**Euthanasia and assisted dying**

**By Dan Burns**

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**General Christian view**

Christians are mostly against euthanasia. The arguments are usually based on the beliefs that life is given by God, and that human beings are made in God's image. Some churches also emphasise the importance of not interfering with the natural process of death.

**Life is a gift from God**

* all life is God-given
* birth and death are part of the life processes which God has created, so we should respect them
* therefore no human being has the authority to take the life of any innocent person, even if that person wants to die

**Human beings are valuable because they are made in God's image**

* human life possesses an intrinsic dignity and value because it is created by God in his own image for the distinctive destiny of sharing in God's own life
  + saying that God created humankind in his own image doesn't mean that people actually look like God, but that people have a unique capacity for rational existence that enables them to see what is good and to want what is good
  + as people develop these abilities they live a life that is as close as possible to God's life of love
  + this is a good thing, and life should be preserved so that people can go on doing this
* to propose euthanasia for an individual is to judge that the current life of that individual is not worthwhile
* such a judgement is incompatible with recognising the worth and dignity of the person to be killed
* therefore arguements based on the quality of life are completely irrelevant
* nor should anyone ask for euthanasia for themselves because no-one has the right to value anyone, even themselves, as worthless

**The process of dying is spiritually important, and should not be disrupted**

* Many churches believe that the period just before death is a profoundly spiritual time
* They think it is wrong to interfere with the process of dying, as this would interrupt the process of the spirit moving towards God

**All human lives are equally valuable**

Christians believe that the intrinsic dignity and value of human lives means that the value of each human life is identical. They don't think that human dignity and value are measured by mobility, intelligence, or any achievements in life.

Valuing human beings as equal just because they are human beings has clear implications for thinking about euthanasia:

* patients in a persistent vegetative state, although seriously damaged, remain living human beings, and so their intrinsic value remains the same as anyone else's
* so it would be wrong to treat their lives as worthless and to conclude that they 'would be better off dead'
* patients who are old or sick, and who are near the end of earthly life have the same value as any other human being
* people who have mental or physical handicaps have the same value as any other human being

**Exceptions and omissions**

Some features of Christianity suggest that there are some obligations that go against the general view that euthanasia is a bad thing:

* Christianity requires us to respect every human being
* If we respect a person we should respect their decisions about the end of their life
* We should accept their rational decisions to refuse burdensome and futile treatment
* Perhaps we should accept their rational decision to refuse excessively burdensome treatment even if it may provide several weeks more of life

**End of life care**

The Christian faith leads those who follow it to some clear-cut views about the way terminally ill patients should be treated:

* the community should care for people who are dying, and for those who are close to them
* the community should provide the best possible palliative care
* the community should face death and dying with honesty and support
* the community should recognise that when people suffer death on earth they entrust their future to the risen Christ
* religious people, both lay and professional, should help the terminally ill to prepare for death
* they should be open to their hopes and fears
* they should be open to discussion

**The Roman Catholic view**

Euthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person.

The Roman Catholic church regards euthanasia as morally wrong. It has always taught the absolute and unchanging value of the commandment "You shall not kill".

The church has said that:

nothing and no one can in any way permit the killing of an innocent human being, whether a foetus or an embryo, an infant or an adult, an old person, or one suffering from an incurable disease, or a person who is dying.

Pope John Paul II has spoken out against what he calls a 'culture of death' in modern society, and said that human beings should always prefer the way of life to the way of death.

The church regards any law permitting euthanasia as an intrinsically unjust law.

**The value of life**

Life is a thing of value in itself; it's value doesn't depend on the extent that it brings pleasure and well-being.

This means that suffering and pain do not stop life being valuable, and are not a reason for ending life.

The church believes that each person should enter the dying process with all its mysteries with trust in God and in solidarity with their fellow human beings; they should die with the dignity of letting themselves be loved unconditionally.

As Catholic leaders and moral teachers, we believe that life is the most basic gift of a loving God--a gift over which we have stewardship but not absolute dominion.

*National Conference of Catholic Bishops (USA), 1991*

**The right to die**

The Roman Catholic church does not accept that human beings have a right to die.

Human beings are free agents, but their freedom does not extend to the ending of their own lives. Euthanasia and suicide are both a rejection of God's absolute sovereignty over life and death.

The church believes that each human life is a manifestation of God in the world, a sign of his presence, a trace of his glory. "The life which God offers to man is a gift by which God shares something of himself with his creature."

A human being who insists that they have the 'right to die' is denying the truth of their fundamental relationship with God.

**Refusing aggressive medical treatment**

The church regards it as morally acceptable to refuse extraordinary and aggressive medical means to preserve life. Refusing such treatment is not euthanasia but a proper acceptance of the human condition in the face of death.

**Assisting suicide**

Since it is morally wrong to commit suicide it is morally wrong to help someone commit suicide.

True compassion leads to sharing another's pain; it does not kill the person whose suffering we cannot bear.

*Pope John Paul II, Evangelium Vitae, 1995*