

Death is the door to eternity, so to prepare for the final journey properly is of the utmost importance.

An Urgent Appeal to Medical Practitioners

Why are calls for euthanasia and assisted suicide emerging precisely at a time when our capacity to care for disabled and sick patients has so greatly advanced? It seems a cruel twist of history that societies with such great medical capabilities are turning against the disabled and sick – with lethal results.

To all medical practitioners we address an urgent appeal to employ the noble arts of medicine in service of life. The ancient injunction to physicians is still valid: Do no harm. Above all, medical practitioners must raise their voices against permitting euthanasia and assisted suicide. They are the ones who would make the critical decisions; they are the ones who would administer the fatal doses, the lethal injections. Patients place their trust in the medical professions. We should not create, or permit, situations which will undermine that trust.

A Civic Responsibility

The right to life is not a matter for Christians only. It is a human right. Our criminal law recognizes this, and both euthanasia and assisted suicide are currently criminal offenses. They should remain so. To permit the killing of the disabled, frail, sick or suffering, even if motivated by a misplaced compassion, requires a prior judgment that such lives are not worth living. No life lacks value. No life should be unprotected by the law. No one forfeits the right to life because of illness or disability.

Catholics, like all other citizens, have a right and duty to participate in the political processes of our democracy. Our elected representatives should be questioned about their positions on euthanasia and assisted suicide. We call on Canadians to encourage those who hold office, in all political parties, to protect the right to life, especially the right to life of those who are disabled, frail, sick, or suffering.

The right to life and the care of the sick are not partisan issues. Neither are they exclusively religious ones. The right to life is a fundamental human right, and protecting it no more depends upon strictly religious arguments than do our laws against theft, fraud or assault.

The Father's House

Jesus assures us that He has gone ahead to prepare a place for us in His Father's house. We know with certain faith and well-founded hope that He awaits us across the threshold of death. We may even look forward to the day when He calls us home. It is, indeed, our abiding home. To prepare for death is part of life, and to die a holy death is a special grace. Our particular vocation at this time in Canada's history is to meet death in a way that recognizes the great gift that life is in this world, and the still greater gift of life eternal with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in heaven.

*“Let me go
to the house
of The Father”*

John Paul II



Going to the House of the Father

A Statement on the Dignity and Destiny of Human Life



In early 2005 the world watched Pope John Paul II prepare for his death with serenity and courage. In those last days, our beloved Holy Father's Christian faith became ever more luminous, expressed in the beautiful simplicity of his last words:

“Let me go to the house of the Father.”

Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops
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Our faith in Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, teaches us that while we live in this world, full of the Lord's bounty and entrusted to human hands, it is not our abiding home.

We look forward to living with Jesus, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and with all the angels and saints in the eternal

bliss of heaven. Death marks the time of our judgment, and then, according to our cooperation with God's free gift of grace, we hope to pass over into life eternal with Him. For this reason, St. Francis of Assisi was able to speak of "Sister Death" as a friend who carries us from this life to the Father's house. Christians are not immune from the anxiety which impending death brings, but we should not fear it. We can face death with serenity and courage, knowing that it is our time to go to the house of the Father.

The Current Situation

As medical treatments have advanced many Canadians fear that death will no longer be a serene moment, but a mechanized and technological process in which suffering is prolonged. Partly because of such fears, advocates of euthanasia and assisted suicide have launched various initiatives to promote the practice of both. In late 2005, a private member's bill was introduced in

the House of Commons, which would have legalized euthanasia and assisted suicide. That bill died with the dissolution of Parliament that year. It is expected that similar Bills will be introduced.

While the issue has an important political dimension, the question of euthanasia and assisted suicide is even more fundamental than politics. We are dealing here with the great gift of life itself. Unless the right to life is secure, there can be no sure foundation for any human rights.

Difficult Decisions at the End of Life

There is undoubtedly great anxiety about medical decisions at the end of life. Some of this anxiety amongst Catholics stems from a mistaken understanding of what the moral law requires, even leading some to be sympathetic to calls for euthanasia and assisted suicide.

Euthanasia is the deliberate killing of someone with the intention of ending all suffering. Assisted suicide is similar, though it consists of helping someone to take his or her own life, usually a sick person who wishes to commit suicide but is physically unable to do so. Both are never permissible, for they violate the prohibition against taking innocent human life.

While life on earth is always good, it is not the greatest of all goods. Many have witnessed that there are goods more important than life in the body – faith (as the martyrs have shown), love, honour, integrity. Since life is always good, it may never be taken, even when the patient appears to wish it. However, because life on earth is not the greatest good, it need not be prolonged at all costs.

It is important to understand that as long as nothing is done with the deliberate intention of causing death, the moral law does not require that life be prolonged if the means of doing so are judged unduly burdensome or are no longer effective. Although advanced medical technology has developed many new methods of treatment, it is perfectly permissible to refuse any medical treatment that is unduly burdensome, or which would cause additional suffering and when there is little hope of recovery. In cases where pain is great, it is even permissible to administer pain relief that could have the secondary, but not intended, effect of hastening the end of life. The intent should be to relieve pain, not to cause death. In principle, however, a gravely ill person should receive nutrition, hydration, warmth and hygiene. No one should be killed by means of starvation or dehydration.

Given the complexity of medical alternatives at the end of life, we urge Catholics to familiarize themselves with the relevant moral issues and prepare accordingly. In many cases, a medical power of attorney is helpful.

Suffering and the Cross of Christ

Death is a human reality. Furthermore, physical suffering in general, and death in particular, draw their deepest meaning from the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. Consequently, for a Christian, suffering and death cannot remain only a matter for medicine. While it is necessary at the end of life to attend to many medical matters, it is vital not to neglect matters of the soul.

Preparation for death is the last phase of a Christian life. Suffering should be relieved and the possibility of uniting the whole experience with the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross must not be forgotten. The last days and hours should be times of prayer, preferably together with the dying person's family, friends and fellow Christians. Above all, it is a

time to rely upon the sacraments of the Church. In addition to the Anointing of the Sick, Catholics should not die without the opportunity to make a good confession (Sacrament of Reconciliation) and to receive Viaticum (Holy Communion for the final time). It is highly desirable that a priest be called in the final days before death, not only in the final hours.

