

CATECHISM OF EUTHANASIA AND ASSISTED SUICIDE FOR CATHOLICS

Why does the Catholic Church oppose voluntary assisted dying (euthanasia)?

The basic premises¹ of the Catholic Church on voluntary assisted dying (euthanasia) are that: (i) all persons are of equal worth or dignity; (ii) every person has a right to life, understood as a right not to be unjustly killed; (iii) there is no such thing as a person who has a life not worth living (or that they would be better off dead); (iv) there is no requirement according to medical ethics, law, or Christian tradition, that the maximal prolongation of life be the principal goal of all medical treatment; (v) *prima facie* a man or woman of full age and sound understanding may choose to reject medical advice and medical or surgical treatment either partially or in its entirety, even if a refusal may risk permanent injury or even lead to premature death; and (vi) no person or section of the community ought ever be absolved from the legal responsibilities for their actions.

The Catholic Church's position is that our society should be a caring and compassionate one, founded on the promotion of human dignity, human freedom and the common good, whereas voluntary assisted dying (euthanasia) undermines human dignity and the common good.

This is based on our belief that all individuals are created in God's image and worthy of being valued and feeling valued by our society, regardless of the circumstances in which they find themselves. Our leaders and laws should affirm this basic human worth.

Instead of deliberately killing our aged and dying, we should work together to secure the common good. The common good is all the material and social conditions necessary for all individuals to live truly purposeful and fulfilling lives in and through their relationships with others. These conditions include access to high-quality health care, aged care and end of life care.

¹ *ACBC Submission to The Select Committee on Euthanasia of the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly (26 April 1995)*

What is the position of the Catholic Church on voluntary assisted dying (euthanasia), and what does this mean for me, as a Catholic?

In the Catholic tradition, human life is to be protected from conception to natural death. The sanctity of life underpins the Catholic understanding of human existence.

As Catholics, we believe that our lives come from God our Creator, belong to God and are destined to return to God. We are merely stewards of our lives.

Suicide is a serious moral issue because, when freely undertaken, suicide is contrary to the Fifth Commandment (*Thou shall not kill*). It is not merely contrary to love of self², but also offends love of neighbour because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family, nation, and other human societies to which we continue to have obligations.

In keeping with the Catholic Church's vision of the dignity of the human person and the sanctity of human life, the choice to commit suicide is an objectively sinful act, even if assessing subjective responsibility can be a very delicate matter. In the Catholic tradition, our culpability for what we do is measured in large part by our freedom in choosing it. On this basis, the doctrinal position for those individuals choosing voluntary assisted dying of their own free will, suicide – whether it is called voluntary assisted dying or euthanasia - is gravely sinful for both the person who will die and the person who assists to bring about their death.

As the Church sees it, we need a balance between recognizing, on the one hand, the gravity of suicide and the free moral agency of those who commit it and, on the other hand, the possibility of diminished culpability and the final mercy of God.

As it does for all grave acts, the Church also teaches that both full knowledge and deliberate consent must be present for suicide to be a mortal sin. It presupposes knowledge of the sinful

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church - The fifth commandment at 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 neighbour because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family, nation, and other human societies to which we continue to have obligations.*
www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm

nature of the act, of its opposition to God's law. It also implies consent sufficiently deliberate to be a personal choice.³

When a person commits suicide as a result of a psychological impairment, such as clinical depression, the Church recognizes that he or she may not have been fully capable of the knowledge and consent necessary to commit mortal sin. Therefore conditions such as grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the person committing suicide⁴.

This is difficult to reconcile with planned future assisted suicide directives, for example, where people voluntarily plan to commit to a future assisted suicide.

Can I receive the last rites before my suicide / assisted suicide?

Catholics who intend to receive the Eucharistic Body of our Lord should do so with a pure conscience and proper disposition of soul if they are to receive the effects of the paschal sacrament. The rite of Holy Viaticum, or the "last rites", usually includes the confession of sin, absolution and the Eucharist, understood as the heavenly food for the final journey. It is difficult to see how someone intent on assisted suicide would have the proper disposition to receive the Anointing of the Sick⁵. We cannot be forgiven pre-emptively for something we are going to do – such as to ask for, or proceed with assisted suicide when suicide is a grave sin.

What if someone I loved has chosen to end their own life? Are they condemned to hell?

The Catholic Church teaches that we should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. In ways known only to God, there is the possibility of saving repentance. That is why the Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives⁶.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church, at 1859*

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church, at 2282*
(www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm)

⁵ *Code of Canon Law, Can 916, "A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to celebrate Mass or receive the body of the Lord without previous sacramental confession unless there is a grave reason and there is no opportunity to confess; in this case the person is to remember the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition which includes the resolution of confessing as soon as possible*

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church, at 2283*

Far from condemning souls to hell for suicide, then, the Catholic Church teaches that salvation is possible for those who commit this act and cautions those who live on against despair for their deceased loved ones:

In most cases, whether someone committed suicide under circumstances that involved impairment of the will or that allowed for repentance prior to death is beyond our ken. In the end, we entrust to the mercy of God those who have chosen this act and pray for the repose of their souls. St. Paul assures us that our hope for those we love is not misplaced: *“Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or [the] sword [separate us from Christ’s love]? . . . I am sure that neither death, nor life . . . nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Rom. 8:35–39).

How should we care for the sick and dying?

In the Catholic tradition, death is part of life and any act to deliberately hasten or shorten a person’s life is contrary to that tradition and cannot be supported. At the same time, euthanasia is not “dying well”. Truly dying well calls for all life to have worth, and for every person to be valued and nurtured until the moment of death.

As Pope Emeritus Benedict has written⁷:

“The Church wishes to support the incurably and terminally ill by calling for just social policies which can help to eliminate the causes of many diseases and by urging improved care for the dying and those for whom no medical remedy is available. there is a need to promote policies which create conditions where human beings can bear even incurable illnesses and death in a dignified manner. here it is necessary to stress once again the need for more palliative care centres which provide integral care, offering the sick the human assistance and spiritual accompaniment they need. This is a right belonging to every human being, one which we must all be committed to defend.”

For those who with a terminal illness, palliative care is a holistic and comprehensive form of care. It is not just about the relief of pain; it is care for the whole person, physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. Palliative care services are available in many

⁷ *Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for the Fifteenth World Day of the Sick*
www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/sick/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20061208_world-day-of-the-sick-2007_en.html

Catholic and other health and aged care providers are specifically designed to improve the quality of life – and the quality of death - for people with a life-limiting illness and help their loved ones in bereavement.

Palliative care is a means to promote a culture of life rather than support a culture of death. It does not seek to prolong unnecessarily or to hasten death but accepts a death as part of overall mystery of life.⁸

For a list of Catholic hospitals, health and aged care services that provide palliative care services, please refer to Catholic Health Australia's publication, "Palliative Care in the Catholic Sector".⁹

⁸ *Catholic Health Australia, Provision of Palliative Care in Catholic Health and Aged Care Services*

⁹ www.cha.org.au