I am honoured, though somewhat daunted, that the Archbishop and the SRC have invited me to speak at this very important symposium. Rather like Dr Blackwell, when first asked to participate this evening, my response was “Why me?” I begin by saying that the issue of Voluntary Assisted Dying is a remarkably complex one, and, given that it touches on the question of death and dying - what we might see as, in one sense, the very essence of being human, created mortal - it rightly goes very deep: emotionally, spiritually, physically, existentially deep. There is, therefore, a very real burden of responsibility placed on anyone who attempts to articulate reflections on this question.

Furthermore, I agree entirely with Dr Carnley that it is very sad indeed that there has been so little public debate on this issue – the 80% clearly holds sway perhaps because no reasonable alternative has been offered. And, while he was rightly keen to discuss the conversation Christians should be willing to have into the public space, my purpose in this is to offer some ways we can think about this in and as Church, before we begin to speak out.

We meet to explore this question at the end of a day on which the Church recalls St Monica - the mother of a rather precocious (though highly talented and gifted) son, whom we remember tomorrow: St Augustine of Hippo. So, following Augustine’s method in Confessions (of using autobiography as a way into exploring complex theological issues), I begin with some autobiography. My mother also had (or rather has) a rather precocious son. (I hope it goes without saying that he has no claims to the talents or giftedness of Monica’s son!).

At the age of 13 or 14, religious geek that I was (and am!) I asked my mother, for a school holiday ‘treat’, to take me for a tour of the Great Synagogue in Elizabeth Street, Sydney. During that tour, we all heard an explanation of some of the deep wisdom and faith of Judaism, and the Rabbi who spoke to the group said much about various aspects of Jewish life. Included amongst these was teaching on ‘fasting’. As the tour was ending, quietly and shyly (who could believe it?), I privately asked the Rabbi a question about some of what he’d said. “I am an insulin-dependant diabetic,” I said to him. “I cannot fast. What would I do?” The Rabbi looked very kindly and indulgently at me and said, “Young man, the greatest gift that God gives us is the gift of life: you must do nothing to threaten that gift. If you cannot fast without threatening that gift, you must not fast.”

A ‘chance’ encounter, one might say. But that clause ‘the greatest gift that God gives us is the gift of life’ stuck in my mind that day, and remains there. Thus, I began my thinking for this evening by returning to that, and I will return to circumstances surrounding it later.

An obvious legacy of its Jewish origins is that that same sense, of life as a ‘gift of God’, is prevalent in Christian thinking. Thus, as recently as 2015, the International Commission for Anglican-Orthodox Theological Dialogue can begin its statement In the Image and Likeness of God: A Hope-Filled Anthropology with the statement: “Creation, including humankind, is a gift of God, expressing [God’s] love…”¹ God creates from nothing, giving life to all creation, not because God needs to, but because God desires to be in loving relationship - ‘communion’, we

might say - with humanity and, indeed, all creation. That is God’s gift: the gift of life, lived in communion with God and with each other. As Vladimir Lossky puts it (following the thinking of the writer of Genesis and St Paul), God ‘makes room’ or creates space for what is not God.\(^2\)

Christianity goes a little further, however. God desires that all creation live in eternal communion with God precisely because that is how God is: a triune communion of love. Humanity, however, disrupts and rejects that desire: humanity demands to be ‘in control’, to be ‘like God’, as the serpent says to Eve (Genesis 3:5). The tragic irony is that in rejecting the eternal communion with the source of life, which is God’s desire for creation, humanity severs both itself and the rest of creation from that sustaining life-force. In other words, death enters in. And a further tragic irony is that humanity does not recognise that any attempt to grasp at or take control is precisely the opposite of the divine nature revealed to us in the self-giving love that leads to Creation and, more particularly, in the Incarnation of God the Son as Jesus of Nazareth.

That is, God’s desire for communion with the whole created order is such that, when humans reject that communion, God, in the eternal Son, takes on full humanity to re-establish and restore that communion. And, the great insight of the earliest followers of Jesus, recorded in St Paul’s letter to the Philippians,\(^3\) is that this happened precisely because he shows, thereby, that ‘equality with God’ was not something to be ‘exploited’. Rather, through ‘emptying himself’, (kenosis, as the Greek has it) and taking on humanity, he is “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”. (see Philippians 2: 5-11). Jesus, the Christian faith affirms, accepts all that being human entails - even death; accepts it obediently, ‘kenotically’, without wishing to gain control, nor exploit his power and position.

