

CLIFF NOTES

by Fr. Clifford Smith

What's Wrong With Physician-Assisted Suicide?

Euthanasia (*literally "good death" in Ancient Greek,*) the technical term for physician-assisted-suicide or mercy killing is either a form of suicide or murder, depending on the consent or inability to consent the part of the subject. It refers to the practice of directly and intentionally ending a life that, because of pain, suffering or significantly reduced quality of life, seems too much to bear. At this time (2008) some forms of euthanasia are legal in Belgium, Thailand, Luxemburg, The Netherlands, Switzerland, some Australian states, and the U.S. state Oregon.

The ***Catechism of the Catholic Church*** is very clear: (paragraph #2258) Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can under any circumstance claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being.

Para. #2280: *Everyone is responsible for his life before God who has given it to him. It is God who remains the sovereign Master of life. We are obliged to accept life gratefully and preserve it for his honor and the salvation of our souls. We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of.*

Para #2281: *Suicide contradicts the natural inclination of the human being to preserve and perpetuate his life. It is gravely contrary to the just love of self. It likewise offends love of neighbor because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family, nation, and other human societies to which we continue to have obligations. Suicide is contrary to love for the living God.*

Suicides, physician-assisted or otherwise usually proceed from fear of undue pain and suffering. Physicians and other caregivers have the obligation to maintain life but also to relieve pain. Individuals who support physician-assisted suicide often argue that it is the only way to protect the dying from severe pain. But it is important to understand that the effective and aggressive treatment of pain guarantees that no one need endure a painful death. Health-care providers must make every effort to ensure that all available medications to eliminate or control pain are provided to a patient. This type of treatment is completely acceptable in Catholic thought. Although we may always be encouraged to accept pain and suffering, offering it up to be united with the suffering of Christ, we are not required to suffer. A physician may responsibly administer medications to control or reduce pain even when doing so may hasten death. The physician's intention in so doing is not to kill the patient but to relieve pain effectively with the medication.

In his 1995 encyclical letter, ***Evangelium Vitae*** (*The Gospel of Life,*) Pope John Paul II, wrote: "*True compassion leads to sharing another's pain; it does not kill the person whose suffering we cannot bear.*"

God is the giver of life and we may not except under extraordinary circumstances take it away. All life is sacred. Whatever its motives and means, direct euthanasia that consists in putting an end to the lives of handicapped, sick, or dying persons is morally unacceptable. Intentional euthanasia, regardless of intention, is murder. It is gravely contrary to the dignity of the human person and to the respect due to the living God, his Creator. Suicide is seriously contrary to justice, hope, and charity. It is forbidden by the fifth commandment.