

The Catholic Church's Teaching on Assisted Suicide

POPE FRANCIS has said that the dying need palliative care, not euthanasia or assisted suicide and that this ethical principle was valid not only for Christians but for everyone. Pope Francis praised palliative care aimed at helping terminally ill patients live as comfortably and humanely as possible. "However, we must be careful not to confuse this help with unacceptable drifts towards euthanasia," he said. **"We must accompany people towards death, but not provoke death or facilitate assisted suicide."**

The pope dedicated his **live-streamed** general audience to **"St Joseph, patron of the good death,"** He noted that **the Church has long encouraged Catholics to ask St Joseph to intercede for the dying.** Pope Francis recalled that in a **letter** published on 8 February 2022, Pope emeritus Benedict XVI referred to himself as approaching "the dark door of death." Pope Francis praised his predecessor's words for their clarity and said that they contained "good advice." The pope explained that **Christianity helped believers to face death by presenting it in the light of Christ's resurrection. "Dear brothers and sisters, it is only through faith in resurrection that we can face the abyss of death without being overwhelmed by fear. Not only that: we can restore a positive role to death."**

He then reflected on care for the dying, emphasizing that doctors must make every effort to cure the sick. But, he said, "it is immoral to engage in futile treatment," citing the Catechism of the Catholic Church (2278), which says that "discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate." He highlighted what he described as the "real problem" of "accelerating the death of the elderly." He urged the authorities not to isolate the elderly or hasten their deaths.

Concluding his address, the pope noted that in the **Hail Mary** prayer, Catholics ask the Virgin Mary to be close "at the hour of our death."

"Precisely for this reason, I would like to conclude by praying together a Hail Mary for the dying and for those who are experiencing bereavement," he said, before reciting the prayer with pilgrims. **(General audience in the Vatican's Paul VI Hall Feb. 9, 2022)**

CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

2276 Those whose lives are diminished or weakened deserve special respect. Sick or handicapped persons should be helped to lead lives as normal as possible.

2277 Whatever its motives and means, direct euthanasia consists in putting an end to the lives of handicapped, sick, or dying persons. It is morally unacceptable. Thus an act or omission which, of itself or by intention, causes death in order to eliminate suffering constitutes a murder gravely contrary to the dignity of the human person and to the respect due to the living God, his Creator. The error of judgment into which one can fall in good faith does not change the nature of this murderous act, which must always be forbidden and excluded.

2278 Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate; it is the refusal of "over-zealous" treatment. Here one does not will to cause death; one's inability to impede it is merely accepted. The decisions should be made by the patient if he is competent and able or, if not, by those legally entitled to act for the patient, whose reasonable will and legitimate interests must always be respected.

2279 Even if death is thought imminent, the ordinary care owed to a sick person cannot be legitimately interrupted. The use of painkillers to alleviate the sufferings of the dying, even at the risk of shortening their days, can be morally in conformity with human dignity if death is not willed as either an end or a means, but only foreseen and tolerated as inevitable. Palliative care is a special form of disinterested charity. As such it should be encouraged.

CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF ENGLAND AND WALES

The term ‘Assisted Dying’ is euphemistic, the truth is that this bill seeks to introduce Assisted Suicide. If legalised, this Bill would allow a terminally ill adult with less than 6 months to live to be assisted in committing suicide. Catholic teaching opposes assisting suicide, since life is a gift to be cared for and preserved until its natural death. The Church is clear that we cannot directly choose to take the life of another, even if they request it. The solidarity of praying and caring for the most vulnerable at this fragile time of their lives is a profoundly Christian act which imitates Our Lady’s prayer at the cross and Christ’s service to the weakest.

As Pope Francis has said, “Physician-assisted suicide is part of a ‘throwaway culture’ that offers a ‘false compassion’ and treats a human person as a problem... True compassion does not marginalise anyone, nor does it humiliate and exclude – much less considers the disappearance of a person as a good thing.” He criticised “those who hide behind an alleged compassion to justify and approve the death of a patient.”

Importantly, at this stage we need to argue the dangers of the introduction of Assisted Suicide, which include the safety of people who are vulnerable due to external pressures, and the later liberalisation of the law which is evidenced by other countries which have introduced Assisted Suicide. Many voices from the world of disability-rights and other allies are also very fearful and fighting this bill. Whilst there are clear arguments to support Catholic teachings, it is important to remember that this position is not only a matter of faith but also human reason. **(Bishop John Sherrington, Lead Bishop for Life Issues, Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales 8th September 2021)**

CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF CANADA

‘Our position remains unequivocal. Euthanasia and assisted suicide constitute the deliberate killing of human life in violation of God’s Commandments; they erode our shared dignity by failing to see, to accept, and accompany those suffering and dying. Furthermore, they undermine the fundamental duty we have to take care of the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. Human life must be protected from conception to natural death, at all stages and in all conditions. In the new and challenging situation we now face, we truly wish to acknowledge and support all those individuals and communities who continue to defend life by resisting euthanasia and assisted suicide in Canada, or by promoting life through the care of family, friends and loved ones in their suffering, or in attending to the sick and dying as a dedicated healthcare worker or as a compassionate volunteer.’ **(Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 8th April 2021)**

CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF AUSTRALIA

‘Euthanasia is a much-debated topic in Australia. Compassion for the sick and suffering is something which unites us all. Many of us have accompanied friends or family as they face the fear and uncertainty of a serious illness. Euthanasia, or voluntary assisted suicide, is proposed by some people in our society as the compassionate choice for people who are facing such illness. We hear people saying that euthanasia would allow people to “die with dignity” and that it is each individual’s “right” to choose the timing and manner of their death.

This view, although born of compassion, is misguided and even dangerous. Killing people is wrong, and this principle is fundamental to our law. The Catholic Church’s position is that our society should be caring and compassionate, founded on the promotion of human dignity, human freedom and the common good - whereas euthanasia undermines human dignity and the common good.

(Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. 23rd October 2015)