflection on Medical Assistance in Dying*.

Building upon these and other pastoral responses, what can the Ukrainian Catholic Church add to this conversation? What does our faith teach us?

To answer these questions, and understand better the events that unfolded which led to the debate on end-of-life issues, let us first summarize the Supreme Court of Canada's decision and subsequent federal and provincial changes in civil legislation.

PART ONE CHANGE IN CIVIL LEGISLATION

Supreme Court of Canada's Decision in *Carter v. Canada*

In February 2015, the Supreme Court of Canada found the section of the *Criminal Code* which prohibits assisted suicide to be unconstitutional in some circumstances. As a result, the Court declared Section 241 of the *Criminal Code* invalid, as it prohibits anyone from (a) counselling a person to commit suicide or (b) aiding or abetting a person to commit suicide, whether suicide ensues or not. The Court suspended the declaration of invalidity to give Parliament an opportunity to change applicable legislation to reflect their ruling.

Before this ruling, a person could legally request palliative sedation, refuse artificial nutrition and hydration, or request the removal of life-sustaining medical equipment—all morally acceptable practices in the tradition and teaching of the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, a person could not obtain a physician's assistance to die. The penalty for illegally counselling, aiding or abetting a suicide was, and continues to be, a maximum prison sentence of up to 14 years.

Government of Canada's Response

In response, the Government of Canada passed Bill C-14, *An Act to Amend the Criminal Code* and to make related amendments to other Acts (“medical assistance in dying”). The House of Commons voted 235 to 75 to send Bill C-14 to the Senate for consideration. After study and making several amendments, the Senate of Canada voted 44-28 in favour of passing the Bill. The Bill received Royal Assent and became law on June 17, 2015, the same day as the Senate vote.



Under the new legislation, the *Criminal Code* still generally prohibits assisting a person to die, including by suicide, but there is an exemption for certain health professionals who assist a person to obtain “medical assistance in dying.” The exemption applies in limited circumstances, which include that the person is a mentally competent adult who requests the assistance and consents to receive it, who has a serious and irremediable medical condition which causes intolerable suffering, and for whom natural death is reasonably foreseeable.

Government of Alberta's Response

Health care in Canada is a shared jurisdiction of the federal and provincial-territorial governments. The Government of Canada legislates health care, including as it relates to the *Criminal Code*. Provincial and territorial governments create laws such as those relating to health insurance, health professions, hospitals, and delivery of specific medical services, including detailed regulations applicable to “medical assistance in dying.”

Alberta Health Services (AHS) oversees the provision of health care for the province, including providing information on “medical assistance in dying.” In this regard, the website of AHS reads, in part:

Physicians who are qualified and trained in medical assistance in dying can provide patients with all the information required to make informed choices about treatment, including diagnosis, prognosis and treatment options, and about medical assistance in dying.

Counselling patients on treatment options is part of the role of the physician; medical assistance in dying may be the right option for some, but there are many other options that need to be part of the conversation, including palliative care.

Understanding Euthanasia

Despite the unprecedented legal realities that have changed the Canadian landscape, the perspective of Catholic moral and social teaching clearly affirms that there are enduring higher laws of God that must also be understood and respected.

This pastoral letter reflects upon these laws as revealed to us in Scripture, catechesis, and pastoral experience. In so doing, we are called to discern an authentic response to our suffering sister or brother. As witnesses of Christ's boundless mercy and compassion we accompany the sufferer and help to alleviate her or his suffering, without deliberately hastening the person's death.

This is in stark contrast to what is commonly understood as euthanasia, which the Catechism of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, *Christ Our Pascha*, defines in the following terms:

Euthanasia (from the Greek meaning good death) is an action or inaction which by its nature or its intention causes a person's death with the purpose of eliminating all sorts of diverse suffering. Euthanasia is used not only on the gravely ill but also on newborn infants with birth defects.

In addition to euthanasia "by individual request," there is also "social euthanasia," in which the decision to terminate a life comes not from the person himself but from society, when further medical treatment is deemed futile or excessively expensive, since the necessary resources could be used to treat many other people (Catechism, §908; all further references are to the Ukrainian Catholic Catechism).

The Church teaches:

"Nothing and no one can in any way permit the killing of an innocent human being, whether a fetus or an embryo, an infant or an adult, an old person, or one suffering from an incurable disease, or a person who is dying. Furthermore, no one is permitted to ask for this act of killing, either for himself or herself or for another person entrusted to his or her care, nor can he or she consent to it, either explicitly or implicitly. Nor can any authority legitimately recommend or permit such an act. For it is a question of the violation of the divine law, an offense against the dignity of the human person, a crime against life, and an attack on humanity" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration on Euthanasia, May 5, 1980, no 2) (Catechism, §909).

