

A Pastoral Letter to

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# The People, Clergy and Religious Catholic communities in Victoria Dioceses of Melbourne, Ballarat, Sale and Sandhurst

## Re Voluntary Assisted Dying

Sunday 16 June 2019

Dear friends,

On the morning of Wednesday 19 June 2019 we will wake to a new, and deeply troubling chapter of health care in Victoria. On that day the *Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD) Act* (2017) comes into effect, creating the legal possibility for a person to end their own life or a doctor ending it on request in particular circumstances. What is being referred to as 'VAD' is a combination of what in plain-speaking is more commonly known as *physician assisted suicide* and *euthanasia*.

Many people support euthanasia in various forms, and some also express a belief in God. A number of the loudest voices, including some members of the Victorian Parliament, have called VAD a 'compassionate' response to suffering, and those who oppose VAD have been accused of lacking in compassion.

Contrary to this position, Pope Francis has encouraged ordinary Catholics everywhere to resist euthanasia and to protect the old, the young and the vulnerable from being cast aside in a "throw-away culture." Instead, Francis calls us to follow Christ by accompanying people with compassion, sharing hope not fear. In Victoria, we have entered a moment in which we are called to join this task.

Christians in Victoria, as in any other time of history, are now challenged to show a different approach to death and the dying, one which accompanies every person as they are dying and allows them to love and to be loved to the very end. We cannot cooperate with the facilitation of suicide, even when it seems motivated by empathy or kindness. These words will sound hard to hear, but as pastors of the Catholic dioceses of Melbourne, Ballarat, Sale and Sandhurst, we feel a responsibility not just to say "no" to VAD, but to give every encouragement to model a way of life that renders VAD unnecessary.

We call to mind Saint Gianna Beretta Molla and Blessed Franz Jagerstatter who witnessed to the moral commitments that arose out of their faith by their conscientious objection. Gianna and Franz lived in the twentieth century – not that long ago – and were called by the Lord to witness to the dignity of human life despite great personal cost. There are countless other examples and we draw encouragement and strength from their witness of self-giving. In our particular circumstance, St Gianna and Bl Franz can help us find our way ahead.

Also in our own time, Catholic hospitals and Catholic residential care organisations have shown great courage. They have united to find ways to model excellent care for their patients, and are committed to resisting calls to involve themselves in VAD. Please learn about their thoughtful and considered response to VAD, which is framed through their enduring commitment to excellence in end of life care, and show them your support.

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All of us who hold a principled opposition to euthanasia are now, in effect, *conscientious objectors*.

- We object to the unnecessary taking of a human life;
- we object to the diminishment of the love that can be given and received in the last days of our loved ones;
- we object to the lack of adequate funding for excellent palliative care;
- we object to state-sponsored practices that facilitate suicide;
- and most of all we object to the lazy idea that the best response our community can offer a person in acute suffering is to end their life.

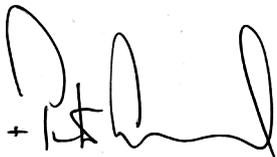
Christians in Victoria have asked their pastors and priests what they can do. In the information provided, we draw attention to our need to **pray**, to **be informed**, and to **act**.

We are called to engage with our Victorian communities with friendship and wisdom, not motivated by fear. We hold no animosity for those with whom we disagree – we simply wish to bear witness to what is good and true in those we love, and accompany them as Christ calls us. *We will not abandon those we love*, and we believe they have a right to be loved from the beginning to the end of their life.

As in all difficult moments of life and death, Christians look to the Good Shepherd who said:

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

Yours in Christ Jesus,



Most Rev Peter A Comensoli DD  
ARCHBISHOP OF MELBOURNE



Most Rev Paul Bernard Bird CSsR DD  
BISHOP OF BALLARAT



Most Rev Patrick Michael O'Regan DD  
BISHOP OF SALE



Most Rev Leslie R Tomlinson DD  
BISHOP OF SANDHURST



# We Care

From the earliest times, Christ's followers have set themselves apart by their care of the vulnerable (Acts 4:34). Indeed, Christ said, "By this love you have for one another; everyone will know that you are my disciples" (John 13:35). Just as the early Christians were, we too, are called to accompany and care for those who are suffering.

On 19 June 2019, the Victorian Assisted Dying Act comes into effect. This law legalises euthanasia and assisted suicide. Despite what the law may say, our Christian tradition affirms that every life, including those of the sick and suffering, is sacred. For us, euthanasia or assisted suicide are never part of end of life care. Instead, we remain committed to: healing – never harming; relieving pain and symptoms of illness and frailty; withdrawing life-prolonging treatments when they are medically futile or overly burdensome or when a person wants them withdrawn, and never abandoning those in our care.

