

On Living Through Our Dying

A Pastoral Letter from the Catholic Bishops of Saskatchewan

*To our sisters and brothers in faith
and all people graced with the gift of life:
an invitation to reflect
on living through our dying.*

Introduction – “Dying is a part of life”

Just as the sun makes its way toward the western horizon every evening and sets into night, every human life makes its way from birth to death. It can be difficult to think about our own dying. Perhaps it is even more challenging to contemplate the death of those we love. While it can be tempting to distance ourselves from death, Pope John Paul II reminds us that “dying is also a part of life.”¹

In Canada today, we have become distanced from dying. Life expectancy is considerably longer than it has been at other times in human history, and even in other parts of the world today; we often take health and longevity for granted. Advances in medical knowledge and technology mean that we often live long enough that our children and grandchildren have long since established their own lives when we begin to face our own death. While people used to die at home, primarily cared for by extended family, death is now more commonly experienced in a hospital or other health care setting.

While we are grateful to live longer and healthier lives, we are all still going to die. The experience of dying is often a harsh and overwhelming experience. Our fear of death at times leads us to resist or ignore what this fundamental human experience might have to teach us, about God and about ourselves. Saint Francis, in his *Canticle of the Creatures*, dares to call death a sister, part of the human condition which God has authored and through which God speaks to us.

The recent legalization of euthanasia and physician assisted suicide² in Canada adds to our sense that we can control the circumstances of our dying in the same way that we try to control other aspects of living. It is in this context that we feel called to reflect on human dignity in the face of human mortality. Our faith invites us to live and die with trust in the God who gave us breath. We mourn any time a person seeks to end their own life. Our calling at this time and in this place is to form ourselves well in a Christian understanding of living and dying, so that we can witness to the world that there is another way.

1. To Hear the Good News

As Christians, we believe that life, despite its limits and struggles, is a gift of God to us. It is this very life that Jesus himself enters, promising: “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). In living and dying among us, he showed us how to live and how to die; and his resurrection gives us the hope that in our living and our dying, we are ever in the hands of the living God, who came

¹ Pope John Paul II, Address at the Rennweg Hospice in Vienna, June 21, 1998.

² Euthanasia and Physician Assisted Suicide are formally called Medical Aid in Dying (MAID) within the Canadian healthcare system.

among us to wipe away our tears. Even where life is difficult, He is with us, inviting us to receive and live the gift that we have received.

Dying, in the light of God's gift of life, is a part of our living. Living through death is both our final responsibility and the last gift we can make of our lives. It is something to be experienced and endured, learned from, and ultimately offered back to God. St. Paul writes that "If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him" (Rom 6:8). We believe that in living through our dying, we share an experience with Jesus, who turned his suffering and death into self-offering which brings redemption. To have faith in Christ is to face death as a part of the great mystery of the gift of living, and to participate in God's redemptive work in this world and the next.

Ecclesiastes offers this advice: "Whatever you do, do well" (9:10). It is worth reflecting that it is possible for us to die well. God does not force us to do anything; rather, death offers us a final *invitation to surrender* all that we are, to the very last breath, into the hands of the one who gave us life and promises us eternal life.

2. Living Through Our Suffering and Dying

Jesus was not a stranger to the brutal physical pain and intense spiritual suffering that accompanies some human dying. We, too, are called to be mindful of just how hard the work of dying can be. Sometimes, chronic illness means that our dying is stretched over months or years, a steady decline of health and ability that is challenging for both the person and their family, friends, and caregivers. In other cases, dying happens too quickly, resulting in a different kind of suffering and grief. The journey towards death can be a struggle towards some form of acceptance and trust. Jesus himself struggled to make peace with his own impending death. The path is difficult and we have a responsibility to accompany people through it. And it can be even more painful for family and caregivers to witness the suffering of their loved one than it is for the dying person. Violence, uncontrolled pain, unforgiveness, lack of access to necessary supports, fear, and any number of other circumstances can make the work of dying feel completely overwhelming.

As Christians, we believe that our freedom, and ultimately our salvation, is linked to God's loving presence and our response to it in the midst of every reality. It is not always easy to believe this or to feel it, but it is our call, our invitation to seek Him in all things, even, and maybe especially when we are at the end of our own capacity. Death confronts our deepest sense of who we are and what we hope for, and it is the final opportunity for us to embrace the reality that lies before us.

The response to God's invitation is at once both deeply personal and profoundly communal. No one can force another person to embrace, accept or make peace with reality. To impose meaning on another person, to not hear another's pain with empathy, to trivialize or ignore another's grief: such actions damage our relationships with each other, distance us from loving like God loves, and violate the freedom God gives to each person. At the same time, the end of life decisions of one individual have great impact on that person's community. When we suffer with resentment, blame, anger, and despair, we plant those seeds in the lives and experiences of others. We can also strive to let those dark and difficult feelings be transformed into acknowledgement, service, humility, and hope. The choice to end one's life (with or without the assistance of others), while intended to end certain kinds of suffering, is not without consequences for those left behind. In accompanying the dying, we do not get to choose how they will face their own suffering. Still, we can choose how we will respond to them. God invites us

to choose selflessness, generosity, kindness, peace, and love in even the most trying circumstances, and offers us his presence, grace, and strength, which we so profoundly need.

