

Brief Reflections on Euthanasia

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1. Increasingly, in the courts and the media and in conversation, we are hearing about euthanasia and the so-called "right to die."

It's time we all are fully informed about what is going on, and what the appropriate response should be.

Euthanasia is not a future problem. It is a present problem. It is happening now and becoming increasingly accepted. And we are asleep, not realizing that the road we are on will lead to the massive elimination of the elderly and "incompetent," and anyone else considered to be a burden to society.

Consider the Nancy Cruzan case. She had been in a coma for almost eight years, but was NOT dying, NOT deteriorating. The courts allowed food and water to be discontinued, and 12 days later (on the day after Christmas) she died. Note well, she did not die of the coma. She died of starvation. She was 33.

Or consider Dr. Jack Kevorkian, who let Janet Adkins, a 54 year old sufferer of early Alzheimer's, use his homemade "suicide machine" to kill herself. She pushed a button which released lethal fluids into her body. He has likewise administered death to dozens of others.

Is this the direction we want our society to go? Is life valuable only when it is healthy? Are we the ones who decide when we die? Is suffering meaningless?

The answer to all these questions is NO, and I hope in these reflections to explain why. Let us all do some serious thinking on these matters. It's a question of life and death.

2. We do not have a "right to die." Many people now speak of such a thing, but without the proper understanding of the terminology they use.

A "right" is a moral claim. We do not have a claim on death. Rather, death has a claim on us!

We do not decide when our life will end, any more than we decided when it began. Much less does someone else -- a relative, a doctor, or a legislator--decide when our life will end. None of us is master over life and death.

What we do have a right to is proper care. It is never "care" in any sense of the word, to terminate life, even if that life is full of suffering. We have no right to terminate life.

There are groups in our country pushing for the "right" to use lethal injections on the seriously ill, or to remove their food and water. We must oppose such moral nonsense with all our strength. And the time to oppose it is now, before it becomes solidified in law.

3. No matter how ill a patient is, we never have a right to put that person to death. Rather, we have a duty to care for and preserve life.

But to what length are we required to go to preserve life? No religion or state holds that we are obliged to use every possible means to prolong life. The means we use have traditionally been classified as either "ordinary" or "extraordinary."

"Ordinary" means must always be used. This is any treatment or procedure which provides some benefit to the patient without excessive burden or hardship.

"Extraordinary" means are optional. These are measures which do present an excessive burden.

The distinction here is NOT between "artificial" and "natural." Many artificial treatments will be "ordinary" means in the moral sense, as long as they provide some benefit without excessive burden. It depends, of course, on the specific case in point, with all its medical details. We cannot figure out ahead of time, in other words, whether or not we ourselves or a relative want some specific treatment to be used on us "when the time comes," because we do not know in advance what our medical situation will be at that time or what treatments will be available. When the time does come, however, we must consult on the medical and moral aspects of the situation. Remember, procedures providing benefit without unreasonable hardship are obligatory; others are not. You should consult your clergyman when the situations arise.

4. According to the 1980 declaration from the Vatican, *Jura et Bona*, "euthanasia", or "mercy killing" is defined as "an action or an omission which of itself or by intention causes death, in order that all suffering may in this way be eliminated."

Our country is on a collision course with euthanasia. Think about the issue now, and work to change the course, or else you may end up a victim of it.

"Mercy killing". I do not see what killing has to do with mercy. What I do see is that those who advocate it have a MISPLACED compassion. They want to eliminate all suffering. Very nice, but very unrealistic...and also very pagan.

I ask you readers who are Christian, is all suffering meaningless? Does it have no value at all, no purpose? I do not wish suffering on anyone. But when it comes, is

our only response to be to eliminate it, even to the point of euthanasia? You tell me whether this is the Christian gospel!

Was the suffering of Christ meaningless? Or do we not say, "We adore You, O Christ, and we bless You, for BY YOUR HOLY CROSS You have redeemed the world."? Did He not tell His followers to embrace the cross? Do we not join our pain to His to save souls?

Even from a secular viewpoint, does not suffering provide an occasion to grow in wisdom, character, and compassion?

The push for mercy killing is utterly pagan. Christian and all reasonable people must oppose it.

5. The core evil of euthanasia is that an individual or group of people think they have the right to put someone else to death.

"Killing a human being" is not a very nice concept. To make it more acceptable, therefore some people start playing with the language. They say, for example, that the one who is incurably ill or comatose is a "vegetable". A vegetable? What kind? A cucumber? Carrot?

