

# South Australian Voluntary Euthanasia Society Inc.

**Patrons:**

Emeritus Professor JA Richardson  
Robyn Layton LLB, LLM, QC

**Internet:** <http://www.saves.asn.au>



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**Please reply to:**      **Address:** 11 Boord Court, Dernancourt SA 5075      **Phone:** (08) 8336 8994  
**E-mail:** fcoombe@adam.com.au      **Mobile:** 0404 851 387

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To all members of the South Australian Parliament

## Separation of Church and State

Dear member,

A Doctrinal Note, drawn up by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and approved by the Pope on 21 November 2002, instructs Catholics on their participation in political life. The Note has been sent to members of the South Australian Parliament in anticipation of debate on the Dignity in Dying Bill. The full text is available at [www.adoremus.org/CDF-politicians.html](http://www.adoremus.org/CDF-politicians.html).

The Note inevitably raises questions about the role of church dictates in a secular democratic government. This is particularly relevant in matters such as abortion and voluntary euthanasia, which are commonly the subject of a "conscience" or "free" vote, and which Catholics are specifically instructed to oppose in debate and vote against.

The enclosed comments, limited to selected passages, illustrate the shortcomings and dangers of our lawmakers making decisions on issues and proposed Bills from a dogma standpoint rather than a rational and evidence based one which allows examination on merit. I abbreviate the comments in dotpoints here for your convenience.

- Elected representatives have a dual responsibility - to act in the common good and to represent the views of those who elected them.
  
- The variety of moral values held in different societies and the way they are interpreted shows the extent to which they are a cultural concept. Religious teaching may be significant in this, but it is not decisive.
  
- Someone who has only a future of intolerable suffering or distress may legitimately seek to end biological life and ask for help to do so. This right needs to be prescribed by law to prevent abuse and to enable the choice to be made while still of sound mind.

Yours sincerely,

**Frances Coombe**  
**President**

The “Doctrinal Note on some questions regarding the participation of Catholics in political life” drawn up by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, approved by Pope John Paul II on 21 November 2002, and proclaimed on November 24 2002 by Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect, and Archbishop Bertone, Secretary was sent by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference under cover of a Briefing Paper to all members of the South Australian Parliament.

### **Comment**

Whereas the Doctrinal Note is an instruction to Catholics, in many places “Catholic” is confusingly treated as if it were synonymous with “Christian”. As the Note was sent to all MPs it is left to those who are not subject to Catholic doctrine to consider its merits, so it is important to examine the premises on which the Note is based.

#### **“Guided by a Christian conscience”**

The overriding issue is the role of church dictates in secular democratic government. Elected representatives have a dual responsibility - to act in the common good and to represent the views of those who elected them. These responsibilities may conflict. If so they should be resolved by rational debate and/or in conformity with party policy or election promises, not according to the dictates of a church.. Moreover, representatives are sometimes allowed a conscience or “free” vote on moral issues. The Doctrinal Note instructs that conscience in accordance with Catholic doctrine.

Those who are subject to the doctrine should in the interests of fair debate make it known that their views and their vote reflect the requirements of their church. This would also apply to any who are constrained by church discipline in their parliamentary role.

#### **“Non-negotiable ethical principles”**

“*Ethical pluralism*” and “*moral relativism*” are two terms used to attack the right of people to exercise autonomy in their moral choices. There is claimed to be a natural “*moral law rooted in the nature of the human person*” to which the Church is privy, giving the Church the “*right and duty to provide a moral judgment on temporal matters ...*”

However, t

he variety of moral values held in different societies and the way they are interpreted shows the extent to which they are a cultural concept. Religious teaching may be significant in this, but it is not decisive. A great part is played by rational reflection on life experiences. Progress in moral understanding is impossible when fresh thinking is blocked by the assertion of non-negotiable principles, and when a particular church claims to identify these and proclaims them to be immutable.

***“The inviolability of human life”***

*“... democracy...succeeds only to the extent that it is based on a correct understanding of the human person”. Legislators have a “grave and clear obligation to oppose’ any law that attacks human life”, i.e., “the basic right to life from conception to natural death”.*

These statements derive not only from the belief that human life is a gift from God, who retains ownership, but that God has set a term of life for each of us which we must not curtail. This latter belief is the basis for objection to both abortion and [voluntary] euthanasia. (The omission of “voluntary” is significant as there is no campaign for non-voluntary or compulsory euthanasia).

An alternative view holds that whether or not human life is a gift from God, it is freely owned by its possessor,

who is responsible not to use it to the detriment or harm of others.

The Note conflates a human “life” and a human “person”. Human life can be biologically described, but a human person is distinguished by qualities such as self-awareness, rationality and self-determination. Someone who is deprived of these qualities by illness or injury

and/or has only a future of intolerable suffering or distress may legitimately seek to end biological life and ask for help to do so.

This right needs to be prescribed by law to prevent abuse and to enable the choice to be made while still of sound mind.