PART TWO GOD'S PLAN FOR HUMANKIND

Humankind Created in the Image and Likeness of God

To guide our reflection, let us turn to the story of creation and our goal as the people of God as expressed in the Catechism of the Ukrainian Catholic Church, *Christ Our Pascha*.

God created the world and everything in it. Humankind is the crown of God's creation:

Lord, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet (Psalm 8:4-6).

God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:27).



Not only are we made in the image of God, but in the very likeness of God as well:

Every human being that comes into the world is called to grow in likeness to God—to achieve divinization... This partaking in God's nature constitutes human happiness (Catechism, §124).

It is in this vocation, this call to become divinized, that Eastern Christians see the beginning of spiritual life and humanity's eternal progression towards that end.

Our first ancestors began in a state of innocence and simplicity. God set them on the right path, and gave them free will.

The most profound dimension of human freedom consists in being able freely to choose God and to be with him. This is the good. Yet with this same freedom, we can also reject our relationship with God—and this is evil (Catechism, §137).

Enter the serpent, “more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made” (Genesis 3:1). Enter deception, “You will not die ... you will be like God, knowing good and evil (Genesis 3:4-5).

The serpent proposed a false divinization to humankind, suggesting the thought of becoming God but without God, by means of one's own efforts. The devil in Paradise lured Adam with a vain hope for divinization, proposing that he consider that the measure of goodness resides not in God but within himself (Catechism, §145).

Tragically, our first parents chose to disobey God's will, setting up their own will against God's, refusing to accept the invitation to grow in loving communion with God and one another.

Consequences of the Fall

The Fall of our first ancestors is the tragedy of humankind. Instead of being sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters to all, and stewards of creation, humans by their own sinful choice became slaves of evil, enemies to other people ... under the sway of the world. Created in the image of God, humankind failed to attain God-likeness (Catechism, §149).

The result of this turning away from God was devastating: humankind lost Paradise, "the human will to choose good was weakened, and the inclination towards evil increased" (Catechism, §150).

Fear and shame were also consequences of the Fall, and human conscience became clouded. Most profoundly, human beings forfeited their communion with God—the highest Truth (see Catechism, §151).

The spiritual death, which came with the failure of living out their vocation of cooperation, harmony and communion with God, led to bodily death in various forms: disease, suffering, and death itself (see Genesis 3:16-19).

Disorder was introduced into society, and gave rise to vain efforts to build a society without God (see Catechism, §§150-156. Also, see Genesis 11:1-9, the story of the Tower of Babel).

In the end, the value of human beings was measured by their ability to contribute to the building up of the economy and not by their inherent dignity as the beloved sons and daughters of God.



Yet, all was not lost.

God did not turn away from humankind, but continued to abide with it, granting it hope for salvation ... The source of humankind's hope is the love of God the Father, who grants his promise of salvation (Catechism, §158).

The Incarnation: Our Salvation in Jesus Christ

While the image of God in humankind is distorted by sin, it is never destroyed.

While our growth in the likeness to God has been impeded by our ancestral sin, nonetheless, it can be revived.

The love of God for humanity could not be restrained.

“The Fall of the human race did not put a stop to God’s love” (*Catechism*, §182). “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (*John* 3:16). Precisely this love towards humanity—his love for humankind—brought about the coming of God into the world.



It was already in God’s eternal plan for salvation, for our divinization, that God would become human without diminishing his divine nature (*Catechism*, §179, §182).

At the appointed time in history, by the action of the Holy Spirit, the Son of God descended into creation to raise creation to God.

PART THREE CARING FOR THE SICK AND DYING

The Passion of Christ and Suffering

We ask ourselves again: how do we as Ukrainian Catholics respond to those who are faced with the age-old questions of life and death?

Through the witness of Christ’s own passion, suffering, death and resurrection, we come to a deeper understanding of what authentic compassion and accompaniment means.

Our suffering in mind, body and spirit are intimately united to Christ’s own salvific suffering. Christ, through his own suffering and life-giving death, gives our suffering a new meaning: “joined to his sufferings they become a means of purification and a path of salvation for ourselves and others” (*Catechism*, §463).

May we respond to our hurting brothers and sisters with this same selfless witness.

