



# Reflections to the ELCIC Task Force on Decisions at the End of Life

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**By Rev. Dr. Telmor Sartison  
Bishop Retired**

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Bishop Retired  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

Many moons ago I received an email inviting a contribution to the Task Force being asked to prepare a study guide by March 2017 into the issue of assisted death. I am honoured to be asked to contribute. I don't see myself as a profound thinker and scholar, a person with gifts to dissect issues and point the way detail by detail. However, I don't consider myself extraordinary in that respect. All theologians—the ones in the pew and the ones behind the Hd's live on a continuum between detail and larger picture, scientist and poet, essayist and playwright. I come somewhere closer to the right side of that continuum... not at the end but at least past the fifty percent. Apology (in both senses) ended, here goes.

- Fundamental to our faith is the idea that life is a gift. We are made in the image of God—whatever that means—by human pro-creation. Call it creation or evolution. Whatever, it starts beyond our beginning and reaches beyond our ending.
- That life, as alluded to above, has a beginning (gift) and an end (gift). We choose neither—ordinarily—and to this point in the Christian era have left out the “ordinarily” and believed, if not practiced, “always.”
- We used to regard the taking of life as essential under the banner of “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” That’s a pretty clear Old Testament idea in some places.
- We still take lives “legally” in war and police actions.
- We take lives in accidents irresponsible or unavoidable.
- And we take lives in what we call “murder”—not accepted.
- To choose death “at that time” (the “end”—or is it a beginning—is obviously and painfully approaching) is not a statement negative or positive about the sanctity of life.
- Suffering for Christ’s sake has nothing to do with long days and nights in pain in a hospital bed waiting for the end to come. Suffering for Christ, for our faith, has to do with being faithful against any or every evil that confronts us. It’s as simple as the embarrassment that might come through confessing our faith at work or to a neighbour—that we believe in and try to follow this Jesus—and as painfully powerful as being burned to death on a cross or fed to the lions or placed in solitary confinement. But it’s not about “taking it like a man” because we are very very ill and on the sidewalk making our way toward the threshold of death’s door.

- As a pastor and bishop to the church called Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada I would not hesitate to “walk” with a person in very ill health whose end is clearly terminal, with a view to helping that one think through and decide for her- or himself on the question of choosing to die in advance of death’s choice (the body continuing to pump out “life” while the “spirit” asks “Why does this go on?”
- How can a Christian tradition such as ours justify/explain/support assisted dying in such a way as does not betray centuries of theological practice as belief? Answer: Carefully, openly, honest-to-Godly and/but in the spirit of *simul ustes et peccator*. We may be wrong. We may be correct. God ONLY knows.
- Many of the older comedians used to joke about the two certain things about life: “Death and taxes.” I sense a growing openness, one that has not changed lives so much as it has the conversation, to the idea that we live with an end. It comes to us all. At eighty next February 17—a marvelous day in my life—I am very aware that I probably don’t have a quarter of that number left. That has changed the conversation and the planning for me. I enjoy life immensely—with myself, Adelene, family, friends in this creation with it’s magnificence and pain, social and otherwise. But I know there’s an end some time, some tomorrow.

By faith we live with the knowing that life’s end is not only an end to all these relationships here. It is especially a beginning to something we know only by promise, without all the details we wrongly, I think, put into funeral eulogies and sermons—“He’s gone to be with our mother whom he loved so much.” They watch us as we speak. “What joy!” That stuff is more for our comfort than truth’s speaking. But we are all going there. Can we walk there with one another—often a great pastoral opportunity for a pastor and a friend—and pray, converse and meditate over decisions about “how long?” and “what if we?” I think we can, by the grace of God and in the grace of God.

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I’m going to stop there. Thanks for the opportunity to say what little I have to offer without all the texts and the history and the arguments.

But a little aside. I listen to Charlie Rose on PBS on occasion. He had an interview with Tom Friedman who wrote *Thanks For Being Late*, McMillan Press. I found it a very interesting interview. You can find it by Googling the two names, Charlie Rose and Tom Fieldman. Tom talks about three “accelerations” that we are unable to adjust to/keep up with/understand politically, socially, culturally, religiously. His thesis should not set our agenda and discussions on this matter, but it might inform the way we come to clarity and understanding.

Blessings in Christ.

+Telmor

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