As we face our own mortality, we are invited to do the spiritual work of living through our dying. Such work is what makes dying well possible. And we are not called to do it alone. As people of faith, we can offer the gift of accompanying and supporting people through the spiritual work of dying, beginning wherever they are.

Living through our dying invites three key spiritual works: forgiveness, love, and surrender. Facing death can strip away our self-justification, self-righteousness, arrogance, pride, and excuses. We long to be reconciled, to ask for forgiveness and to be forgiven. Dying invites us to do the hard work of asking for and receiving forgiveness. In dealing with our need for forgiveness, we are freed to express love with a depth and finality that is often difficult in everyday life. Death presents the possibility that we have nothing left to lose in trying to express our love, however imperfectly. Finally, our dying invites us to complete the spiritual work of surrender, as age, illness, decreased ability, and dying gradually increase our dependency. Aging often pushes us to let go of the things we once worked so hard to develop and strengthen: our homes, our ease of movement, our hearing. At the end, we will be asked to surrender to God our very lives.

The world is in desperate need of our witness of living through our dying. So many have forgotten, or never knew, that death could be gift. With God's grace, and the prayers and support of others, we can live through this dying as a gift even as we face difficulties we would never have chosen. And God, who knows the pain and struggle of death (cf. Heb. 5:8), will use our courage to witness to the value of this work to the people and the world we leave behind.

3. To Care for the Dying

As people face the end of their lives, they become increasingly reliant on the living. They may feel like a burden. While this is normal, sometimes we are meant to be in need, on the receiving end, calling forth the gifts of our family and those around us. There is a beauty in this interdependence. In receiving the gift of being cared for, the dying also give the gift of allowing others to care. The relationship of care, while imbued with deep meaning and the potential for profound moments of connection, joy and growth, can also be tremendously mundane, labour intensive, or wearisome. But the suffering of one is alleviated when we carry it together (cf. Gal. 6:2). And it is our privilege to care for one another, even and perhaps especially when this is difficult.

Caring for the dying also means caring for the caregivers. None of us are incapable of or exempt from offering this care in some way. We can provide food or other necessities, volunteer, advocate for, visit with, listen to, and pray for the dying and their caregivers in many and various ways. And if, in so doing, we live generously and faithfully now, we will have practiced living the way we hope to live through dying.

At the end, our responsibility moves from caring for the dying to accompanying those who grieve, and lifting the one who has died into the tender hands of God, who in Jesus has revealed to us the power and desire to transform darkness into light and death into life. As community and as individuals, we strive to live this well by attending to the rituals and rites of death and grief with faithfulness and hope;

by praying for those who are meeting God; and by receiving the healing of grieving well those we have loved. This life is a gift that none of us keeps forever, but its end does not make it less a gift.

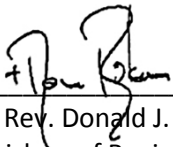
Conclusion

We do not know the day or the hour (cf. Matt. 24:36), but we are always preparing for our dying by the way that we live. Love well and deeply. Choose a life of service. Rely on God always, and especially when you reach the limits of what you can do on your own. Trust with an open heart that God can bring meaning out of the suffering you face, and look for God's goodness and new life in every situation.

As salt for the earth and light for the world, we can transform personal and public conversations about death and dying. By sharing our perspectives, beliefs and actions, we can become authentic witnesses to the gift of living through dying in a world that is often afraid of death and desperate to control it. God has called us to walk through this life together, and this includes journeying with people to the end of their days on earth. Now more than ever, our world needs to know that we will not leave them to face their dying alone.

May the God who came to earth and showed us how to live and die draw near to us as we walk faithfully in a culture that has forgotten how to die well. May we receive the courage and strength of the Spirit that we need to be witnesses to the gift of living through dying. And may our hearts be fixed on Jesus, who has walked this path before us to show us the way.

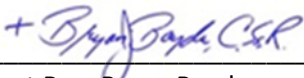
Sincerely,



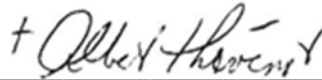
Most Rev. Donald J. Bolen
Archbishop of Regina



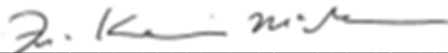
Most Rev. Murray Chatlain
Archbishop of Keewatin-Le Pas



Most Rev. Bryan Bayda
Eparchial Bishop of Saskatoon



Most Rev. Albert Thévenot
Bishop of Prince Albert



Very Rev. Kevin McGee
Diocesan Administrator for Saskatoon