



Guidelines Regarding the Funeral Rites for Those Who Have Asked for Euthanasia or Physician-Assisted Suicide

A pastoral matter of great importance has arisen because of the legalization of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide in Canada, one which has caused great confusion about the morality of such choices. The Supreme Court's decision to strike down the law against euthanasia was gravely wrong, and the federal government's assisted suicide legislation has legalized morally evil actions: euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide both entail the deliberate taking of human life in violation of the Fifth Commandment. As we are now beginning to realize, this change in the law will endanger the human rights and lives of all Canadians: the sick and the dying, the disabled and the mentally ill, medical professionals and families.

A. What does the Church teach about legalized euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide?

Our society still recognizes suicide itself as an evil and an alarming social problem. Although modern cultures generally agree that suicide should no longer be viewed as a criminal act, sparing families and survivors from various penalties and burdens, it is still understood as an act which brings great social pain, not only to family members and friends but also to the wider community. A human life comes to an end; but the suffering continues and is passed on to others. Experience demonstrates that people who are vulnerable or easily influenced may in turn become victims of another's suicide. We see this especially among young people.

Now, however, euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide are being presented as "morally acceptable," expressions of "free choice" and even "socially responsible solutions" to the suffering caused by terminal disease and perhaps long-term disability. These false views can place subtle and not so subtle pressure on individuals weakened by pain and suffering, coercing them to make an immoral choice.

Moreover, the consciences and careers of health-care professionals are even now being threatened with the prospect of professional dismissal or censure if they do not cooperate in euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide. The Church has – and must always – speak out as a defender of the rights of conscience of individuals and institutions, as well as the rights of the vulnerable and the suffering.

The Church defends and respects all human life from conception to natural death as a magnificent gift of God the Creator. Her mission is to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ and his gift of salvation and divine life. This Good News has a special significance for what we might call "the world of suffering." The Son of God became man to take upon himself the burden of human sin and suffering; to redeem us and to teach us how the universal experiences of suffering, illness and death can lead us to practise selflessness, grow in love and find salvation. Because of the Incarnation, he is our model in all that we experience. The Church proclaims that there is a Christian meaning to our suffering; that the Cross of Jesus transforms the crosses of our lives and



gives significance to what might otherwise bring hopelessness and despair. As a result, death, the natural end of our human life, becomes for believers an act of confident surrender to God; its acceptance expresses our sorrow for sin and our trust in his merciful forgiveness.

B. What does the Church do on behalf of the suffering and dying?

In imitation of Jesus' own actions of caring for the sick and suffering, through her health-care mission the Church has distinguished herself by doing good to those who suffer, and she teaches all of us to do good with and through our suffering. Loving care for the sick – whether family, friend or stranger – marks the life of believers and ennobles human hearts.

Suffering can be alleviated and transformed, even when a cure is impossible or death is imminent. As Catholics, we also believe in the best possible symptom control and pain management in such circumstances. We are strong advocates of making palliative care more accessible to all Canadians. In good conscience a patient may request all the medication needed to control pain; but to request death by euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide is always wrong and objectively sinful. It is even more gravely evil than suicide because it involves another human being; in this case, medical professionals become the patient's agents or proxies in taking life. This entails the moral abuse of other persons, and this too is objectively sinful.

C. What will the Church do to help me when I am coping with a terminal diagnosis?

When our own life or the life of a loved one is threatened by illness, accident or advanced age, the best thing we can do is to call for a priest as soon as possible. He will be able to offer the merciful love of Christ in the healing power of the Sacraments. He may also help to answer any moral questions about medical treatments and give the reassurance needed to overcome spiritual suffering. Moreover, he may answer concerns and requests in planning the Funeral Mass. We should never be afraid of calling for a priest's services. Even though a person may have lived apart from the Church for a long time, Christ's arms and his heart are always open.

If a Catholic brings up the idea of physician-assisted suicide as a potential choice for himself or herself, the priest must do everything in his power to explain the Church's teaching and gently move the person to accept natural death as essential to the duty of accepting God's plan for our lives, a plan which includes death. No human person is the arbiter of his or her own life or death. We do not choose when we come into this world; we do not have the authority to choose when we leave it. God alone is life's Author; we may never force his hand. A priest can help the patient and family to experience the loving presence of Jesus in the mystery of the Cross, and find strength to accept "a death like his." He will help the patient to prepare for the "life of the world to come," and he will also dedicate his own prayers and penance to dissuade the sick person from death by euthanasia or suicide.