**Here are three ways that those who conscientiously object to this law can accompany people who suffer.**



## Pray (Heart)

- For those who are or may be convinced that taking their life is the only option left. May God intervene and show them His love.
- That when faced with pain and suffering – ours or someone else's – we respond with compassion and courage. May we do all we can to alleviate the pain of those around us and respect their dignity.
- Seek inspiration by reflecting on Jesus' passion, death and resurrection.



## Be informed (Head)

- Read Pope Francis' address on end of life care: [www.bit.ly/2HNUiNP](http://www.bit.ly/2HNUiNP)
- Read **Be Not Afraid** and **When Life is Ending** available online at: [www.cam.org.au/euthanasia](http://www.cam.org.au/euthanasia)
- See how our Catholic health and aged care services are responding to the new legislation: [www.bit.ly/30VMH8n](http://www.bit.ly/30VMH8n)
- Visit **Moments that Matter**, for real stories of people who have experienced palliative care:
  - [www.momentsthatmatter.org.au](http://www.momentsthatmatter.org.au)
- Look at these websites for up to date information on the subject:
  - [www.australiancarealliance.org.au](http://www.australiancarealliance.org.au)
  - [www.no euthanasia.org.au](http://www.no euthanasia.org.au)



## Act (Hands)

- Who do you know who is sick, disabled or elderly and may be vulnerable? Visit them, call them, spend time with them. Show that you care.
- Loneliness, loss of meaning in life and fear of losing dignity or being a burden, are the most common reasons people seek euthanasia and assisted suicide. Help address these concerns in whatever way you can.
- Link those you encounter with support services. If you're not sure who can help, Palliative Care Victoria is a good place to start.

Euthanasia and assisted suicide will now be legal in Victoria. All of us have a role to play in caring for those suffering as well as becoming conscientious objectors by refusing to participate.

When we visit the sick and suffering, we visit Christ (Matt 25:34). Given there are over one million Catholics in Victoria, if each of us do what we can, we will have a tremendous impact. We may not be able to change the law now, but we can remove the need for it and resist it by refusing to cooperate with it.

# The Saints

Many of the saints have been bold witnesses of conscientious objection – heroically holding fast to the Truth amid difficult and trying circumstances.



## Blessed Franz Jägerstätter

- Lived: 1907-1943, Austria
- Feast day: 21 May
- Patron of: Conscientious objectors

A husband and father of four daughters, Blessed Franz Jägerstätter was the only person in his Austrian village to vote against the Anschluss – the annexation of Austria by Germany during the Second World War. Rejecting the position of village mayor offered to him by German troops, he also refused to take the Hitler Oath.

Franz was called to military training in the German armed forces. However, he was able to defer service due to exemptions. He began to examine the morality of the war and decided his faith could not allow him to participate. Called to military service again in 1943, Franz declared his conscientious objection and was arrested, jailed and sentenced to death as a result.

Numerous people visited him in jail to convince him to serve, reminding him of his duty as a husband and father, but did not succeed.

Before his death, he wrote: “If I must write ... with my hands in chains, I find that much better than if my will were in chains. Neither prison nor chains nor sentence of death can rob a man of the Faith and his free will”.

Franz was beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in 2007 with his wife Franziska and daughters in attendance.



## Saint Gianna Beretta Molla

- Lived: 1922-1962, Italy
- Feast day: 28 April
- Patron of: Physicians, mothers & unborn children

Saint Gianna Beretta was a 20th century Italian doctor (paediatrician), wife and mother. In 1961, Gianna became pregnant with her fourth child, however, a fibroma was discovered on her uterus.

Doctors gave her three choices: an abortion, a hysterectomy or the removal of the fibroma alone. Gianna refused an abortion. She also declined to have a hysterectomy despite knowing she might lose her life. Wanting to preserve her child's life, Gianna opted for the removal of only the fibroma.

On 21 April, 1962, her baby Gianna Emanuela was successfully delivered by caesarean section. Despite the efforts of doctors, the mother – Gianna, passed away a week later.

Gianna was canonised by Pope John Paul II in 2004. Her husband Pietro and their children, including Gianna Emanuela, attended the ceremony. Pietro would tell Gianna Emanuela, that her mother's choice was one of conscience as both a loving mother and a doctor.

**“Especially in those difficult circumstances, if the person feels loved, respected and accepted, the negative shadow of euthanasia disappears or is made almost non-existent because the value of his or her being is measured by the ability of giving and receiving love and not by his or her productivity.”**

– Pope Francis

*Address to Participants at the IV Seminar on Ethics in Health Management*  
1 October, 2018