This brings me to the second element in this presentation: Christological reflections. The fact that Jesus’ death is, as the hymn in Philippians makes clear, ‘even death on a cross’ means we must also ask what is meant by a ‘dignified death’? To be hung up on a gibbet outside the walls of a city, so that every passer-by can see your dying agonies in their full naked (literally as well as figuratively) horror hardly qualifies as what we might call ‘dignified’. And yet, Christian faith affirms that this is where the glory of God is fully seen. Now, of course, I need to be very careful in suggesting that every painful, agonizing, undignified death speaks to us of Christ. Or, need I be? Perhaps each one can so speak, if we view all aspects of human life – even death – as being recapitulated (to use a theologically loaded term), summed up, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

It is possible to agree with Maggie Ross when she writes that ‘the heart of Christianity is the self-emptying, kenotic humility of God expressed in Jesus the Christ.’ Consequently, ‘it is from this… ground… that all discussions… that are to be termed “Christian” must proceed.’\(^4\) Ross goes on to state that at the heart of God’s ‘kenotic humility’ in Jesus is this: that God willingly is wounded. She argues, too, that

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\text{God’s willing woundedness is without hope of healing, as we commonly understand that word – for healing is the sign of finitude. In resurrection, Christ’s wounds are open. The wound into}
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which Thomas is invited to thrust his hand is not covered over or closed or scarred, but open and deep and glorified.\textsuperscript{5}

And, most tellingly of all (and so worthy of lengthy quotation), she goes on to argue that if we are to be in God's image,\ldots to invite God to indwell us so that we live Christ's life in today's world and in every day's world, we have to be willing to enter our individual wounds and through them the wounds of the community.\ldots We have to be willing to enter these wounds, not hide them, not seal them up, not scar them over. They must remain wounds in order that Christ's resurrection may enter and indwell us and our wounds be united and glorified with his. This is the way of transfiguration, which is a continuing process.\ldots

Thus we reject as hope (as God has rejected it) what appears as healing within mortality, because too often the appearance of healing becomes the denial of our creatureliness.\textsuperscript{6}

In other words, we might say, we attempt to assume control, to exploit our ability to 'transcend' our time-bound, frail, mortal bodies - whether only temporarily (given our mortality) or seemingly permanently, through taking our own lives. Ross continues:

This rejection of healing as hope does not, of course, in any way deny our longing to relieve pain or our search for healing our physical and psycho-spiritual hurts in this life until we engage our death. But we need to understand healing for what it really is; it is not a vanishing act, but rather learning to live with, in, and through pain, to adjust to our wounding, which cannot ultimately be denied, and to be willing to risk opening to change [even in death] that will lead to transfiguration.\textsuperscript{7}

Ross goes on to argue that attempts to deny creatureliness, and to assume control in such circumstances, has led to very unhealthy exercises of power by people over one another and the whole creation – and not only in the world, as it were, but in the Church too. But that leads us into at least one other topic for other potential symposia!

Such sharp Christological lenses lead, it seems to me, to the following tremulous musings:

I a) Christians affirm that a new, renewed, or better, transfigured paradigm of what it is to be human and live a human life was revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That life, therefore, becomes the pattern, for Christians. That pattern includes an unwillingness to 'seize control' of any aspect of life lived, even the manner of death undergone. That must, for Christians, raise questions about the premise of 'voluntary assisted dying/suicide'.

I b) By the same token, we need to acknowledge that sometimes – perhaps too often (especially in the past?) – that same desire for 'control' has led us to demand (and perhaps the medical profession has abetted that demand), that life be extended beyond what is - or at least could ever have been believed – reasonable. Indeed, later in the introductory chapter from which I have quoted at some length, Maggie Ross argues that the 'great god technology' has too often determined how long a life is extended for, that medical practitioners, driven by government and hospital demands that 'deaths on the ward' be decreased, have used medical technology to hold things together rather than allow the mortality that is an essential part of being human to work to its allotted end.

Integral to this, I believe, is a fear of death. But, again, a Christological reflection allows us to see that fear of death has no place for the Christian. As Paul reminds us, death has been

\textsuperscript{5} ibid., p. xvii
\textsuperscript{6} ibid., p. xvii
\textsuperscript{7} ibid., pp. xvii-xviii; emphasis added
swallowed up in the victory of Christ over death – “trampling down death by death” as the Orthodox sing each Easter morning: death where is thy sting?