The Works of Christ and Healing

As Christians, we await the second and awesome coming of Christ, when this world will pass away and the Kingdom of God will prevail. Then, in the Resurrection of Our Lord, death will be no more.

In the meantime, the consequences of Adam and Eve's sinfulness—disease, suffering and death—are our reality.

Just as the sign of God's action in the time of Christ were his miracles, so in the life of the Church the signs of Christ at work are the Holy Mysteries [Sacraments]. Jesus entrusts his healing ministry to the Church.

The works of Christ in relation to human ailments offer us healing both in body and soul. With the Mysteries [Sacraments] of Repentance, Holy Anointing, and the Divine Eucharist, the Church journeys with the faithful in their struggles with illness and death.

Healing and the Mystery of Repentance

The *Ukrainian Catholic Catechism* teaches:

The Holy Mystery of Repentance (Confession) is a marvellous manifestation of God's love and mercy towards us sinners. He does not reject us or turn away from us when we, having been washed of our sins in Baptism and endowed with divine grace, sin again through malice or weakness.

Indeed, the Lord awaits our repentance. He forgives us if we repent and confess our sins (Catechism, §449).

Healing and the Mystery of Holy Anointing

During his earthly ministry, Christ preached the Good News about the Kingdom of God and healed all sorts of ailments.

Christ, in healing the sick, granted both forgiveness of sins and physical healing.

Today, the Church continues Christ's healing ministry in the Mystery of Holy Anointing for the healing of soul and body, and for the forgiveness of sins.

The Mystery of Holy Anointing, received at the time of suffering and illness, is celebrated in order to strengthen our faith in Christ's victory over sin and death. In Holy Anointing, God grants the grace to renew a person's inner wholeness—their healing and further spiritual growth ... Therefore our suffering and illness have great spiritual value: "I [Saint Paul] am now rejoicing

in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of the his body, that is, the Church" (Colossians 1:24) (Catechism, §465).

Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven (James 5:14-15).

Healing and the Mystery of the Divine Eucharist

The Christ who suffered his passion and death upon the cross for our salvation is the same Christ who invites us to unite our suffering to his through the healing nourishment of the Divine Eucharist.

The Divine Eucharist, the body and blood of Christ, is a source of healing for both body and spirit.

At the Mystical Supper (Last Supper), Jesus Christ reveals the unfathomable mystery of his Body: in the Incarnation he received a body from the Virgin Mary, and in the Eucharist he offers it to his disciples as nourishment, so that in the Church all humanity and all creation may become his Body.

Saint John Chrysostom explains the gift of Christ at the Mystical Supper: "I have willed to become your brother. For your sake I shared in flesh and blood, and in turn I give to you the flesh and blood by which I became your kinsman" (Catechism, §434).



The True Value of a Person

Many within health care ministry have dedicated their lives to caring for the sick, the elderly, the dying. Many in our families do so similarly. Who has not sacrificed their own sleep to comfort a sick child through the night? Who has not sat by the hospital bedside of a loved one following an operation? Who has not cared for parents in their senior years?

Yet, there are many in our midst who suffer alone, forgotten, abandoned. They have no one to take care of them, to love them. Family and friends are far away and few. Their sickness often leaves them depressed. Dark clouds are moving in all around them.

To make matters worse, society has rejected them. They are sick and unable to work, unable to contribute to the building up of the Gross National Product. Rather, society views them as ever increasingly drawing upon valuable human and financial resources because of their need for medical care and attention.

Every human being has intrinsic dignity and incalculable worth, which can never be taken away even if a person is afflicted by disease or infirmity. Given our inherent value, no person can ever be considered a burden to society, nor should anyone be compelled to end their life for fear of being perceived a burden.

Suffering is part of the human experience that can leave a person impoverished physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually—all requiring an authentic response of compassion that recognizes the person's intrinsic worth.

The true value of a person is defined not in terms of riches and success, but in the ability to love and be loved by God, neighbour, and self.

Regardless of our illness or disability, we are all called to a project that is beyond words to describe: divinization, that is, to become partakers in the divine nature of God. We are called not just to survive, nor even to excel; in our hearts, the still, quiet voice of God calls us to a share in eternal and unbounded Love.

“Medical assistance in dying” introduces choice, and for the first time people may now feel the need to defend their choice for continued life-sustaining therapies rather than simply “ending it all.” Because we measure the value of human life by what utility a person brings rather than as a precious gift in their own right, Canada suffers not just from true physical hunger, but also true spiritual hunger. The Church is called to respond to both.

