

Statement On Euthanasia

Michigan Catholic Conference Board of Directors

Death, quite understandably, is a frightening prospect, although differently for different people. This is not necessarily a sign of weakness or wavering faith; actually it is realistic to face something so monumental and mysterious as death with a certain wonderment and awe.

Now, in addition to the natural ambivalence to death, we have come to fear dying, for dying often is accompanied by suffering and we have been conditioned to avoid suffering at all costs. There are some sufferings, however, which cannot be avoided. Growing up is one, dying is another.

We believe that dying is a human act. We can and should try to minimize the suffering, but we cannot take away the risk and the letting-go that is involved. Experience tells us that there is something beneficial about this precious stage of human existence. For the dying and those who are committed to them, the end of life can be a time of intimacy, healing, soul-searching, wonder and awe. From a merely sociological and psychological point of view, dying is not something to be avoided at all costs.

It is appropriate and desirable to take every reasonable means possible to alleviate or eliminate pain and suffering for the chronically ill or the dying. We believe that “everything that blossoms dies,” and that we are not required to take extreme measures to squeeze every second of earthly life from our earthly sojourn.

In other words, we believe that people should be allowed to die, and to die with dignity. We believe that it is not necessary to take unreasonable means to prolong human life. It might be noted that “unreasonable means” can include family members or friends who tell a dying person to “keep fighting” or try to create a false hope of recovery instead of handing on the truth.

For millennia, people have looked to their faith to find the answers to the “profound mysteries of the human condition.” With hope in the Risen Christ, many of us have found peace and understanding of life, death and eternal life. On the other hand, there are many today who argue for the right to exercise what they perceive as the “ultimate freedom of choice”: suicide. A few, for a great variety of reasons, seek solutions to the existential conditions of pain, suffering and loss in self-imposed or assisted death.

There are those in our society today who believe that euthanasia (literally “good death”) protects those who wish to die with dignity. They are wrong. Euthanasia and assisted suicide are an outgrowth of what our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, has called “a false love.” In 1979, prior to his election to the papacy, Cardinal Karol Wojtyla wrote in “Love and Responsibility”:

“True love perfects and develops personal existence. A false love, on the other hand, has contrary results. False love turns toward false good and, what happens more often, to some actual real good, but in manner which does not conform to its nature or even opposes it.....A false love is an evil love.”

This “false love” causes those who lose hope to become victims of a culture which tolerates mercy killing and physician-assisted suicide. Death becomes the answer for many social ills. Abortion becomes the solution for a “problem pregnancy,” the death penalty as retribution for violent crime, or actions of euthanasia as an answer for pain and suffering. Such death-dealing policies directed at suffering, aged, and vulnerable persons, diminishes each of us as individuals and as members of families and communities.

Society must be very careful when it puts its hand on the switch of human life. Euthanasia would add an entirely different category of permissible killing, and it raises very serious problems that have not been carefully considered.

What sort of fear will this cause in persons who are chronically ill, aged, or disabled?

What sort of subtle pressure will this create among those who feel (or are) unwanted?

Would it not mean that individuals would be handing over control of their lives and destinies without any possibility of calling it back?

Who determines and how do we determine when unavoidable pain and suffering is too much? All of us can think of times in our lives when we thought our burden too heavy to bear another step.

We shape our society, and our society shapes us. If we sanction euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide, we can be absolutely sure it will have consequences far beyond the individual case we may have in mind. Physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia are more than one-on-one killing. It is societal killing and will affect how we think about ourselves and others, about life and death, far beyond this issue.

As the Board of Directors of the Michigan Catholic Conference, we believe that a just society promotes and enhances the dignity of all human life for the common good.

- *We* invite the Catholic Community to prayerful reflection and thoughtful action on this subject.
- *We* urge the medical and legal professions to study the issue with discipline, integrity and compassion. The medical community particularly, trained to heal, must conform to the strictest canons of healing as an art and as a science. The desire to control pain has always been valid, but not the desire to push control so far as to directly cause death.
- *We* challenge the media not to capitalize on people's confusion, ambivalence and even fear about the use of modern life-prolonging technologies, but to provide thorough research to clarify and enlighten.

We have thus far spoken on a human plane, and we believe that our reasons at that level are compelling. But we cannot speak about life and death without including our faith. We believe in God. We believe that our following of Jesus is most of all to die as He died – freely, with trust in God's plan and God's timetable – not ours!

What we really believe in is life, not death. We arrive at life by dying, which means letting go of all that we hold dear. For Christians, dying is not an ultimate evil to be avoided at all costs; it is a step toward the fullness of life. It is just a piece of the journey, and not the entire journey.

Dying is part of our ultimate power to say how we will respond to the mystery of who we are and who God is. It is at the very core of our freedom. True freedom does not claim the power to die as we choose – which is what euthanasia attempts to do. We claim only the freedom to choose how we will accept death as it is presented to each of us. Our logo is the Cross, for Jesus freely responded to a death He did not choose, and made of it the path to life.

Therefore, we call upon all people of good will to reflect on the value of life and its ultimate meaning. Let us follow the exhortation the dying Moses spoke to the Jewish people: “I set before you life and death ...Choose life!”

*Michigan Catholic Conference
Board of Directors
Archbishop Adam J. Maida, Chairman
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