

***Pastoral Norms in the Formation of Conscience, Administration of Sacraments and
Celebration of Funeral Rites in the Context of Physician-Assisted Suicide***

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. Physician-assisted suicide or legally known as '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

Pope Francis was consistently a voice in the wilderness, calling all followers of Christ to oppose euthanasia and assisted suicide. In September of 2020, Pope Francis issued, through the Dicastery 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. Catholics are encouraged 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, in the Scriptures, and in the 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.

Bishops, priests and deacons have made life-long promises 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 reminds 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)

New Pastoral Realities and Challenges: Funerals

Ever since the practice of physician-assisted death became normative in Canada, the pastoral realities and challenges have shifted. We are now faced with the new pastoral reality of what happens in the Christian community when one has followed through with assisted suicide. This moment provides the Christian community with an opportunity to

renew our understanding of the purpose of the Mass of Christian Burial: to pray for our deceased brother or sister, and to commend their soul to the mercy and tenderness of Almighty God by joining them to the one sacrifice of Christ made present in the Mass.

In Catholic funerals we confidently celebrate Christ's paschal mystery. Its intention is that those who by baptism were made one body with Christ in his dying and rising, may with Christ pass from death to life. The Church, therefore, offers the Eucharistic sacrifice of Christ's Passover for the dead and pours forth prayers and petitions for them. Because of the communion of all Christ's members with each other, all of this brings spiritual aid to the dead and consolation of hope to the living. At the death of a Christian, whose life of faith was begun in the waters of baptism and strengthened at the Eucharistic table, the Church intercedes on behalf of the deceased because of her confident belief that death is not the end, nor does it break the bonds forged in life.

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. The Church also ministers to the sorrowing and consoles them in the funeral rites with the comforting Word of God and the Sacrament of the Eucharist. While all funerals are for 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.

As we consider the question of a Christian funeral, there are two principal points to be taken into consideration and held in balance. First, all ecclesiastical funerals are offered for sinners. The Church, as a generous mother, is eager to intercede for her children even when they have wandered. Second, however, the Church requires her funeral celebrations to be real signs of faith and to be respectful of the conscience and decisions of persons who have defected seriously from the faith (Canon 1184): notorious apostates, heretics and schismatics; persons who chose cremation of their own bodies for reasons opposed to the Christian faith; other manifest sinners whose funerals would cause public scandal – unless they have shown some sign of repentance before death. When facing questions of doubt about grave public scandal, a parish priest or deacon should consult the Bishop.

As the ministers of the Church face the new situation of funeral requests for persons who have elected to die by assisted suicide or euthanasia, the following are additional considerations. The Church does, in fact, celebrate Christian funerals for those who have been found after the fact to have died by suicide. We are not able to judge the reason the person has taken that decision or the disposition of their heart.

The case of assisted suicide or euthanasia, however, is a situation where more may sometimes be known of the disposition of the person and the freedom of the chronically ill man or woman, particularly if the case is high profile or notorious. In such cases, it may not be possible to celebrate a Christian funeral Mass. If the Church were to refuse a funeral to someone, it is not to punish the person but to recognize his or her decision – a free and informed decision that has brought him or her to an action that is contrary to the Christian faith, that is somehow notorious and public, and would do harm to the Christian community and the larger culture.

However, family circumstances must also be considered. As they face the death of a loved one, family members need the prayer and support of the Church. Perhaps the family did not will the assisted suicide or euthanasia of their loved one, and is looking to the Church for the assistance and comfort of her intercession and mercy. In such a situation, provided there would not be cause for public scandal (Canon 1184), the funeral rites could be celebrated.

There may also be the case, however, of a family or friends that wish the funeral rites to be an occasion to celebrate the decision of their loved one to die by assisted suicide or euthanasia and thus to promote these practices as acceptable. This would be truly scandalous, as it could be an encouragement to others to engage in the evil that is euthanasia and assisted suicide. Such a request for funeral rites must be gently but firmly denied. In these situations, the Bishop must be consulted.

It must always be remembered that the burial of the dead is among the corporal works of mercy. Therefore, even when the official funeral rites of the Church must be denied, a liturgy of the Word at the funeral home or simple prayers at the graveside might be proposed. Perhaps a Mass for the repose of the deceased's soul could be celebrated at a later date. This is a matter of the priests' good pastoral judgement. How to offer care and support to a family in the wake of these tragic events remains something we must always bear in mind, whether we celebrate the full funeral rites or not.

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

It is necessary for all pastors and catechists 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. Pastors, teachers and the entire Christian community must work in unison with to reverse these rising trends, because the culture around us has normalized these realities, without realizing the grave consequences that could ultimately compromise the eternal salvation of souls.

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, before opening up 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. We do our best to ensure that our language and actions must never lead our faithful to falsely believe that euthanasia/assisted suicide is now accepted by the Church. But nevertheless, we have the capacity to reassure others 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. The Church's consistent ethic of life simply echoes 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.

By the mercies of God

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)

May St Joseph, example of fidelity, 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.

Diocese of Pembroke
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Sources:

Samaritanus Bonus (The Good Samaritan): on the care of persons in the critical and terminal phases of life, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2020.

Guidelines for the Celebration of the Sacraments with Persons & Families Considering or Opting for Death by Assisted Suicide or Euthanasia, Archdiocese of Toronto, 2017.

The Order of Christian Funerals, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Witnessing to the Dignity of Life, Diocese of Pembroke, 2021.