1 c) That existential and ontological reality, that God does not allow death to have the final word, is seen by faith. And perhaps the statement that at the centre of this is a ‘fear of death’ needs to be nuanced to a ‘fear of dying’. Obviously, dying often is a painful physical reality – to say nothing of its emotional, existential and communal pain. For this reason, as both Drs Blackwell and Carnley have said, Christians and all people should continue to call for greatly increased expenditure on palliative care, and investment in its continuing improvement. To speak autobiographically again, technology can be very good: the fact that a century ago, scientists discovered how insulin could be produced and used to treat those with juvenile onset diabetes means I am here speaking with you this evening. And, just as methods of treating diabetes have improved remarkably in the forty or so years I have had it, so technological developments that improve palliative care are to be encouraged as strongly as possible.

2 a) God’s gift of life is given because God desires us to live in communion with God, with each other and, indeed, with the entire creation. Therefore, whatever else we say, we must agree with the remarkable Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral, London (who was also one of the finest poets in English) John Donne: any death diminishes us. No death is, or can ever be, solely an exercise of ‘absolute individual autonomy’. Voluntary assisted dying/suicide has repercussions for family members, friends, medical professionals, and the community at large because, as Donne put it, ‘no [one] is an island, entire and to itself’.

2 b) This means there are also implications for what can be experienced by those who sit with and observing a dying person. Yes, that will inevitably be painful for loved ones. But are we willing to allow the watching and waiting to teach us more of what it is to be human? Let us not forget that the women disciples, who remained faithfully watching the agony at the foot of the cross, were the ones who were also given the first news of resurrection life, and given the task to speak of what they had seen and learned.

3) A final cautionary note. As I said at the beginning, while Archbishop Peter was bewailing a lack of speaking into the public sphere, I was hoping in this paper to speak to sisters and brothers in Christ, and to ask us all to commit ourselves to thinking through what the very real prospect of Voluntary Assisted Dying/Suicide laws in this state imply, and how we might discuss and think about those laws with ourselves. Exercising the same kenotic humility we see in Christ Jesus, Christians must realise that others do not share our theological/Christological perspective. Some of what I have said can only be said in and to the Church, and we must be very wary and cautious about offering ‘answers’ and ‘moral standpoints’ to questions or moral dilemmas we’re not being asked, nor asked to comment on.

By the same token, however, part of being responsible citizens in a place is that we, too, have a right to express our thoughts: we aren’t only members of the Church; we are also citizens of the state of Western Australia. And we may need to realise (as Timothy Jenkins reminded clergy of the Diocese at Clergy School last week) that part of the rôle of the Church is to argue out amongst itself, in public, those ‘sides’ in a debate that the public may want to see and hear discussed, but is perhaps unwilling to discuss in other ways. That is why it is good that the Archbishop and SRC have convened this Symposium.

Perhaps it is worth ending this reflection almost where I began, by quoting St Augustine’s account of and reflections on the death of his mother, St Monica. Recalling the beginning of her final days, Augustine writes:
...as we talked on, my mother said, ‘My son, as for myself, I now find no pleasure in this life. What I have still to do here and why I am here, I do not know. My hope in this world is already fulfilled. The one reason why I wanted to stay longer in this life was my desire to see you a Catholic Christian before I die. My God has granted this in a way more than I had hoped. For I see you despising this world’s success to become [God’s] servant....

Then seeing us [Augustine and his brother] struck dumb with grief, she said: “Bury your mother here.” I kept silence and fought back my tears. But my brother, as if to cheer her up, said something to the effect that he hoped she would be buried not in a foreign land but in her home country.... She looked in my direction and said... to both of us “Bury my body anywhere you like. Let no anxiety about that disturb you. I have only one request to make of you: that you remember me at the altar of the Lord, wherever you may be.” She explained her thought in such words as she could speak, then fell silent as the pain of her sickness became worse....

... asked whether she were not afraid to leave her body so far from her own town. “Nothing,” she said “is distant from God, and there is no ground for fear that he may not acknowledge me at the end of the world and raise me up.”

Such is the Christian’s hope. Such is our hope. May we, like Monica, be given grace to face our own certain death in such hope; and may we, like Augustine, have grace to be present with those who die – even in pain – in a silence which, rather than needing to speak to ‘cheer’ them, allows them to speak to us – even in silence – of such hope.

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