



Embracing Our Dying

A Project of the California Catholic Conference

WHAT'S WRONG WITH "ASSISTED SUICIDE"? *A Catholic Moral Analysis*

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A. THE ETHICS OF ASSISTED SUICIDE: A NATURAL LAW ANALYSIS

Throughout history, assisted suicide has generally been considered unethical.

- 1) **The "Hippocratic Oath,"** originating in ancient Greece, was taken by doctors for centuries. It clearly states that doctors are committed first and foremost when practicing their art to "*primum non nocere*" or "to do no harm." Helping people to kill themselves cannot be construed as anything other than "doing harm" to them and a violation of the physician's oath. Killing a person should never be seen as the moral equivalent of killing the pain. Assisting in a suicide is not a "medical intervention."
- 2) **Those practicing medicine recognize that while they have the noble goal of curing illness,** there eventually will come the time when a "cure" is no longer possible. It is at that time, that healthcare practitioners have the moral responsibility of providing "care" for their patient.
- 3) **Assisted suicide can never be seen as a legitimate form of "care."**
- 4) **A person's right to liberty** in the medical context involves a right to "care for one's physical life" until the moment of natural death. This would include a right to be free from pain and a right to be accorded the dignity every person enjoys as a person.
- 5) **A right to a "natural death"** means that a person also has a right to be protected from any medical procedures that are determined to be "heroic," "extraordinary" or "disproportional." This would mean that all terminal patients have the right to decide which medical procedures they wish to forego—and forgo those in which the burden of the treatment is not proportional to any benefit they may possibly occur. It is entirely ethical for terminal patients to reject these means that may simply prolong the dying process.
- 6) **All terminal patients have the ethical right to demand any and all pain medication** that is necessary to ensure their comfort, even if such medications may compromise their life span, as long as the intention of the medication is to "kill the pain" not to "kill the patient."
- 7) **Assisted suicide is an attack on the person and fails to address the real issues,** which are protecting the person from pain and providing for their dignity.
- 8) **Assisted suicide has consistently been evaluated by medical ethicists as immoral** for the following reasons:

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- (a) It does not provide for a natural death.
- (b) It can lead society down a very slippery slope; e.g.,
 - Health care dollars for care of seniors are diverted,
 - Health care research dollars addressing senior health concerns are lessened,
 - Medical care is no longer seen as right for all citizens but only for the young and healthy,
 - The medical community is involved is “life-taking” rather than “life-caring,”
 - Governments move from protecting a citizen’s right to life, to providing and even encouraging their premature death,
 - Hospice care and the right to a dignified and pain free natural death are substituted for a societal option that encourages and is even complicit in killing.

Medical ethicists and social communities generally agree that when society provides for and encourages “advance directives” as well as adequate hospice care there is no necessity for assisted suicide. Hospice care should include proper pain relief and the kind of dignified care that allows a terminal patient to live with as much autonomy as possible until the moment of natural death. Experts will agree that modern medicine has more than enough resources at its disposal to prevent the kind of pain that is often cited as a primary reason why a terminally ill patient would call for assistance in dying. When societies truly embrace those who are dying with dignified care, and protect their citizens’ right to unnecessary and disproportional interventions, they avoid the evil of assisted suicide and provide for all the goods sought by those who believe that assisted suicide is necessary.

Specifically in the U.S. context:

- 9) The founding documents of the United States make it clear that government has the duty of protecting every citizen’s “inalienable” right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” It would be clear that any law that legalized assisted suicide would make a government complicit in an act that deprived a citizen of the right to life. Such a law would also make the medical community complicit in an act contradictory to the very notion of a healing art.

B. CATHOLIC MORAL CONCERNS

- 1) **All life comes from God.**
- 2) **We are stewards of our lives, but they belong to God.**
- 3) **Catholic morality ensures both the right to a “natural death” and the right to be protected from any therapy that simply prolongs the dying process.**
- 4) **Physical life is a basic, but not absolute good.**
- 5) **Physical death is not something that should then be avoided by all means possible when it is clear that death is near and inevitable. However, the church does not demand that one’s faith call them to accept physical suffering as inevitable. Pain relief is a moral right as is a natural death.**
- 6) **Suicide and assisted suicide are then not only unnecessary, but also always intrinsically evil and contrary to the church’s moral teaching.**