

# WHAT'S WRONG WITH ASSISTED SUICIDE?

By Reverend Richard Benson, C.M.

## *PROPONENTS' ARGUMENTS FOR THE LEGALIZATION OF ASSISTED SUICIDE*

.. Personal freedom: If we believe in individual liberty and personal freedom, why shouldn't we be able to determine both the moment and means of our own death?

.. Pain control: If we consider it humane to euthanize our beloved pets which have grown too sick to be cured or too old to enjoy life, why should we "make people suffer" when they are in a similar condition?

As Catholics it is important for us to be educated about the issue of "assisted suicide" so that we can form our consciences well and articulate our Church's position clearly.

## *CATHOLIC TEACHING ON PERSONAL FREEDOM*

Pope John Paul II writes in his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*:

“ . . . [T]he temptation grows to have recourse to euthanasia, that is, to take control of death and bring it about before its time, 'gently' ending one's own life or the life of others. In reality, what might seem logical and humane, when looked at more closely is seen to be senseless and inhumane... Here we are faced with one of the more alarming symptoms of the 'culture of death'... marked by an attitude of preoccupation with efficiency and which sees the growing number of elderly and disabled people as... too burdensome.” (n. 64)

Our Catholic ethic of life responds clearly that life is to be protected from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death. We believe that life is a gift from God and our faith challenges us to live it on God's timetable, not our own. Thus we may do nothing to hasten death but at the same time we need do nothing extraordinary to prolong the dying process. When the burdens of treatment outweigh the benefits, we are free to say, "No more."

In 1980, Pope Benedict XVI (then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger) wrote in *Euthanasia* (Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith):

“In our day it is very important at the moment of death to safeguard the dignity of the person and the Christian meaning of life, in the face of a technological approach to death that can easily be abused. Some even speak of a 'right to die.' By this they mean, however, not a right of persons to inflict death

on themselves at will by their own or another's hand, but rather a right to die peacefully and in a manner worthy of a human being and a Christian.”

Here we can be reminded that hospice care, where death is neither hastened nor disproportionately held at bay, can be a very moral choice for those who await an imminent death.

### *BACKGROUND*

Assisted suicide is legal in Oregon and euthanasia is legal in the Netherlands.

During the past 15 years, the proponents of legalized assisted suicide, whose advocacy group has changed its name from The Hemlock Society to Compassion & Choices, have sponsored a ballot initiative which was defeated and failed in five attempts to get a bill through the California Legislature.

In 2007, the proponents again introduced legislation, AB 374, which they named the California Compassionate Choices Act.

### *CATHOLIC TEACHING ON PAIN CONTROL*

The Church's position on pain control is clear. Medicine is directed to “kill the pain” not “kill the patient.” The Church, in fact, does not demand or expect that people should suffer; rather the Church teaches that every patient has the right to effective pain control.

The principle of “double effect” allows the physician to prescribe whatever is necessary to address the pain. As Pope Benedict wrote in Euthanasia:

“In this case death is by no means intended or sought, although this risk of it is being incurred for a good reason; the only intention is to diminish pain effectively by use of the painkillers available to medical science.”

### *CONCLUSION*

A society that condones assisted suicide and euthanasia may also find that:

- .. Health care dollars for seniors are diverted and/or unavailable;
- .. Health care research funds devoted to chronic illness and disability are reduced;
- .. Medical care is no longer seen as a right for all citizens but only for the young and healthy;
- .. Hospice care for the dying is replaced by an option that encourages and is even complicit in killing.

As the U. S. Bishops remind us in their Ethical and Religious Directives (4th ed., 2001):

“We are not the owners of our lives and, hence, do not have absolute power over life. We have a duty to preserve our life and to use it for the glory of God, but the duty to preserve life is not absolute, for we may reject life-prolonging procedures that are insufficiently beneficial or excessively burdensome. Suicide and euthanasia are never morally accepted options.”

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More information available at the California Catholic Conference of Bishops’ website: [www.embracingourdying.com](http://www.embracingourdying.com)

### *THE OREGON CASE*

Between 1998 and 2006, there were 292 people who died from assisted suicide in Oregon.

The Oregon Public Health Division reports that over those nine years, 87 percent of those opting for assisted suicide did it because they feared a “loss of autonomy” and only 26 percent chose assisted suicide because of inadequate pain control.

### *THE CALIFORNIA CASE*

The authors of AB 374 seem to assume that physicians will be ready and willing to help kill their patients—which may very well NOT be true.

The California Medical Association (CMA) has a long history of opposing physician participation in executions. In fact, a February 2006 scheduled execution was postponed because there was not a single physician willing to participate.

The CMA is also on record in opposition to the legalization of assisted suicide.

The physicians’ motto, after all, is: “First, do not harm.”