NO MATTER WHAT THE AILMENT HE/SHE SUFFERS FROM, A HUMAN BEING IS ALWAYS HUMAN, AND ALWAYS HAS A RIGHT TO LIFE WHICH NOBODY, OF ANY PHILOSOPHICAL, POLITICAL, OR RELIGIOUS PERSUASION EVER IS ABLE TO TAKE AWAY. In fact, it is precisely when life is afflicted by weakness and illness that it is all the MORE deserving of our care.

Remember the song, "He Ain't Heavy; He's My Brother". Advocates of euthanasia do not see the ill this way, but only as a burden. God forgive them.

And how about you?

6. Those who push euthanasia (the killing of the seriously ill by act or omission) are all around. Have you met them? Have you heard them on TV and read their articles? If not, the time has come to be aware that they are on the march with their ungodly, death-dealing philosophy, trying to carve it into law.

Central to their utterly false philosophy is the notion that some lives are NOT WORTH LIVING. These lives, they maintain, are more trouble than they are worth. They have too much suffering, and are too much of a burden on the resources of society.

You know, if we were talking about a car, or a typewriter, or some other THING, we could say that when enough things go wrong with it, it becomes more trouble than it's worth. Repairs would be too costly, too involved. Throw it out and get a new one.

But we cannot apply this mindset to HUMAN PERSONS. A person is never more trouble than he/she is worth. Notice, we do not use the pronoun "it" to refer to a human being. There's a reason for that. A person is not a "thing", an "it", an object whose value is to be calculated on some kind of economic cost/benefit analysis scale. A person is worth more than the ENTIRE PHYSICAL UNIVERSE! Ponder that. Human life is of INFINITE VALUE, and this remains true no matter how small, weak, incommunicative, disabled, diseased, or "unproductive" (in the eyes of a materialistic, consumerist society like ours) it may be.

Take up the torch of life. Defend human life from euthanasia.

7. Many of you have heard of "Living Wills." These are documents by which a person can give in advance a directive to have life-sustaining medical treatment withheld or discontinued at the time of future serious illness, should he or she then be unable to make medical decisions. These living wills are being promoted as necessary for the person to die peacefully and with dignity. HOWEVER, living wills can be harmful

rather than helpful. They are unnecessary and dangerous for patients, doctors, and society.

One of the many reasons that we should not get involved with living wills is that the language used is too broad and can be open to a variety of interpretations. This will vary from one document to another. But a living will distributed by the Concern for Dying organization asks that the signer "not be kept alive by medications" or "artificial means." What does that mean? An aspirin is "medication," is it not? Drinking through a straw is "artificial." People can construe meanings for these words which the signer of the document never intended.

There are other serious reasons not to make a living will, which are examined below.

8. "Living Wills" are unnecessary and dangerous. There are many reasons; here I will share one more.

According to an authoritative brochure on Living Wills printed by the Metropolitan New York Right to Life Foundation, Living Wills are unnecessary because they propose to give rights which patients and doctors already possess. To quote the brochure, "People already have the right to make informed consent decisions telling their family and physicians how they want to be treated if and when they can no longer make decisions for themselves. Doctors are already free to withhold or withdraw useless procedures in terminal cases that provide no benefit to the patient. Some people fear that medical technology will be used to torture them in their final days. But it is more likely that the 'medical heroics' people fear are the very treatments that will make possible a more comfortable, less painful death."

Catholics must follow the moral teachings of the Church in these matters and should consult a priest in specific cases. But by all means avoid "Living Wills." More on this to come.

9. Can you predict the future? Specifically, can you tell me what form of sickness or disease you will be afflicted with in the years ahead? Can you tell me what kind of treatment you will need?

Of course not, says common sense. But common sense is not as common as we might think. The making of a "Living Will" presupposes that we know what kind of medical treatments we will want to use or avoid in the future. It speaks about treatments before we even know the disease; it turns a future option into a present decision.

As I have explained above, not every medical treatment is always obligatory. But to figure out which treatments are obligatory, morally speaking, and which are only optional, one must know the medical facts of the case. These facts are then examined in the light of the moral principles involved. But to try to make that decision in advance is to act without all the necessary information. Moreover, to make that decision legally binding by means of a formal document is really putting the cart before the horse. It is not morally justified.

Living Wills are both unnecessary and dangerous.

10. Some years ago, the winner of a Pro-Life Essay Contest sponsored by the Archdiocese of New York was Anne Marie O'Halloran, from Maria Regina High School in Hartsdale. Her topic was euthanasia. Let me share with you some of her own words:

"One of the highest values this country holds is freedom. This has led to a situation in which individuals believe they have the right to live completely as they desire. Human beings are seen as limitless. They have the right to decide how they want to live and how they should die....Another quality prized by our culture is power. We believe, or rather, we would like to believe, that we can control anything and everything to ensure a safe and comfortable lifestyle....Our society has created a world in which it is always possible and always considered right to take the easy way

out of problems, suffering and death. That way is completely against the example Jesus set for us; it is against Christian values. We, as Christians, must form a counter-culture. We do not pray for an easy, free or painless life and death. Rather we should pray for strength to sustain and understand the life God gave us to live."

