



Statement from Cardinal Thomas Collins re: Supreme Court of Canada decision on assisted suicide

February 10, 2015

“For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away.” Psalm 31

In our days, as in the days of the psalmist, so many years ago, people can suffer grievously during their journey through this “valley of tears,” and may even be tempted to request assisted suicide. The Supreme Court has now allowed that, and at first glance, it may seem to be the compassionate thing to do.

There is certainly no need to take extreme measures to extend the length of life. When people are dying, we should surround them with love as they enter into their final experience on this earth, and relieve as best we can any suffering they endure. We need as a society to make effective palliative care more available. But there is a profound difference between compassionately journeying with someone who is dying, or who is suffering when not in danger of death, and killing that person, or helping that person to commit suicide. No one has a right to do that, and it is simply wrong for the state to allow or to encourage that.

Suicide is already a sadly common tragedy in our society, as persons facing what at the moment they feel to be intolerable suffering of some kind, decide to end their life. We all need to reach out compassionately to anyone contemplating suicide, and to offer whatever help we can to alleviate their pain, be it physical or psychological, so they can appreciate the value of their life, and know they are loved. But for anyone actually to assist them not to escape but to commit suicide is wrong. It is a perversion of the vocation of physicians to have them engaged in helping people to kill themselves. Physicians are called to be servants of healing, not agents of death.

Assisted suicide is the deceptively attractive face of euthanasia. The most compelling cases grip our attention and sway the debate, and so the Court opens the door to assisted suicide, all the while seeming to do less than it actually has done by surrounding its action with a set of limiting conditions, seeking to guarantee informed consent, as if that were the key issue. But the state is authorizing the killing of an innocent person, whatever controls are in place, and even those limitations can over time be swept away, leading to the more widespread practice of euthanasia. We have only to look at some European countries to see what lies ahead. We Canadians patriotically believe our country is special, but it is not so special as to be immune to the dynamics of increasing access to medical killing, as individualist rationales make persuasive the argument for that in more and more cases.

The court, recognizing that many physicians, faithful to their healing vocation, will not assist people to kill themselves, makes some very slight room for freedom of conscience. It trusts local Colleges of Physicians and other such groups to deal appropriately with the conscience issue.

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This trust is misplaced. Currently the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario is proposing a draft conscience policy which states that physicians who refuse to perform a procedure to which they morally object must arrange that the procedure gets done by someone else. In other words, they are compelled to become accomplices. I urge the College not to go through with this unjust policy, and I urge Ontarians, especially physicians, to speak up against it. First the politicians; now the physicians: the assault on freedom of conscience steadily advances in our country.

We all are on the way to death and should gain wisdom from contemplating that inescapable fact, so that we use each present moment to prepare for the moment of our death by living well. We should provide all who are suffering with the best medical assistance we can offer, especially in palliative care for those who are coming to the end of life. Most importantly, we should accompany each person with love, especially those without friends or family. But any society that authorizes killing people through assisted suicide and euthanasia has lost its moral compass.