

**Pastoral letter of the Bishop to the clergy and faithful
of the Diocese of Pembroke**
Witnessing the dignity of Life - Feast day of the Baptism of the Lord
Sunday, January 10, 2021

“Stay Awake!” (Mt 24:42)

During Advent, we have heard the voice of St John the Baptist calling the Church to repentance, conversion and the spiritual challenge of making a straight way for the coming of the Lord. Hearing this call from the Word of God each year beckons us to ‘stay awake’ for the coming of the Lord and to be prepared to give an accounting of our lives before Him at the end of time. Welcoming Christ into our hearts requires us to open our lives to Him completely and wholeheartedly, knowing that the Risen Lord and his law are where our true freedom is found.

While we were journeying through these days of Advent in our own nation, legislative procedures were undertaken that seek to expand euthanasia/assisted suicide laws to encompass those whose death is not immediately foreseeable, including those who are living with mental illness or a disability. The race towards radical expansion of the assisted dying laws in Canada in just a few short years has taken place alongside growing acceptance and normalization of something that just a few years ago was unthinkable. ‘Medical Assistance in Dying’ (MAiD) is now publicly celebrated as a virtue in many media stories, and it is not uncommon to see public obituaries proudly profess euthanasia/assisted suicide as a celebrated means of death. When societal attitudes evolve so quickly and popularly, as followers of Christ, we must return to St John the Baptist’s call to conversion and repentance: ‘*Stay awake!*’

The Good Samaritan: Witnessing to the dignity of life

Our Holy Father Pope Francis consistently acts as a voice in the wilderness, calling all followers of Christ to oppose euthanasia and assisted suicide. In September, Pope Francis approved, through the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a letter called *Samaritanus Bonus (The Good Samaritan): on the care of persons in the critical and terminal phases of life*. It may be accessed online at vatican.va. Using the parable of the Good Samaritan, the letter reminds us that euthanasia is a “*crime against human life*”, and therefore is intrinsically evil in every circumstance. Additionally, any formal or material cooperation (assisting in facilitating the process of euthanasia/assisted suicide) constitutes a grave sin against human life. Such realities should not cause believers to retreat into silence, but rather to re-commit ourselves to radical accompaniment of those who are facing serious physical and mental distress, and seek to care for them in every way possible: physically, emotionally and spiritually. I highly encourage you to take the time to read *Samaritanus Bonus*, since in the face of such rapidly changing legal and ethical situations in our country and families, we must allow our hearts and consciences to be formed to God’s Law as spoken to us in Christ and His Church.

Samaritanus Bonus addresses the formation of family members, health care professionals and clergy in facing the unthinkable situations surrounding an impending assisted suicide. The letter makes it very clear that *“the quality of love and care for persons in critical and terminal states of life contributes to assuaging the terrible, desperate desire to end one’s life. Only human warmth and evangelical fraternity can reveal a positive horizon of support to the sick person in hope and confident trust”*. (SB, 10) This need for radical accompaniment of the sick person means that every effort must be made to show sacrificial love, provide real comfort and seek to alleviate physical and mental distress. Hospital chaplains and clergy are exhorted to intensify the spiritual and moral formation of healthcare workers, including physicians and nursing staff, as well as those who volunteer in our healthcare facilities, so that all involved in the care of the dying may at all times be faithful witnesses to the Gospel of Life.

Care for the body and the salvation of souls

Just as the alleviation of physical and emotional suffering is crucial at the time of caring for someone who is sick, so too is the spiritual responsibility of caring for the soul of a person. While our bodies will eventually die, the soul is the innermost part of the person, and is immortal. Authentic care for the soul is not arbitrary, but finds fullness in encountering the Truth as revealed to us by Christ. Pope Francis has taken this obligation seriously in seeking to ensure that all members of the Church are clearly aware that euthanasia is, in every circumstance, a grave evil. As your Chief Shepherd, together with the priests of the Church, we have promised with our lives to articulate what is inscribed on the human heart and taught by the Church. While many will seek to dismiss and discredit such teachings in light of the growing acceptance and even promotion of euthanasia/assisted suicide, the Word of God in recent Sundays has reminded all of us that we will all have to render a personal account before the Lord. Since the pastors of the Church are entrusted with the care of souls, we must endeavour not only to articulate the teaching but also the reasons *why* the teaching is consistent with the Good News of God’s Law.

Samaritanus Bonus imparts very clear pastoral guidance as to why the Sacraments are not to be administered to one who has made his/her decision for euthanasia. The Church has consistently shown us that the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick and Viaticum are to be administered only when a proper disposition is evident, specifically contrition and openness to the mercy of God. One cannot be open to the graces of the Sacraments while at the same time having an intention of then violating God’s Law with euthanasia/assisted suicide. To do so would create a situation where a priest is unable to administer the Sacraments faithfully. The graces of the Sacraments are so lavish that the ministers of the Church must never give up praying with such persons to seek a conversion of heart. *Samaritanus Bonus* states, *“The position of the Church here does not imply a non-acceptance of the sick person. It must be accompanied by a willingness to listen and to help, with a deeper explanation of the nature of the sacrament, in order to provide the opportunity to desire and choose the sacrament up to the last moment”*. (SB, 11)

