

A Pastoral Letter to

The People, Clergy and Religious Catholic communities in Victoria Dioceses of Melbourne, Ballarat, Sale and Sandhurst

Re Voluntary Assisted Dying

Sunday 16 June 2019

Dear friends,

On the morning of Wednesday 19 June 2019 we will wake to a new, and deeply troubling chapter of health care in Victoria. On that day the *Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD) Act* (2017) comes into effect, creating the legal possibility for a person to end their own life or a doctor ending it on request in particular circumstances. What is being referred to as 'VAD' is a combination of what in plain-speaking is more commonly known as *physician assisted suicide* and *euthanasia*.

Many people support euthanasia in various forms, and some also express a belief in God. A number of the loudest voices, including some members of the Victorian Parliament, have called VAD a 'compassionate' response to suffering, and those who oppose VAD have been accused of lacking in compassion.

Contrary to this position, Pope Francis has encouraged ordinary Catholics everywhere to resist euthanasia and to protect the old, the young and the vulnerable from being cast aside in a "throw-away culture." Instead, Francis calls us to follow Christ by accompanying people with compassion, sharing hope not fear. In Victoria, we have entered a moment in which we are called to join this task.

Christians in Victoria, as in any other time of history, are now challenged to show a different approach to death and the dying, one which accompanies every person as they are dying and allows them to love and to be loved to the very end. We cannot cooperate with the facilitation of suicide, even when it seems motivated by empathy or kindness. These words will sound hard to hear, but as pastors of the Catholic dioceses of Melbourne, Ballarat, Sale and Sandhurst, we feel a responsibility not just to say "no" to VAD, but to give every encouragement to model a way of life that renders VAD unnecessary.

We call to mind Saint Gianna Beretta Molla and Blessed Franz Jagerstatter who witnessed to the moral commitments that arose out of their faith by their conscientious objection. Gianna and Franz lived in the twentieth century – not that long ago – and were called by the Lord to witness to the dignity of human life despite great personal cost. There are countless other examples and we draw encouragement and strength from their witness of self-giving. In our particular circumstance, St Gianna and Bl Franz can help us find our way ahead.

Also in our own time, Catholic hospitals and Catholic residential care organisations have shown great courage. They have united to find ways to model excellent care for their patients, and are committed to resisting calls to involve themselves in VAD. Please learn about their thoughtful and considered response to VAD, which is framed through their enduring commitment to excellence in end of life care, and show them your support.

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All of us who hold a principled opposition to euthanasia are now, in effect, *conscientious objectors*.

- We object to the unnecessary taking of a human life;
- we object to the diminishment of the love that can be given and received in the last days of our loved ones;
- we object to the lack of adequate funding for excellent palliative care;
- we object to state-sponsored practices that facilitate suicide;
- and most of all we object to the lazy idea that the best response our community can offer a person in acute suffering is to end their life.

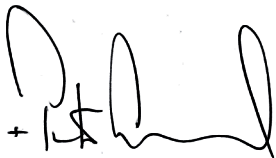
Christians in Victoria have asked their pastors and priests what they can do. In the information provided, we draw attention to our need to **pray**, to **be informed**, and to **act**.

We are called to engage with our Victorian communities with friendship and wisdom, not motivated by fear. We hold no animosity for those with whom we disagree – we simply wish to bear witness to what is good and true in those we love, and accompany them as Christ calls us. *We will not abandon those we love*, and we believe they have a right to be loved from the beginning to the end of their life.

As in all difficult moments of life and death, Christians look to the Good Shepherd who said:

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

Yours in Christ Jesus,



Most Rev Peter A Comensoli DD
ARCHBISHOP OF MELBOURNE



Most Rev Paul Bernard Bird CSsR DD
BISHOP OF BALLARAT



Most Rev Patrick Michael O'Regan DD
BISHOP OF SALE



Most Rev Leslie R Tomlinson DD
BISHOP OF SANDHURST

