

Archbishop urges Canadian MPs to back palliative care, not euthanasia

OTTAWA – The president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has sent an open letter to members of Parliament, urging them to support good palliative care instead of assisted suicide or euthanasia.

As debate approaches for Bill C-384, an act to amend the Criminal Code (Right to Die With Dignity), Winnipeg Archbishop V. James Weisgerber took aim at the “misleading and unclear” terms framing the debate. The bill is sponsored by Francine Lalonde, a Bloc Quebecois member of Parliament.

Archbishop Weisgerber asked politicians to use “clear definitions” and to consider the “profound impact” such a bill would have on society.

“Those wishing to reopen this debate are no doubt motivated by concern for the sufferings of others,” he said in an open letter sent Sept. 23. “An unfortunate understanding of compassion has led them to suggest euthanizing the most vulnerable instead of providing them with proper care, effective pain control, and social, emotional and spiritual support until their natural death.”

Without clear terms, the discussion can be “confusing and unhelpful,” Archbishop Weisgerber said.

“From the Catholic perspective, it is legitimate to use medication and other means to alleviate suffering, even if a side effect can be the shortening of life expectancy,” he said, citing the Catechism of the Catholic Church. “It is also legitimate for someone to refuse medical procedures that are found to be especially burdensome.

“But what is never acceptable is the direct and intentional killing of the depressed, handicapped, sick, elderly or dying,” he said.

He urged Canadians and their political representatives to become better informed about the societal impacts of legalizing assisted suicide and euthanasia and to engage in a civil, informed debate.

He warned, however, that legalization would “mean there is no longer a common duty for all to protect the lives of others” and would erode the trust vulnerable patients have in their caregivers.

“There is also the well-founded fear that euthanasia and assisted suicide can be imposed on individuals as a way to save costs and lessen demands on caregivers,” he said. “Inevitably, the result would be a society even more fragmented, with its members living in greater isolation and anxiety.”

Bill C-384 is scheduled to have one hour of debate in early October, followed by a second hour and a vote on second reading in November or early December. If it passes second reading, it would go to committee for further study and possible amendments before a final vote in the House of Commons, which would send it to the Senate.