



Diocese of Port Pirie Chancery

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Pastoral Letter to the Christian Faithful of the Diocese of Port Pirie

The Affirmation of Life

Dear Brothers & Sisters

Life is affirmed in many ways. Look at the joy and the hope and the life that came from the ordinations of Gary Stokes, Harold Camonias and Ramel Morales have brought for our diocese. Their presence is like water coming to a dry land, creating new life among the People of God.

And there is physical life. In August last year I had the quadruple by-passes; seven months later, to the day, I had the operation for bowel cancer and commenced the thirty week chemotherapy course. After such a double whammy, I thought “strewth”, what’s next? Leprosy?! On a more serious note, such experiences remind one forcefully of the prayer of the Lord, “Thy will be done”, and how life is a gift, to be cherished and given thanks for every day.

The affirmation of life is a theme of Holy Scripture, from the marvellous words in the Book of Wisdom,

Yes, you love all that exists, you hold nothing of what you have made in abhorrence,
for had you hated anything, you would not have formed it, and how, had you not willed it, could a
thing persist?
How be conserved if not called forth by you? You spare all things because all things are yours, Lord,
lover of life,
you whose imperishable spirit is in all. (Wisdom 11:24)

And there is the wonderful cry of Jesus, “I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full. (John 10: 10) The Church has repeated this daily since the earliest times in The Creed – “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life”. In such a tradition, who are we to take life away in euthanasia? Legislation to intervene, to perform a direct killing of another human being, even those not terminally ill, is presently before our Parliament in South Australia. We also note that good people are often confused about the Church’s attitude towards euthanasia, thinking that Catholics are told they must go to extraordinary means to keep life going. The teaching of the Church is simply that there can be no direct intervention, with the deliberate intention to kill. The doctor who administers morphine to relieve pain, even though the incremental additions will eventually bring about death, is not in contradiction with the Church’s teachings. People tend to think that the Church is opposed to any form of alleviation of pain, and this is just not the case.

We have three Homes for the Aged in our diocese, and as you would appreciate the word “euthanasia” leaps out of a newspaper page or news bulletin when the elderly in our Homes read or hear it, and causes unnecessary anxiety. Bishop Eugene Hurley has written how the brief euthanasia experience in the Northern Territory caused dread in the Aboriginal population, and engendered fear not trust of the doctor and the nurse among the people. The relationship was severely affected.

There are many things being said about this very sensitive topic. Those of us who have watched a loved one die, especially if it is a hard dying, can sympathise with the compassionate words of those who promote euthanasia. But often the sentiments to end it all are in the beholder, not in the patient. The St Vincent's Hospital doctors report that it is very rare indeed for a dying patient to ask for euthanasia, and the request often comes from the family instead. I am not aware of any such requests coming from the many residents in our Homes for the Aged. Very few of the dying seem to ask for it. Paul Kelly, Editor of *The Australian*, wrote an excellent article describing how a society changes itself forever when it legislates for death (*Weekend Australian 1-2 October 2016*).

Some strong advocates of euthanasia decry any talk of "the slippery slope", but the evidence is there and undeniable. Take abortion, for example. When South Australia pioneered this legislation, there were all sorts of safeguards to prevent abortion being simply on demand. That has now so clearly changed after the passage of years, and presently the largest single group obtaining an abortion in South Australia are overseas Asian students, who in circumstances away from home and in a strange environment have incurred unwanted pregnancies, and solve it through an abortion request readily accepted. Similarly, with euthanasia in Holland and Belgium. When it was originally proposed there was no thought at all in the framers of the legislation that there would be such a thing as children's euthanasia, but now both countries have set up procedures to enable this. And like our Aboriginal people, what does it do to the status of the healing profession, turning them into administrators of an act that is the antithesis of their calling?

May our fellow citizens join with us in revering and holding sacred the human life of the frail and dying knowing that the Lord's "imperishable spirit is in all".

Yours in Christ



+ Gregory O'Kelly SJ
Bishop of the Diocese of Port Pirie

14th October 2016