

Updated: Bishops urge Catholics to demand end to euthanasia law as Ottawa seeks its expansion

The bishops of Alberta and the Northwest Territories are calling on Catholics to mobilize in their opposition to euthanasia and assisted suicide even as the federal government looks to expand the criteria to qualify.

“We are absolutely opposed to euthanasia and assisted suicide and we disagree vehemently with its very existence in the country,” Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith said of the 2016 law that legalized Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD), which is under review.

“Naturally, we would be opposed to its expansion,” Archbishop Smith said. “The longer that something is in law, the longer people can think that because it’s legal, it’s also morally permissible. That’s a stance that we can’t allow to stand unchallenged. We have a number of things in our country that might be allowed legally, that doesn’t mean that they are morally permitted.”



Archbishop Richard Smith

A pastoral letter signed by Smith, and the bishops of Calgary, St. Paul, Grouard-McLennan, McKenzie-Fort Smith, and the Ukrainian Eparchy of Edmonton, was shared with parishioners at Masses on the Jan. 18-19 weekend. The letter is in English and French.

“Euthanasia and assisted suicide stand in stark opposition to the Christian way

of living and our belief in the sanctity of human life,” the bishops’ letter says. “Neither is permissible, since they violate the prohibition against taking innocent human life and stand as a rejection of God’s absolute sovereignty over life and death.”

The bishops of B.C. and the Yukon have issued a similar pastoral letter and Winnipeg Archbishop Richard Gagnon, president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, has also written to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

In their letter, the bishops call on all Canadians, and Catholics in particular, to press members of parliament to vote against any expansion of MAiD. They also call on the federal government to expand palliative care, and on health professionals to assert their right to refuse to participate in euthanasia and assisted suicide.

Canadians are being asked to weigh in on changes to the MAiD law as Ottawa seeks to amend the Criminal Code to permit greater access to assisted suicide. Survey responses are being accepted until Jan. 27. Over 100,000 people have responded, Health Minister Patty Hajdu said in Calgary after closed-door talks on MAiD on Jan.17. Justice Minister David Lametti said new legislation will be tabled next month.

The Liberal government’s move to amend the MAiD law is in response to a Quebec court decision. In September, a judge declared parts of the federal and provincial laws on assisted dying unconstitutional, ruling that the requirement that a patient must face a “reasonably foreseeable” death before asking for MAiD violated their Charter rights.



Health Minister Patty Hajdu was in Calgary Jan. 17 for closed-door talks on MAiD. Grandin Media file photo

If no new legislation is passed by March 11, the “reasonably foreseeable” provision in the law will be suspended in the province. Even without the court ruling, the law was facing review this year.

Since it was legalized, the federal government reports more than 6,700 Canadians have died through MAiD.

Current eligibility requirements say candidates must be 18 or older, able to make health decisions for themselves, and “in grievous and irremediable medical condition” – although not terminal – to qualify.

The survey asks whether the federal government should change the length of the 10-day reflection period between requesting and receiving a medically assisted death. It asks about an “advance request” for MAiD for patients who later lose their capacity to confirm their consent.

The survey also noted that the report of an expert panel last year looked at the possibility of expanding MAiD to people under 18 – if doctors decide they are mature enough to make decisions on their own care -as well as people with certain psychiatric conditions.

The survey itself is disingenuous, says Dr. Thomas Fung, a Catholic physician in Calgary. He noted the survey is steered towards removing the “reasonable foreseeable” death criteria from the MAiD law while not explicitly asking whether Canadians favour removal at all.



Dr. Thomas Fung

“It basically was kind of like a foregone conclusion that this was going to happen,” Fung said, adding once the criteria are removed, MAiD will be easier to access. “It really opens the doorway for suicide on demand essentially ... At

some point, human suffering is a subjective experience, so it's really hard to objectify who should qualify for MAiD when the near-death criteria is removed."

Archbishop Smith said the bishops are issuing their pastoral letter because of what they see as an alarming culture that is not only normalizing euthanasia and assisted suicide but favouring expansion – in particular, through the "advanced request."

"That puts the decision in the hands of somebody else. And we don't have the right to ask somebody else to decide for me when my life is deserving of coming to an end," Smith said. "It seems that it robs the person of that capacity, over time, to change their position, to change their mind and to be acting in freedom at the moment that such as serious action is taken.

"It had always been up until now, a rock-solid conviction that medicine is dedicated to the preservation of life and to doing no harm. Well, now we have ... medicine being used actually prematurely to end life, which turns the medical profession on its head," Smith said. "It introduces the possibility of a lack of trust between patient and doctor. This is something that divides families."

MAiD is also an issue that has divided the medical profession. Fung noted the conscience rights of physicians who object to MAiD – as well as other controversial procedures such as abortion – are under fire.

An Ontario court ruled that doctors in that province must give referrals for medical services such MAiD and abortion, which is tacit approval. In Alberta, a bill to protect the conscience rights of health providers never got past the committee stage. In Delta, B.C., a hospice has been ordered by the local health authority to provide MAiD, even though such an action would violate their constitution.

"Really we're seeing discrimination at every level for those of us who object to MAiD," Fung said.

"Despite Canadian Medical Association code of ethics and other provincial association guidelines to protect conscientious objectors, there is really nothing legal that is helping us to advance our case in court. We're losing every time we go to court, and I think we're seeing a pattern here.

"MAiD is a moral evil," Fung said. "It's become, in a way, a kind of right in itself. And I think that rests on a false premise of unlimited autonomy. As a Catholic, one cannot participate in any way, shape or form but the way the government is implementing it, one may not have much of a choice in the future, especially with some of the court rulings."



Delta Hospice Society, the non-profit behind the Irene Thomas Hospice in Ladner, south of Vancouver, is facing pressure from the Fraser Health Authority to offer medical assistance in dying to its patients. Canadian Catholic News

Nevertheless, Fung said there is a possibility of striking a balance.

“If we enshrine legal conscience protection for physicians, that will allow us to continue to practise without undue pressure and professional repercussions,” he said. “As long as there’s robust self-referral access resources available, patients do not need to go through providers who object in order to access that service.”

In their letter, the bishops recognize that there are situations where a family member or loved one experiences pain and suffering. And it’s a personal issue for Archbishop Smith, whose father Donald suffered from dementia for years until his death on Sept. 28.

“We just said it’s on us, as the children who love him, and we owe it to him as our father, we owe it to him as a human being in dignity to give ourselves to him too and accompany him at every stage, even when he ceased to know us or really understand the relation,” Smith recalled, “and by our presence and by our love and by our care, just communicate as clearly as we could that this individual is of great, great dignity and of great, great worth – and none of

that is diminished by his physical capacity.”

Smith’s message to families who have a loved one who is suffering is to continue to love them.

“Just continue to be with them. Look for any opportunity, if there’s a need for reconciliation, for the healing of relationships. We will never, ever regret the time that we spend with our loved ones.

“Be there in that attitude and stance of love, even when sometimes the suffering doesn’t allow conversation or speech. That has a power within the soul of the individual that is difficult for us to grasp humanly or to express humanly either.”