



A R C H D I O C E S E O F B R I S B A N E

Voluntary Assisted Dying Guidelines for Clergy and Pastoral Carers

Queensland's laws on Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD) will come into effect on 1 January 2023. Below are some guiding principles if you are asked to provide pastoral care in situations where VAD is being considered or has been chosen.

The following general points should be kept in mind:

- 1) The pastoral care of the dying person and their family is paramount.
- 2) There is no "one size fits all" template that could be applied mechanically to every situation of VAD, since every person and their family are unique and every death is different. Pastoral sensitivity and proper discernment are therefore essential.
- 3) The decision of any priest, chaplain or pastoral carer who is unable or unwilling to minister to a person considering VAD should be respected; and in such circumstances, another priest, chaplain or pastoral carer should be sought.

When VAD is being considered or requested

If requested, it would be appropriate to provide accompaniment, spiritual counsel and prayer (including the Prayers for the Dying) before VAD takes place.

The requirements of the civil law must be respected. This includes the following:

- 1) You must not initiate a discussion or suggest VAD to any person. Doing so could see you in breach of the Act and facing significant consequences.
- 2) If a person approaches you for spiritual counsel in relation to a decision concerning VAD for themselves or a family member, and no request for access to VAD has yet been made, you may counsel them compassionately with regard to the Church's teaching and talk to them about other options, such as palliative care. For the reasons given in 3) immediately below, you would need to be quite sure that a request for access to VAD had not yet been made, and you should keep careful notes of any such conversations, including dates.
- 3) Once a request of a medical practitioner for access to VAD has been made you must not try to influence a person to revoke their decision to seek access to VAD. The following applies in the legislation:



A person must not, dishonestly or by coercion, induce another person to make, or revoke, a request for access to voluntary assisted dying.

Maximum penalty – 7 years imprisonment

Coercion includes intimidation or a threat or promise, including by an improper use of a position of trust or influence.

When VAD is to happen

If Viaticum or Absolution is requested, the particular circumstances would need to be considered very carefully, keeping in mind

- 1) that the Church's sacraments are to be made available to those who request them in good faith.
- 2) that fruitful reception of a sacrament always requires a suitable disposition on the part of the recipient.
- 3) that the sacraments should be celebrated only if the dying person voluntarily either requests or accepts them.

The decision whether to celebrate the sacraments remains with the priest to whom the request has been made. This calls for careful discernment, and in exceptional circumstances the local Ordinary could be consulted. If it is decided that the sacraments should not be celebrated, the decision should not be seen as a punishment nor as the rigid application of a rule but as a stance in favour of life which in turn affirms God's love for each of us. It is never the end of the relationship of accompaniment.

The Anointing of the Sick is different, since Viaticum rather than the Anointing is the Church's sacrament for the dying, and the patient may have been anointed, even a number of times, before the decision for VAD. Nevertheless, it is pastoral practice in some settings, especially when the patient is unconscious, to offer the Anointing to the dying. Here again sensitivity to particular situations will be necessary.

The Church's minister or pastoral carer should not be present when the lethal substance is administered. This is not to signify abandonment but to make it clear to all that there is no cooperation with or acceptance of the act.

When death has occurred

The minister or pastoral carer may choose to return once death has occurred, which could take some time. However, this would need to be discerned carefully at the time.

Once death has occurred, the Prayers after Death could be recited, interceding for the deceased and providing consolation to the deceased person's family and friends.



If requested, a Catholic funeral service should be celebrated for the repose of the soul of the deceased, provided that there is no serious risk of damage to the faith of others. If there is doubt as to whether a Catholic funeral should be celebrated, the local Ordinary should be consulted.

When preparing or presiding at a funeral, a priest or minister should attend carefully to any pastoral and liturgical recommendations relating to the funeral rites of those who die through VAD, being careful to affirm above all the boundless mystery of God's merciful love. Any words of remembrance spoken during the rite by family and/or friends should maintain the integrity of the rite and not endorse VAD.

NOTE: In November 2022 the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference considered a draft document, *Christian accompaniment of people considering assisted suicide*. Once finalised and released, this document will complement and amplify these guidelines for clergy and pastoral carers in the Archdiocese of Brisbane.

For an extended treatment of the many issues surrounding VAD and the Church's response to it, the Holy See's document *Samaritanus Bonus* (14 July 2020) remains an important resource.

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