

Euthanasia

ISSUE: What is “euthanasia” and why does the Church forbid its practice?

RESPONSE: Euthanasia is “an act or an omission which, of itself or by intention, causes death in order to eliminate suffering.” Euthanasia is an act that always offends against the dignity of the human person and is by nature a murderous act which must be forbidden (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2277). As the Church has always taught, it is a sin against the Fifth Commandment (Ex. 20:13).¹

The Church affirms the right to life of all persons, from conception to natural death.² In addition, we should encourage those with long-standing or terminal illnesses to unite their suffering with those of Jesus Christ, offering up their struggles for the sake of God’s Kingdom.³

DISCUSSION: Euthanasia is defined as any intentional act on the part of a third party that brings about the death of a person in order to eliminate his suffering. Euthanasia is commonly referred to as “assisted suicide.” Not only does an individual wrongly seek his death, but he is assisted by another party in doing so:

No one can make an attempt on the life of an innocent person without opposing God’s love for that person, without violating a fundamental right, and therefore without committing a crime of the utmost gravity.⁴

Purposefully administering any death-inducing substance to a person who is suffering from a terminal or debilitating illness constitutes an act of euthanasia. Euthanasia also includes those intentional omissions of care that result in the death of a patient. One who is caring for the terminally ill is obliged to provide the patient with basic, ordinary care (*Catechism*, nos. 2278-79).

Nutrition (food) and hydration (water) constitute ordinary care, even when they must be administered to the patient through a tube so long as doing so does not cause unnecessary hardship to the patient.⁵ If death is “imminent” and providing the patient with food will cause greater hardship than relief, those caring for the patient may forego such care.⁶

While caretakers are obliged to provide their patients with ordinary care, they are never required to pursue those therapeutic procedures that constitute “extraordinary care.” Extraordinary care refers to those therapeutic treatments that carry a disproportionate risk or great physical/financial burden to the patient. In refusing extraordinary care, one does not will to cause his own death; he is merely recognizing his inability to impede it (*Catechism*, no. 2278).

Drugs used to suppress pain can aid in comforting those who are suffering from a terminal or debilitating illness. These medicines remain morally licit, even when they affect one’s state of consciousness. Such medicines must not, however, be used as an end or a means to bring about one’s own death. Though some pain-relieving drugs may indirectly cause one’s life to be shortened, they are permissible, again, as long as relief of pain and not the death of the patient is sought as the end.⁷

There are those who will argue that euthanasia is necessary to protect the dignity of those who are terminally ill or those who are suffering prolonged and intense pain. Disease or other human suffering can in no way eliminate or even diminish one’s God-given dignity. Such evils are a part of the human condition and, if suffered with meekness and patience, can be offered up with Christ’s suffering for the eternal benefit of souls, including one’s own. Those who are suffering should be comforted in this hope of future glory:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh (2 Cor. 4:8-11; cf. Mt. 16:24-27).

¹ *Ibid.*, no. 2280-83.

² *Ibid.*, no. 2270.

³ *Ibid.*, nos. 1508, 1520, 164; cf. Rom. 8:35-39; 2 Cor. 12:9-10.

⁴ Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on Euthanasia*, 1980, no. 1.

⁵ Cf. National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, 1995, no. 58.

⁶ *Declaration on Euthanasia*, no. 4.

⁷ NCCB, *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, no. 61.

AVAILABLE FROM CUF BOOKS AND TAPES BY MAIL:

Catechism of the Catholic Church; \$29.95 • CUF Member . . . \$22.00 (Hardcover).

Catechism of the Catholic Church; \$19.95 • CUF Member . . . \$12.00 (Paperback).

The Gospel of Life; Pope John Paul II, 1995; \$3.95 • CUF Member . . . \$3.60.

On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering; Pope John Paul II, 1984; \$1.95
• CUF Member . . . \$1.80.

Declaration on Euthanasia; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1980; \$0.50
• CUF Member . . . \$0.45.

Dehumanizing the Vulnerable; William Brennan; \$13.95 • CUF Member . . . \$12.55.

Your Death Warrant?; Gould and Craignyle, eds.; \$4.95 • CUF Member . . . \$2.00.

FAITH FACT: “The Principle of Double Effect”; Free to Members.

Last edited: 11/97

**Catholics United for the Faith
827 North Fourth St.
Steubenville, OH 43952
(800) 693-2484
*Books and Tapes only: (888) 316-2640**

© 1997 Catholics United for the Faith, Inc.