

## Euthanasia, A Pastoral Letter

Euthanasia is one of the most pressing concerns of Conference. Currently there are moves afoot in four Australian States and Territories to enact legislation relating to euthanasia:

In the Northern Territory, the Chief Minister has introduced a Private Member's Bill that has been the subject of intense debate. Conference made a substantial submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry;

In South Australia, euthanasia legislation is being considered; In the Australian Capital Territory, an independent member is marshalling support for the reintroduction of a Private Member's Bill;

In Victoria, seven doctors have admitted breaching State law by engaging in euthanasia or assisting patient suicide.

As a measure of their concern, the Bishops issued a Pastoral Letter on Sunday, 14 May to every Church in the country. The text of the letter follows:

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

Euthanasia is when a doctor, not an illness, kills the patient.

No doctor in Australia at the present time has the right to kill anyone. If we accept euthanasia we give a doctor a licence to kill.

There are big steps and there are little steps. The biggest step is a leap from saying "no one may kill" to saying "some may kill". The little step is from saying that "someone may kill this person" to saying that "someone may also kill that person".

Euthanasia would put at risk all those people whom others think would be better off dead. The Dutch took the big step some years ago, and ever since then they haven't been able to stop taking many little steps.

"We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:7-8)

Human beings must not start playing God.

Australia must not take the big step.

A private member's bill to legalize euthanasia has been introduced into the parliament in the Northern Territory. Similar legislation has been foreshadowed in other Australian parliaments.

The debate over euthanasia is a highly emotional one, for everyone is afraid of prolonged suffering, and it is heartbreaking to see others suffer.

This is the force of the argument in favour of euthanasia, but we appeal to all people to think seriously about whether euthanasia is really the answer to this problem.

No patient and no doctor is under any obligation to prolong life unnecessarily. Indeed, it is the patient, not the doctor, who should decide whether painful, expensive or complicated means should be used to prolong the life of a dying person.

The patient is free not to receive such treatments, and we would welcome public debate on this topic, so that patients might be more aware of their options and their rights.

It is also legitimate for a doctor to use any and every approved drug to take away the pain and suffering of a dying person.

Those who argue for euthanasia usually do not give modern medicine the credit for what it has achieved in this field. The science of palliative care, as it is called, has made remarkable progress. We commend and praise the work of all those who devote themselves to the care of the terminally ill.

Euthanasia goes beyond not prolonging life. It is direct and intentional killing.

We argue that this involves playing God and it places a most dangerous power in the hands of human beings.

Most doctors are opposed to euthanasia. Their profession is one of saving life, not extinguishing it, and legalising euthanasia would place intolerable pressures on them.

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single seed; but if it dies it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

The fear of suffering should not so dominate our thinking as to prevent us from seeing the true and positive reality of death. Death is the supreme moment of life, when we enter most deeply into the mystery of the life that God has given us.

There is no virtue in suffering for its own sake, but the experience of death is a profoundly Christian experience when we go to meet God at the moment when God chooses to call us.