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**From:** Mary Clare Meney  
**Sent:** Wednesday, 9 April 2008 1:08 AM  
**To:** Legal and Constitutional, Committee (SEN)  
**Subject:** Submission:Rights of the Terminally Ill

Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional affairs  
Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

7 April 2008

Dear Sir,

## **Submission from the National Association of Catholic Families Australia to the Inquiry into the Rights of the Terminally Ill (Euthanasia Laws Repeal) Bill 2008**

The National Association of Catholic Families (NACF) is an association open to ordinary Catholic families which accepts the teaching authority of the Church and is also open to non-Catholics who accept the natural law. We promote the Catholic position as given to us by the Vicar of Christ and in the Holy See's **Charter of the Rights of the Family**. We are linked locally, nationally and internationally. Our association comprises members from many different backgrounds: health professionals, educators, lawyers, accountants and business professionals, tradespeople, home-makers and charity workers. Clerics and religious are associate members of the N.A.C.F.

The family is the most precious and important resource available to the Australian nation.

The vast majority of Australians profoundly believe in the family and its values, and this conviction is shared by the younger generation, despite the many challenges. Families make an incalculable contribution to social life and culture, shouldering sometimes serious burdens that cannot be assumed by any other institutions. "The future of humanity passes by way of the family" ( Pope John Paul II).

Thus the family by its very nature is called to be the "Sanctuary of life". Every family has a duty to value and defend human life, even at its most vulnerable stages, from its very beginning to its natural end. We affirm the right of every human being to have this primary good respected to the highest degree. This is the glue which binds the family and therefore society, so that every human life is protected and defended in the manner accorded by the natural law and the current Australian laws.

Legislation that departs from these basic principles of our constitution, - ie *the Euthanasia Laws Repeal Bill 2008*- would if enacted, make 'assisted suicides' -the deliberate killing of a human person - no longer a criminal act.

Such a law would attack the very heart of the family, this sanctuary of life. It would involve embracing a culture that denies solidarity and which takes on the form of a "culture of death" in the name of 'individual freedom.' Euthanasia enthusiasts are creating a new cultural climate by attempting to sway broad sectors of public opinion, justify themselves in the name of "rights" and "freedom", exempt themselves from any form of retribution and seek authorisation from the State.

Such a law would cause profound changes in which life and relationships would operate, within society, within the health system and within the family.

Consider the young teenagers of our families, who may be suffering depression or anxiety. A common problem in our western society, but easily treatable -good medical care, support and encouragement. But a law that alters the concept and attitude to pain, suffering and 'alternative measures' to it, will also alter

society's. The youth suicide rate in 1997 (the year of the Euthanasia Bill of the Northern Territory) rose sharply. Therefore the current debate must also be centered around **all** "vulnerable" citizens, which would include farmers, young adults -especially males -and any adults who may be under stress. Perhaps in this light, the by-product of this proposed bill may not seem so attractive!

Consider the elderly member of the family, or the terminally ill, or the physically handicapped who may be in declining health, suffering pain, perhaps loneliness and depression. He /she may be feeling a burden on society or on their family (especially if it has already been impressed upon them!) and therefore deprived of any any meaning of hope.

It is surely not possible to determine that the patient can make a rational decision for access to medically assisted suicide that is free of any outside influences. It would seem logical that the elderly or terminally ill would feel a certain obligation to committ to a premature death, given their perceptions of no longer contributing to society, expectations conveyed by family members /health care workers etc.

This begs the question: will the right to adequate palliative care, sustenance and pain relief -a more expensive alternative for society -be upheld when medically assisted suicide is enthusiastically endorsed by the law? Good palliative care may well become a secondary concern in the name of efficiency, if medically assisted suicide is legalised.

It remains to be seen whether a legislation which endorses medically assisted suicide will be equally enthusiastic and generous in providing access to comfortable facilities for palliative care!

In the Netherlands, 50% of doctors surveyed thought it appropriate to suggest euthanasia to patients.

The right of a terminally ill person is adequate palliative care -which was almost non-existant in the Northern Territory in 1997! This is the hallmark of a truly compassionate society. To respect the dignity of the human person means to value human bodily life with a regard to the equal value of all its citizens.-none of whom is lacking worth. This is essential for a society that wishes to be protected. Quality palliative care ensures that the pain level of the terminally ill person is adequately managed, while maintaining the dignity of the person at all times.

Consider the terminally ill or elderly or physically challenged babies who are mentally incompetent, and who don't get to decide their fate at all! The Netherlands now "boasts" 10,000 cases of involuntary euthanasia since euthanasia was legislated. In other words, it is impossible to protect the rights of vulnerable and fragile individuals who may not endorse the concept of a hastened death, and who are therefore entitled to a caring, compassionate and comfortable natural end.

On a personal note, as an ICU trained nurse over 2 decades ago in Victorian hospitals, I witnessed on several occasions the administering of lethal drug doses to patients who were terminally ill. If a law is passed today that protects doctors from prosecution, how much more prevalent this practise would be! Perhaps even in situations where the patient would not be deemed "terminal", as has also been reported.

In regard to palliative care and care of the critically ill, the Catholic Church does not endorse the use of overly invasive or prolonged, burdensome treatment by extraordinary means to preserve life 'at all costs'. Invasive and extaordinary treatment may be continued if it is considered that the patient will undergo a full or reasonable recovery. Basic nutrition (food and water) however, is not considered to be "extaordinary" and would be given when possible.

## **CONCLUSION**

The responsibilities of politicians in this field are crucial. It is up to them to promote legislation and to support government action which effect fundamental ethical criteria without yielding to that relativism which under the pretext of defending freedom and democracy actually deprive them of their solid basis.

Therefore, in no way can the lawmaker who wants to act in harmony with an upright moral conscience, contribute to creating laws that are in opposition to the essential rights of the vulnerable human person, young or old. Political forces must agree on what is consistent with the dignity of persons and the common good of human society.

All human life has value and the life of every person possesses inherent and equal dignity. Any distortion of this principle will compromise the security and safety of us all. Human bodily life has intrinsic value and

respect for each human life is integral to respect for human dignity. When we allow individuals or groups to kill, with or without a subject's consent, we particularly heighten the risk to those vulnerable persons who are infirmed, elderly or disabled. It must follow that this ia a direct attack on the family institution which is developing at the cultural level and in political, legislative and administrative spheres.

The family's future is entrusted to each person's conscience and responsible committment, and to the convictions and values that are alive within us.

We appeal to the Committee not to proceed with the Euthanasia Laws Repeal Bill 2008.

Yours Sincerely,

Mary Clare Meney  
Executive Member,  
National Association of Catholic Families (Australia)

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