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Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops of Saskatchewan on the Legalization of Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia

"My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch with me." Matthew 26: 38

Knowing that his death was near, Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane and entered into a night of emotional suffering and agony. He prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." The request to *take this cup away from us* is a human response, that many of us have felt in our hearts during our times of deepest trial. We can find comfort knowing that our Lord shares in our moments of despair. But what happens when we hear these words from our brothers and sisters facing serious trials? Their request for release demands a response from us. What is the Christian response to suffering? These are pertinent questions for us to ask as we enter Holy Week.

We find ourselves in very troubling times, as the Supreme Court of Canada has opened the door to a devastating response to the suffering of others. In their Carter decision, the Supreme Court judges make clear that they believe it is acceptable and even morally necessary to kill the person who is experiencing suffering and asks for it to be brought to an end. But this is not a Christian response. Would any one of us, upon hearing our Lord ask for the cup of his suffering to pass from him, respond by ending his life?

In our liturgies this week, we hear Jesus' request to his disciples to "Remain here and keep watch with me." In this simple phrase, we find a Christian response to suffering: to bring compassion into a world that is overburdened by loneliness and despair. In the paschal mystery, we hear the Good News that God in Jesus embraces suffering in order to embrace us; and to allow us to live, even in the midst of great suffering, with a hope which abides. Faced with the suffering of others, what the Lord asks of us is to be there, with care, love and hope.

Compassion, which literally means "to suffer with," calls us to so much more than feeling sorry for someone. True compassion is journeying with others, sharing in their pain, and standing by them in love and faithfulness, even when we know there is nothing else we can do.

A beautiful image of compassion is the love displayed by Our Blessed Mother Mary and John the Beloved Disciple at the foot of the cross: standing in love and sorrow in the face of Christ's suffering, even though they cannot begin to understand its full meaning until Resurrection morning. True, empathetic compassion calls each of us to see Christ in our brothers and sisters as they carry their burdens. In doing so, we also share the boundless hope we have in Jesus Christ, trusting that even in suffering, God is pouring out grace, revealing his love, forming disciples, and redeeming the world.

"Illness and suffering have always been among the gravest problems confronted in human life. In illness, [people experience their powerlessness, their limitations, their finitude]. Every illness can make us glimpse death. Illness can lead to anguish, self-absorption, sometimes even despair and revolt against God. It can also make a person more mature, helping him discern in his life what is not essential so that he can turn toward that which is. Very often illness provokes a search for God and a return to him." – *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

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We continue to encourage the Catholic faithful and all Canadians to respond courageously to the challenges posed by the Supreme Court's ruling, asking all to raise their voices in defense of the life and the human dignity of all persons, especially the most vulnerable. Eliminating a life is never an appropriate response to suffering. The Lord calls out to us, "Be not afraid!" Empowered by his Spirit, let us encourage our government to provide universal access to and funding for quality palliative and end-of life care for every Canadian – care that provides adequate pain relief, and walks lovingly with those who are suffering and dying, neither hastening nor prolonging death, helping each precious person to live until they die.

Let us also stand united in solidarity and support for all who serve in health care, calling for the conscience rights of individual healthcare workers and healthcare institutions to be protected. As legislation is being drafted and discussed, we pray that our Catholic health facilities might be able to continue to serve people, especially those in greatest need.

Finally, let us make an intentional effort ourselves to reach out faithfully to those who are sick or suffering, dealing with mental illness, or with a terminal condition or disability – all those feeling isolated, marginalized and forgotten. We humbly ask each one of you to embrace the Gospel call of mercy, and to lovingly and clearly communicate in concrete action that no human being is a burden, that all are precious children of God, all are loved, all are cared for.

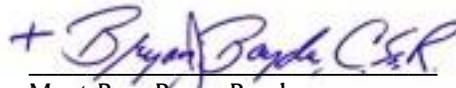
None of this is easy. Suffering is not easy. Illness, death, and despair are harsh realities. The pain we encounter in those journeying through suffering is not answerable with glib platitudes or easy answers. But living this response of love and compassionate care is living the paschal mystery. It is entering into pain and darkness with hearts of love, and clinging to the hope that we have in Jesus Christ who gave himself fully that we might have life, the hope grounded in the mercy of a Father who never abandons us.

As we enter this Passion Week/Triduum and reflect upon the dying and rising of Jesus, let us renew our commitment to journeying with each other through our moments of suffering. St. Paul of the Cross writes: "The passion of Jesus is a sea of sorrows, but it is also an ocean of love. Ask the Lord to teach you to fish in this ocean. Dive into its depths. No matter how deep you go, you will never reach the bottom." As we enter the tomb of the Lord's and each other's suffering, let us ever hold fast to the boundless love of God and the Resurrection he promises.

Yours in Christ,



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