PART FOUR

RESPONDING TO SUFFERING AND DEATH

Compassion

We need not suffer alone.

In the Gospels, some of Jesus' greatest signs or miracles are in response to some human need. Jesus responds with great love and compassion. When wedding guests are thirsty, he makes wine. When people are hungry, he feeds them with loaves of bread and fish. When his disciples are frightened on a stormy sea, he walks to them on the water and calms the sea.



And Jesus is here today to do the same for us, but maybe not always the way we would like. Jesus didn't cure all the sick people or raise them from the dead in his time. Disease, suffering, and death are a reality of our world. But Jesus did show them compassion, comforted them, and even cried with and for them.

Jesus expects us to do the same for each other. That is why he gave so much wisdom and grace to so many researchers, doctors, nurses, care givers, and priests. He expects us to care for one another, comfort one another, love one another. He continues his healing ministry through us. After all, he endured his own passion, suffering and death upon the cross, not for himself, but for us. It was our sinfulness and suffering that he carried.

Pastoral Accompaniment

Sickness, suffering and death are an inevitable part of what it means to be human. The Church, through its ministers and the Mysteries [Sacraments], provides pastoral care for dying persons and their families.

Whether we are regularly active in a parish, attend only at Christmas or Easter, or not at all, let us not hesitate to contact a priest or lay chaplain when we or family members are sick.

The mysteries of healing and the funeral rites of the Church are available to those who strive, according to the best of their ability, to live in accordance with the teachings of the Church.

The Church minister can pastorally accompany us in our need, supporting and encouraging us in our personal situation, leading us to holiness—that divinization for which we were created.

We are called to reach out to all, for we are all brothers and sisters in need of Christ’s healing and reconciling love.



Covenant Health

We are blessed in the Province of Alberta to have a strong and effective Catholic healthcare institution, Covenant Health, operating as an essential partner with government in our single integrated system of healthcare delivery.

Covenant Health provides all Albertans with outstanding health care, including palliative and hospice care. Quality health care based on Catholic values: serving with compassion, upholding the sanctity of life at all stages, and serving the whole person, mind, body and spirit.

Covenant Health’s unique focus is on four of the most vulnerable populations: seniors, those suffering from mental health and addictions, those in need of palliative end-of-life care, and those in the rural areas who might not be close to a hospital.

Covenant Health’s policy on “Medical Assistance in Dying” was adopted in May 2016. The policy is consistent with the *Health Ethics Guide*, the Catholic Church’s foundational ethics resource, and informed by Catholic moral tradition and teaching.

Covenant Health supports persons in its care who seek more information regarding end-of-life care options, including palliative and hospice care, but will not participate in or provide “medical assistance in dying.”

Covenant Health resources on end-of-life care include:

- Official Covenant Health policy: *Responding to Requests for “Medical Assistance in Dying”*
- *Catholic Health Response to “Medical Assistance in Dying:” Q&A*
- *A Catholic Perspective on Health Decisions and Care at the End of Life*
- *Theological Reflection in support of Covenant Health’s End of Life Strategy*
- *Ethics Made Real – “Medical Assistance in Dying”*

Palliative Care Initiative

Recently, Covenant Health joined with many of Canada’s leading national health organizations and experts in palliative care and health policy to lead a new initiative working towards a national strategy and road map on palliative care, that is, providing quality of life for patients and their families faced with the problems associated with life-threatening illness.

The initiative, called *Palliative Care Matters*, recognizes that the lack of consistent, reliable access to high-quality palliative care services is a serious concern for many Canadians. With Covenant Health’s integral part in developing a national strategy on palliative care, Catholics can be assured that the Church’s teaching on palliative care will be respected and upheld.

The Church will continue to provide comfort and support to patients and families during life-limiting illness, the end stages of life, and when dealing with grief and loss.



Carrying on the Healing Ministry of Christ

Like Covenant Health, we are all called to participate in the healing ministry of Christ. Pope Francis reminds us of this sacred call in his remarks at the conclusion of the Jubilee Year of Mercy. He writes:

We are called to serve Christ the Crucified through every marginalized person. We touch the flesh of Christ in those who are outcast, hungry, thirsty, naked, imprisoned, ill, unemployed, persecuted, in search of refuge.



That is where we find God, that is where we touch the Lord. Jesus Himself told us, explaining the protocol for which we all will be judged: “whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did it for me” (Matthew 25:40) (The Name of God Is Mercy).