We are now faced with the new pastoral reality of what happens in the Christian community when one has followed through with euthanasia/assisted suicide. The manner of death is often widely known and even celebrated. Perhaps in recent decades we have lost sight of the purpose of the Mass of Christian Burial: to pray for our deceased brother or sister, and to commend them to the mercy and tenderness of Almighty God by joining them to the one sacrifice of Christ made present in the Mass. Funerals are first and foremost for the dead, and we who are left to mourn find consolation in the great promise of Christ's victory over sin and death and great promise of the resurrection of the body. This is one of the great consolations of our living faith. While funerals are for all redeemed sinners, the Church also requires that the celebration of Christian funerals be a proclamation of faith and reflect the life and conscience of the one who has died. The Church offers Christian Burial for those who have tragically died by suicide, because we are unable to understand the darkness that person was experiencing and how such suffering impaired their own decision-making at the time of death. That is why there is great consolation in the offering of funeral rites in such situations. Yet the decision to die by euthanasia/assisted suicide is a very different pastoral situation, because by virtue of the laws of our country, a person choosing this method of death — while undoubtedly suffering — manifests his/her decision in a way that is deemed rational and wholehearted. The further pain of this situation is that this deliberate decision — assisted by professionals and affirmed by those who cooperate — causes a wound of scandal in the wider believing community. In such situations, it is not possible for the offering of a Christian funeral, since such a notorious decision would undoubtedly be the cause of great difficulty for the community of the Church. This does not exclude the urgent need to pray for the deceased, but with such a public manifestation of intention, it would be difficult for an official minister of the Church to lead a liturgy in a church, funeral home or cemetery. The pastor of souls would have to endeavour to ensure that Masses for the Dead and other prayers are offered for the benefit of the deceased and for the consolation of those who mourn.

Be transformed by the renewal of your mind (Rm 12: 2)

Just a few years ago, we could not have imagined the widespread ramifications of these issues on the life of families and the community of the Church. It must be clearly stated that in these pastoral circumstances, when the final Sacraments or Catholic funeral rites cannot take place, the Church is not punishing any person, since it is the desire of the Church that every soul benefit from the necessary graces that they offer.

It is necessary for all pastors and catechists of our diocese to begin, as soon as possible, to find practical and unified ways to form and educate the consciences of our faithful and of those who believe that euthanasia/assisted suicide is a positive evolution in our modern societies. I strongly encourage all of you to work in unison with me to reverse this rising trend, because, as you know, many Catholics are now adhering to it, not realizing the grave consequences that could ultimately compromise their eternal salvation. Therefore, when receiving a request for a funeral liturgy, whether it is to be presided at the church or at the funeral home, **in cases of uncertainty** and after giving our sincere condolences, the pastor or deacon should **respectfully** enquire about the nature of the death, to possibly determine if it is an act of euthanasia/assisted suicide or not. Our experience to date is that we are often

faced with this shocking truth during the funeral liturgy itself or when a member of the family gives an unexpected eulogy at the funeral home or at the cemetery.

This respectful enquiry will give us an opportunity to form and educate the conscience of those who do not understand the danger of euthanasia. If the person does not understand the reasoning behind the position of the Church, may I suggest a first step before you open the apologetical doors that often lead nowhere: invite them to read the letter from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Samaritanus Bonus* (or refer them to a simpler version of the same text). Before the next phase of discussion, pray that God will give you his grace to always remain at peace and respectful when you listen or talk to the person. Many people need to be listened to before they accept any reasonable or logical arguments, especially in times of grief. After a frank and polite discussion, if the person continues to object, a third step would be to affirm that they must respect the fact that we are not able to provide for the funeral liturgy at the church or at the funeral home. It would become a contradiction of our Catholic beliefs and an object of scandal for the Christian communities who become confused when they hear of the public liturgy for a euthanized person at the church or at the funeral home. This could eventually lead our faithful to believe that euthanasia/assisted suicide is now accepted by the Church. But nevertheless, we can reassure them that we will continue to pray for the deceased person and for the grieving family and friends. Special Mass intentions could later be offered for the person and/or for family members. As stated earlier in this pastoral letter, the Church's intention is not to punish when giving her directives. She is simply echoing the command of our God-Creator who expects respect for his infinite Wisdom and Providence in deciding who comes to life in this world, and when it is time for us to leave our temporal dwelling.

To conclude

The echo of St John the Baptist to repent, change our ways, and make a highway in our hearts for the Saviour is not a call reserved to the days of Advent. The call to conform ourselves to Christ totally and wholeheartedly is the daily vocation of discipleship. This purification of our mind and heart to live the Christian life is all the more challenging in an influential and secular culture that seeks to conform the Church's teaching and practices to popular opinion. St Paul exhorts us in the Letter to the Romans:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12.1-2)

This Year of St Joseph presents us with a fitting time to seek the intercession of the "just one" who quietly shows us the example of fidelity to the will of God, even when seemingly difficult. May St Joseph, patron of a happy death — and patron of Canada — assist us in keeping our minds hearts always awake and eager for the coming of the Lord.

+ Guy Desrochers, C.M.

Bishop of Pembroke