

Bearers of Consolation and Hope Ngā Kaihāpai o te Aroha me te Tūmanako

A Pastoral Statement from the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference on

The spiritual and pastoral care of persons contemplating assisted dying in Aotearoa New Zealand

1. Faith sometimes leads us to places we might rather not be (cf. *John 21:18; Pope Francis, Homily 14 April 2013, 2*)

Soon, in Aotearoa New Zealand, some health professionals, chaplains and priests will find themselves in situations not of their own choosing. ‘Medically assisted dying’ (euthanasia) becomes legally available in our land on the 7th of November. While this course of action will not be offered in our Catholic rest homes or Catholic hospices, or indeed many others, it will become available in a number of hospitals and other public care facilities throughout the country. For some of our Catholic community, these are their places of work or ministry.

2. The implementation of assisted dying for persons with a life-limiting illness will put many vulnerable people at risk. These include the elderly who may feel they have become a burden to family and society, and many others, some of whom will be young. The question arises: how might we, as Catholics, respond when someone confides in us that they are contemplating assisted dying? How can we be bearers of consolation and hope in these situations?

The Old Testament figure of Job is a striking example of one who struggled with his circumstances, both societal and personal. He was filled with angst about the prevailing culture, and he found his own life almost intolerable. Yet, he clung firm to his belief in the goodness of God and reasoned that “if we take happiness from God’s hand, must we not take sorrow too?” (*Job 2:10*). Through perseverance in faith and trust in God’s time, te wā o te Atua, Job was able to turn his personal cry of despair into a wonderful testimony of consolation and hope for all.

Many parents know only too well the mix of desolation and consolation. Sometimes their children – young or adult – make decisions, or behave in ways, contrary to the Gospel. Yet, as mothers and fathers, far from turning away, they stay close, ever ready to offer a hand or word that redirects rather than scolds (*Benedict XVI, Spe Salvi, 38*). They pray for their daughter or son, entrusting them to our merciful God while continuing to walk alongside them in love.

3. The legal availability of euthanasia in New Zealand does not change Catholic convictions about the practice. We profess that we are made in the image and likeness of God and, furthermore, that we are drawn into God's own divine life through Baptism. Our fundamental belief, that all human life is therefore sacred, leads us to teach that we should never take the life of another.

At the same time, our faith tells us there is no place or situation, no matter how uncomfortable, where our faith cannot be expressed, or God's grace encountered. Perhaps too often we presume that God works only through our better parts or places. Yet, most of God's plans are realised in and through our fears, our frailties and our weaknesses (*Patris Corde, 2; 2 Corinthians 12:9-11*), and often in places where, understandably, some might hesitate to go.

4. What precisely is it that our Catholic health professionals, chaplains, priests and lay pastoral workers can bring to those contemplating euthanasia who, with good intent, turn to them for consolation? What is it that we can bring to these situations as whānau – parents, daughters and sons, siblings – or as friends?

Like Job, we could be tempted to give up, or turn away, and thus let the desolation of wrongdoing or despair take over. But, as Job reasoned, that would be turning our backs on God. Faith, in the first instance, calls us to remain present with the suffering other. That indeed is what consolation or *con-solatio* means: bearing another's suffering by sharing it and entering into the solitude of others to make them feel loved, accepted, accompanied, and sustained; simply being with the one who is dying; bearing witness to hope through our closeness (*Samaritanus bonus, 10; Spe Salvi, 38*).

Through this power of hope we can, person by person, transform the places of assisted dying into outposts of the Holy Spirit. Pope Benedict put it this way: "the dark door of time always remains open, when we are bearers of hope" (*Spe Salvi, 2*). Pope Francis puts it another way: "Time is always much greater than space" and so we need never be robbed of hope (*Lumen Fidei, 57*).

Pastoral and spiritual accompaniment of those considering assisted dying becomes a hīkoi of hope most especially because it leaves open the way to an encounter with God; as an expression of an enduring commitment to care. Our prayer and ministry with the dying need never know human barriers. Instead, through perseverance, we "stand with God" (*Benedict XVI, Spe Salvi, 9*) in the knowledge of God's grace at work in all situations.

5. Brothers and Sisters, e te whānau whakapono, prior to preparing this statement we surveyed members of our Catholic community – priests and laity – who are working with and ministering to the dying, sick and vulnerable. The responses we received were overwhelmingly characterised by a desire to show compassion in the face of complexity, combined with a profound respect for the Church's teaching on euthanasia. We do not need to deny the objective wrong of euthanasia in order to accompany, with consolation and hope, those who might feel drawn or pushed towards this type of death.

As we enter a new era of secular history in Aotearoa may we be reminded by the tenacious Saint Paul that even in the most troubling of circumstances and places we are called to remain present, remembering the mercies of God and humble in the knowledge of our own faults (*Romans 12:1-3*) in order to pray "hoping against hope" (*Romans 4:18*).