If the person cannot be dissuaded and does choose either euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide, the Church still hopes that God will be merciful and that the dying person will turn to him in repentance, seeking forgiveness in the last moments, even without the visible help of the



Sacraments. For all God's children for whom Christ suffered and died, we pray "Lord, have mercy" at Mass every day.

D. What about a Funeral Mass for those who have died by euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide?

Funeral rites are very important expressions of honour, affection, human relationships, and religious faith. In our secular age, traditional religious funerals are often replaced by memorial services, "celebrations of life" or similar rituals. A funeral does not take away all our grief or remove our bereavement, but it marks an important step in this process. For Catholics, the Funeral Mass is the highest expression of prayer that can be offered for a deceased loved one and the greatest expression of comfort for the living. In the Funeral Mass, the life of the deceased person is lifted up to the Father in union with Christ's loving and sacrificial death. The Funeral Mass testifies that this person was the object of Jesus' love and is offered to implore forgiveness for his or her sins. It is also an act of evangelization for the living, teaching us the true meaning of life and death, and reminding us that we will all come to stand before the Lord, who is loving and just. We must neither take Heaven for granted nor presume that our choices are without consequences.

Oftentimes, priests are not approached by the sick or their family members before death has occurred. Instead, a call is made to arrange a funeral after the fact, and often by a funeral home. This makes it very difficult for the bereaved to experience the healing support of the Church that would have been consoling earlier. It may also happen that wishes and plans are made without the Church's input and without understanding her principles. The family's expectations may not be in accordance with Catholic belief and practice, which may result in disappointment.

In the case of euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide, this final action of a person's life has been chosen in violation of the clear teachings of the Church; it is an act which expresses a serious defect in belief and in unity with the faithful. It is not a death like Christ's. Some family members may have disagreed with their loved one's decision and now feel morally conflicted because of it. It is the Church's practice that a Catholic Funeral Mass is not appropriate when such a wrongful act and separation of belief has taken place (see canon 1184).

It is true that the Church offers Funeral Masses in most cases of suicide. But there are clear differences between an individual death by suicide and euthanasia by physician-assisted suicide. When a person takes his or her own life, the response is one of sadness, sorrow and the feeling of helpless loss; the most common thought spoken is, "He or she didn't really know what they were doing." Such a death is ascribed to fear or some uncontrollable psychological compulsion, usually acted on in isolation. It is because of these factors which indicate that the person's free will is not fully involved that the Church can offer a Funeral Mass.

Physician-assisted suicide, however, is presented as a fully reasonable, rationally chosen and competent response to terminal illness and suffering. It has its own "eligibility requirements" including multiple assessments, a "waiting period" after the decision has been made, and ongoing confirmation of "informed consent" right up to the final moment before the fatal dosage of medication is administered. This is a completely different process meant to emphasize the dying



patient's autonomy and "free choice." It is not an acceptance of death as part of God's plan, because it fails to express hope and trust in the final and decisive choice of our life on earth: dying a holy death in Christ.

Our faith requires us to be clear and consistent in our beliefs and practices. We do not approve or condone in any way euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide; nor do we want to give scandal to those who may be sacrificing greatly to remain faithful to Christ's teachings and their practical demands in daily life. In ethical terms, "scandal" means an action which causes someone else to stumble or to make it harder for them to act in a morally good way. We do not seek to punish the dead or the living by refusing a Funeral Mass. We simply wish to remain true to the One to whom we all belong: Christ Jesus "who will come to judge the living and the dead."

E. What else can a priest do in individual cases?

While excluding the Funeral Mass, other services and signs of the Church's compassion and love can appropriately be offered to the family: the deceased person may be buried in a Catholic cemetery or a blessed family plot in a public/private cemetery; a priest or deacon may conduct a graveside service at the cemetery; and a public Mass may be offered for the deceased with family members some time after the burial has taken place. The Church has a long and rich tradition of prayer for the dead, where family members and friends can find many sources of strength and support for their own grief and healing.

On a very rare occasion there may even be certain circumstances in which, by way of exception, a Funeral Mass may be granted: such as the deceased suffering from a grave defect of judgement concerning the gravity of the action. In all such cases the permission of the Archbishop or Vicar General must first be obtained. If permission for such a Funeral Mass is granted, however, no eulogy must be given nor any sign that the choice of suicide has or ever could be approved. The focus of the Mass, as with any funeral, must be the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ who has gone before us to prepare for us a place in his Father's house.

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