

## End-of-Life Filled with Dignity and Love

At the present time, and foreseeably for a long time to come, the issue of end-of-life will be front and center at many levels. Think of discussions you may have had recently around palliative care, pain management as death approaches, quality of life, rights of the disabled (or rather differently-abled), freedom to choose physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia. As always, there is a wide variety of opinions and convictions amongst Canadians. Many, maybe even a slim majority, believe there should be the possibility of physician-assisted suicide or even euthanasia in certain situations.

However, what is even more certain is that the vast majority of Canadians want excellent palliative care provided by our health care system. They fear that cuts to budgets may well also mean reduced health services at the end of their life or of that of a loved one.

Around death there is very often much fear. It can be a fear of death itself, even more it can be a fear of going through the experience of dying – a fear of unrelenting pain, a fear of loss of quality of life, a fear of loss of independence and mastery over one's fate.

However, for all of us living includes dying and it is my personal opinion that life in its fullest expression, both at the individual and collective level, includes living till the moment of natural death, surrounded by a community that loves and gives the most appropriate care and comfort each step of the way. This includes family and friends, neighbours and other communities, including spiritual communities, health care services and supports.

Care and comfort in this very human (and not inhuman or inhumane) moment of life includes the best pain management possible. It includes presence and listening and encouraging and remembering (with tears and laughter) and sometimes just holding a hand. It includes a spiritual pastoral care that truly feeds and carries the person, and those close to them, at this time of life when the very meaning of life is put in question.

I have seen this quality of care by family, friends and health care providers again and again. I have seen it in palliative units at the Health Science Centre and at the St. Boniface General Hospital and several other hospitals. I have seen it in nursing homes and family homes, with the family supported by caring and professional health care providers. I have heard of this kind of love and care in places such as our own Winnipeg's Jocelyn House and in similar hospices far and wide.

There is a quality to each individual's life, in even its most broken and vulnerable state, especially as we honour the dignity of that person by surrounding them with love and care. Then as a society, I believe we are at our best when life is nurtured and protected in the most vulnerable, even and especially at the last moment of their life. Ultimately the meaning of life is one of relationships, of relationships of love lived out faithfully without end. The human touch of love, and often the physical touch of holding the hand of a loved one dying, is the final and greatest gift as we say: "You are not alone".

A society gives its very best when it helps those most vulnerable physically, emotionally and spiritually to know, feel and be surrounded by love at the moment of their death. At this point in time I believe we need to have discussions both at the level of family and friends and at the level of the public forum about this reality. All voices have their place in this discussion and in making decisions which will affect us all, including communities of faith and spirituality.

I do not wish to be a fear-monger in any way, but I do have one fear. I fear that without truly going down the road of envisaging and assuring such caring comforting love to the moment of natural death, we open a pandora's box (a can of worms) that we will ultimately regret. Living includes dying, a human experience to be lived together.

Archbishop Albert LeGatt