The *Ukrainian Catholic Catechism* adds:

Sometimes, because of prolonged and unbearable pain, people may ask for death for themselves or for another.

However, such pleas for death are not always a manifestation of a true desire for assisted suicide or euthanasia. In reality, the gravely ill person needs love, attention, prayer, and spiritual support. Those who are close to the infirm—parents, children, family members, friends, and also doctors, nurses, clergy, and other members of the Church community—are called to surround the infirm with such care (Catechism, §910).

We are all called to carry on the healing ministry of Christ. In doing so, may those who endure suffering, who feel alone and abandoned, who are dying, feel the healing touch of Our Lord who desires not death but eternal life.

Hope—the Strength of Christian Life

Following Jesus’ resurrection from the dead and just before he ascends to the Father, Jesus tells his disciples: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (*Matthew 28:19-20*).

In the midst of our suffering, we are not alone. Jesus does not abandon us. Our hope lies in Jesus Christ.

Hope is born of faith. Hope is the expectation of the fullness of God’s kingdom given us. The Christian outlook on life and the aim of our aspirations transcend the limits of human expectations, and also go beyond suffering and death. The Christian who believes in the risen Christ, who ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father, awaits in hope his or her own glorification with Christ at the time of his glorious second coming (Colossians 3:1-4) (Catechism, §840).

In the midst of suffering and death, the Christian is not lost but relies on the strength of the Risen One who unites us to the Father.

We must remind ourselves constantly that our goal is communion with God, to live in harmony with him and one another, and all of creation. While certain societal factors strive to alienate us from this calling, as Christians we are rooted in Christ who offers salvation to us and to the whole of creation.



Let us go forth with a true desire to carry on the healing ministry of Christ, sacrificing time, talent and treasure in a genuine willingness to journey with those who are suffering, who are dying, offering them comfort and hope in the newness of life, resurrected life, life eternal, life with God.

Yours in the peace of Christ,

Bishop David Motiuk
Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Edmonton



All you who
have been baptized
into Christ
you have put
on Christ!
Alleluia!

Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Edmonton

Created in the Image and Likeness of God
A Ukrainian Catholic Response to “Medical Assistance in Dying”

Pastoral Letter to the Faithful
of the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Edmonton
2017

Copies of this Pastoral Letter may be obtained
at any Ukrainian Catholic Parish in Alberta, or at the

Pastoral Centre
9645 -108 Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta T5H 1A3
(780) 424-5496 chancery@edmontoneparchy.com
edmontoneparchy.com

Online References

1. Alberta and Northwest Territories Roman Catholic Bishops, *Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons and Families Considering or Opting for Death by Assisted Suicide or Euthanasia* [http://caedm.ca/Portals/0/documents/family_life/2016-09-14_SacramentalPracticeinSituationsofEuthanasia.pdf]
2. *Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops of Saskatchewan on the Legalization of Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia* [[https://archregina.sk.ca/sites/default/files/newsstories/Pastoral Letter on Euthanasia and assisted suicide - March 2016.pdf](https://archregina.sk.ca/sites/default/files/newsstories/Pastoral%20Letter%20on%20Euthanasia%20and%20assisted%20suicide%20-%20March%202016.pdf)]
3. Atlantic Roman Catholic Episcopal Assembly, *A Pastoral Reflection on Medical Assistance in Dying* [[http://rcchurch.com/uploads/AEA Pastoral letter medical assisted dying.pdf](http://rcchurch.com/uploads/AEA_Pastoral_letter_medical_assisted_dying.pdf)]
4. Alberta Health Services [albertahealthservices.ca]
5. Covenant Health (Alberta) [covenanthealth.ca]
6. Palliative Care Matters [palliativecarematters.ca/home]

Photo Credits

- ❖ *Hope* by Marc-Olivier Jodoin at unsplash.com (page 1)
- ❖ *Parliament of Canada* (Centre Block) by Andrijko Z. at commons.wikimedia.org (page 3)
- ❖ Creation of Adam and Eve, public domain (page 5)
- ❖ Expulsion from Paradise by Michelangelo, public domain (page 6)
- ❖ The Nativity in the Flesh of Our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ, XVI c., Trushevychi, Lviv Oblast, Ukraine (page 7)
- ❖ Fragment of Icon of Holy Communion to the Apostles, XII c., Saint Sophia Cathedral, Kyiv, Ukraine (page 9)
- ❖ All other images from Shutterstock.com - used with permission.