May more young men and women come to see what this student sees and says so well, that we are NOT the absolute masters of life and death. Only God is. May His gift of life be respected.

11. Reflections on the growing problem of euthanasia require a word regarding the medical profession. The word is first of all one of gratitude. So many people have dedicated themselves to the care of others. The skills of medicine are skills to preserve and care for life. The heart and soul of the medical profession is UNWAVERING RESPECT FOR THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON, a dignity which is not bestowed by the State or by anyone else, but belongs to the very nature of the person. Those who promote this dignity deserve thanks.

The state of our times is also a plea to those who practice medicine: never allow the skills of your profession to be used to destroy the gift of life. Euthanasia is just a nice word for killing. We must oppose the trend which says that there are some lives not worth living. We must oppose the mentality which says that we should end a life in order to eliminate suffering. No, we do not end life. We care for it. When life is weak and afflicted with pain, it is all the more deserving of our care.

Our times demand courage and wisdom. May these not be lacking to any one of us!

12. On September 12, 1991, a statement was released by the Administrative Committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the statement centered on euthanasia. Since this statement is addressed both to Catholics and non-Catholics alike, I would like to reproduce it here. As it calls us to reject euthanasia, may it give us much food for thought. Here is how the letter begins:

"Current efforts to legalize euthanasia place our society at a critical juncture. These efforts have received growing public attention, due to new publications giving advice on methods of suicide and some highly publicized instances in which family members or physicians killed terminally ill persons or helped them kill themselves."

"Proposals such as those in the Pacific Northwest, spearheaded by the Hemlock Society, aim to change state laws against homicide and assisted suicide to allow physicians to provide drug overdoses or lethal injections to their terminally ill patients."

"Those who advocate euthanasia have capitalized on people's confusion, ambivalence, and even fear about the use of modern life-prolonging technologies. Further, borrowing language from the abortion debate, they insist that the "right to choose" must prevail over all other considerations. Being able to choose the time and manner of one's death, without regard to what is chosen, is presented as the ultimate freedom. A decision to take one's life or to allow a physician to kill a suffering patient, however, is very different from a decision to refuse extraordinary or disproportionately burdensome treatment.

"As Catholic leaders and moral teachers, we believe that life is the most basic gift of a loving God - a gift over which we have stewardship but not absolute dominion."

"Our tradition, declaring a moral obligation to care for our own life and health and to seek such care from others, recognizes that we are not morally obligated to use all available medical procedures in every set of circumstances. But that tradition clearly and strongly affirms that as a responsible steward of life one must never directly intend to cause one's own death, or the death of an innocent victim, by action or omission. As the Second Vatican Council declared, "Euthanasia and willful suicide" are "offenses against life itself" which "poison civilization"; they "debase the perpetrators more than the victims and militate against the honor of the Creator" (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, No. 27)."

"As the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has said, "Nothing and no one can in any way permit the killing of an innocent human being, whether a fetus or an embryo, an infant or an adult, or and old person, or one suffering from an incurable disease, or a person who is dying." Moreover, we have no right "to ask for this act of killing" for ourselves or for those entrusted to our care; "nor can any authority legitimately recommend or permit such an action." We are dealing here with a "violation of person, a crime against life, and an attack on humanity" (Declaration on Euthanasia," 1980)."

"Legalizing euthanasia would also violate American convictions about human rights and equality. The Declaration of Independence proclaims our inalienable rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." If our right to life itself is diminished in value, our other rights will have no meaning. To destroy the boundary between healing and killing would mark a radical departure from long-standing legal and medical traditions of our country, posing a threat of unforeseeable magnitude to vulnerable members of our society. Those who represent the interests of elderly citizens, persons with disabilities and persons with AIDS or other terminal illnesses are justifiably alarmed when some hasten to confer on them the "freedom" to be killed.

"We call on Catholics, and on all persons of good will, to reject proposals to legalize euthanasia. We urge families to discuss issues surrounding the care of terminally ill loved ones in light of sound moral principles and the demands of human dignity, so that patients need not feel helpless or abandoned in the face of complex decisions about their future. And we urge health care professionals, legislators and all involved in this debate to seek solutions to the problems of terminally ill patients and their families that respect the inherent worth of all human beings, especially those most in need of our love and assistance."