

Respecting Life Until Natural Death

As Catholics we hold both the dignity of each person and the gift of life as sacred. The Second Vatican Council reaffirmed our opposition to "all offences against life itself, such as murder, genocide, abortion, and euthanasia." [1] We understand human life to be the most basic gift from a loving God, a gift over which we have stewardship, not absolute dominion. As responsible stewards of life, we must never directly intend to cause our own death or that of anyone else. Therefore, Euthanasia and assisted suicide are contrary to a Catholic understanding of life.



However, careful stewardship of life does not demand that we always use every possible means to prolong life. Treatment can be refused by a terminally ill patient when its burdens outweigh its benefits for that patient. In such cases, the basic care owed to every human being should still be provided. We may reject those treatments that are too burdensome, but we must never destroy a human life on the ground that it is a burden. Given these principles, we believe that each person is bound to use ordinary means health care. This includes nourishment with food and water and ordinary medical care. Ordinary means offer a reasonable hope of regaining health and are not unduly burdensome to either the patient or the family.[2]

Palliative care has important part to play in any end of life scenario. Pope John Paul II reminded us that modern pain management and relieving discomfort is "the way of love and true mercy" that we should offer to all dying patients, instead of offering to assist their suicides."[3]



“The moment of death is always accompanied by particularly intense human sentiments: an earthy life is ending, the emotional, generational, and social ties that are part of the person's inner self are dissolving; people who are dying and those who assist them are aware of the conflict between hope in immortality and the unknown which troubles even the most enlightened minds. The church lifts her voice so that the dying are not offended but are given every loving care and are not left alone as they prepare to cross the threshold of time to enter eternity.”[4]

How we respect people in the final stage of life says a great deal about the kind of society we live in. This stage of life can be a time when we focus on the things that really count. When dying persons and their families give witness to their love for each other and their trust in God, we can reflect that life is indeed a beautiful gift to be lived out to its fullest moment. Our loved ones in their final hours deserve our respect and protection.

“For a Catholic, dying naturally is central to our teaching. This includes support from palliative care.”
- Most Rev Michael McCarthy, Bishop of Rockhampton

References:

[1] Gaudium et Spes 27.

[2] Pope John Paul II Address "Life Sustaining Treatments", 2011, 5.

[3] Pope John Paul II Love and Solidarity for the Dying." Pope John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Academy

[4] Ibid.

Euthanasia: The Queensland Situation

Euthanasia or Voluntary assisted dying is the deliberate ending of a person's life by a medical professional, either directly by injecting poison into the patient, or indirectly by helping the patient to commit suicide. Euthanasia is on the political agenda of the current Queensland state parliament.

Euthanasia and palliative care are two different things. Good palliative care negates the need for Euthanasia. It includes;

- Use of appropriate pain relief to ease pain and other medications to help ease difficult breathing and reduce agitation
- If the pain becomes uncontrollable, terminal sedation can be considered – this allows the patient to slip into a deep sleep until they pass away of natural causes
- Ceasing or failing to commence active treatment that will unnecessarily prolong life and suffering.



In Queensland, we have a shortage of palliative care specialists, which is acutely felt in regional areas. The lack of access to good palliative care is an argument used by euthanasia supporters for the legalisation of euthanasia. [1]



Why Euthanasia Should Not Be Legalised:

- The Australian Medical Association is against euthanasia of any kind.[2]
- All the peak medical advisory or representative bodies in Australia are opposed to euthanasia, as are many around the world including the World Medical Association.
- 101 Victorian oncologists wrote against euthanasia: "Assisted suicide is in conflict with the basic ethical principles and integrity of medical practice." [3]



Safeguards and Consent:

- Safeguards are eroded over time. No jurisdiction where euthanasia has been legalised has been able to safeguard against wrongful deaths (deaths caused by wrong diagnosis or wrong prognosis, patients being unaware of available treatment or having no access to palliative care), or coercion and elder abuse. In many jurisdictions, Euthanasia is now legal for infants born prematurely or with disabilities.[4]
- There are so many cases of people being "euthanized" against their will. In 2014, the Canadian Medical Association Journal published a study showing that close to 1/3 of euthanasia deaths in one region of Belgium were done without consent.[5]

The present Queensland government has instructed the Queensland Law Reform Commission to produce euthanasia legalisation before 31 March 2021 and therefore it is likely Queensland will legalise euthanasia. In their recent statement, *The Common Good in a COVID World*, the Queensland Bishops have highlighted that:

"Euthanasia and assisted suicide put some of the most vulnerable people in our community at risk by endorsing – even in law – the judgement that some people's lives are no longer of value. The State Government needs to provide better funding and resourcing for palliative care so that all Queenslanders have access, not just the few. Access to palliative care for older Australians receiving aged care, especially in regional and rural settings, is a critical area of need. This is a matter of urgency at a time when there is pressure to legislate for euthanasia in the State parliament."

- Queensland Bishops

Prepared by Bishop's Advisory Panel on Sanctity of Life Issues 2020.

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References:

- [1] Associate Professor Phillip Good, Queensland Specialist Palliative Care Services Medical Directors' Group, Mater Hospital, Brisbane at Queensland Health Committee hearing on 5th April, 2019 submission to the Queensland Health Committee.
- [2] Australian Medical Association Position Statement Euthanasia and Physician Assisted Suicide 2016.
- [3] Victorian Oncologists against Euthanasia. Letter to the Parliament of Victoria 22-08-107.
- [4] Barbara Miller, Euthanasia law: Belgium passes legislation giving terminally ill children right to die. ABC News 14-02-14
- [5] Mark Penninga. Right to die becomes obligation. Lethbridge Herald, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada. Sept 23 2014. <http://lethbridgeherald.com/commentary/opinions/2014/09/23/right-to-die-becomes-obligation/>