



Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD)

**Response from
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Archbishop of Perth
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The Parliament of Western Australia has made its decision and Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD) will be legal in our state under a defined set of circumstances. This decision will delight many who have long advocated for this position. Equally the decision will concern and dismay others who believe that Voluntary Assisted Dying contravenes one of the most foundational principles of our society: that no-one has the right to deliberately take the life of another innocent person, or to actively cooperate in doing so.

The fact that, at least in societies such as ours, this conviction has roots in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and specifically in the fifth commandment (Thou shalt not kill), does not licence anyone to dismiss this principle as a remnant of an out-dated religiosity. Nor does it licence anyone to complain that those who have opposed the passage of this legislation are guilty of trying to impose their religious views on others. Those with deeply-held religious convictions have as much right as anyone else to argue for what they believe is in the best interests of our society, what best serves the common good. In the case of VAD many people, and not only religious-minded people, are convinced that this decision, now passed into law, represents a clear and dangerous move towards a society which no longer believes in the essential value of human life in all its stages and conditions. Once a society gives a government the right to decide who can live and who can die, and who can facilitate the death of innocent persons and under what circumstances, no amount of legislated restrictions and “safeguards” can ensure that a future government will not decide to remove those restrictions and modify those safeguards. The right to life begins to look much less secure and unassailable than it used to be.

To make these comments is not to call into question the integrity of those parliamentarians who voted in favour of legalising VAD. It is simply to make the obvious point that a different group of politicians may well make different decisions in the future. Our society, through its elected parliament, has now accepted the principle that governments have jurisdiction over decisions concerning the right to life. Many people, including a significant number of our parliamentarians, believe this to be a fundamental and dangerous mistake. I am one of them.

In the long drawn out process of discussion and consultation on this question those who have opposed VAD have often been accused of lacking compassion for those who are suffering. This is a callous and unworthy smear. Do people really believe that so many members of the medical profession who have raised concerns about VAD are cold-hearted and unfeeling? Do we really think that ministers of religion, so many of whom have accompanied dying people in their last days, do not feel the anguish of watching someone in pain and distress? Do we really imagine that only those who speak in favour of VAD, often because of personal experience of watching their loved ones die, are the only people who have accompanied parents, partners, children and friends as they die, sometimes in great suffering and distress? I myself have been with both my mum and my dad when they died, both after a long and painful battle with cancer. It was a privilege, painful and yet profoundly humanising for me, to share that journey with them until the very end. I carry the memories of their last journeys with



me and am grateful that when death finally came, painful though it was, I knew that I had done my best for them.

The parliament has made its decision and VAD will now be legally available in Western Australia. While concerns about VAD are by no means limited to the Catholic Church, or to religious institutions only, questions will inevitably be raised now about how Catholics individually, and how Catholic health and aged-care facilities in particular, will conduct themselves in this new environment. As the Archbishop of Perth I am presuming that the government does not intend to drive the Church out of this space. In Western Australia there are a number of Catholic hospitals, both private and public, and a large number of Catholic aged-care facilities. Together they contribute in a very significant way to the health and aged-care services of our state. They do so in a way that is founded on Christian principles as they are believed in and lived in the Catholic tradition. We intend to continue to operate our institutions according to our values and principles which include, of course, our continuing ethic of care and respect for the dignity of every person. We seek to be contributors to the well-being of the people of this state, regardless of people's race, religion or personal belief. We reserve the right to do so in harmony with our values and our conscientious beliefs. I look forward to hearing of the plans the government presumably has in place to cater for those people and institutions in our society who respectfully seek the freedom to operate in accordance with their convictions.

We live in a society in which there is no uniform "world-view". As well as the many religions present in Australia, with their different histories, philosophies and traditions, there are many people for whom religion plays no significant part in their lives. We are deliberately, and thankfully, a secular society in which no one religion dominates the way we live our lives or conduct our affairs. Such a society, rather than seeking to eliminate religion, endeavours to facilitate the free exercise of religious faith and practice, and equally the freedom to live a non-religious way of life. When contentious moral questions arise, of which VAD is clearly one, it is the role of government to ensure that no one person or institution is forced to act against their deeply-held beliefs and conscientious convictions. In this light the Catholic community, among many other sectors of our society, now looks to the government, which has been such an active and passionate supporter of VAD, to show an equal commitment to and passion for the rights of those for whom the passing of the VAD legislation represents a rejection of values and principles which they hold dear.

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