

End of Life Overview of Catholic Ethics

Genesis 1:27

“God created man in his image, in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them.”

This is the source of our dignity as human beings – from the first moment of conception until natural death - a dignity which is not lost in illness and which must always be respected.

Euthanasia

The term “Euthanasia” comes from two Greek words: ευ θανατος (*eu thanatos*) - which mean “easy death” or “good death.” Today we tend to think of it in terms of “mercy killing.”

The Church understands all forms of Euthanasia to be gravely evil and a part of the “culture of death” which St. John Paul II spoke of in *Evangelium Vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*).

Definition of Euthanasia: *An action or omission which of itself or by intention causes death, in order that all suffering may in this way be eliminated.*

Ordinary vs. Extraordinary Treatments

Do I have to do everything medically possible to avoid Euthanasia? No – the Church makes a very important distinction between those medical treatments which are obligatory and those that are optional. The obligatory treatments are typically called “ordinary means” or “proportionate” – while the optional (non-obligatory) medical treatments are typically called “extraordinary means” or “disproportionate.”

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops offers a simple definition of each in the 2009 Document known as *The Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* (5th ed.) which offers a summary of Catholic teaching for Health Care. There we find the following:

#56. *A person has a moral obligation to use ordinary or proportionate means of preserving his or her life. Proportionate means are those that in the judgment of the patient offer a reasonable hope of benefit and do not entail an excessive burden or impose excessive expense on the family or the community.*

#57. *A person may forgo extraordinary or disproportionate means of preserving life. Disproportionate means are those that in the patient’s judgment do not offer a reasonable hope of benefit or entail an excessive burden, or impose excessive expense on the family or the community.*

The Church says we have to look at 5 different things in order to determine if a given treatment is to be considered “ordinary” or “extraordinary”. These criteria are looked at altogether – we don’t just choose one or two. They are:

1. type of treatment
2. degree of complexity or risk involved
3. its cost and possibility of using it
4. expected result
5. state of sick person and their resources (physical, emotional & moral)

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Nutrition and Hydration

What about providing food and water? Out of respect for human dignity there is normally a moral obligation to provide a person with the basics of life: food, water, cleanliness, etc. Once again the Ethical and Religious Directives offer some clarification:

#58. In principle, there is an obligation to provide patients with food and water, including medically assisted nutrition and hydration for those who cannot take food orally. This obligation extends to patients in chronic and presumably irreversible conditions (e.g., the “persistent vegetative state”) who can reasonably be expected to live indefinitely if given such care. Medically assisted nutrition and hydration become morally optional when they cannot reasonably be expected to prolong life or when they would be “excessively burdensome for the patient or [would] cause significant physical discomfort, for example resulting from complications in the use of the means employed.” For instance, as a patient draws close to inevitable death from an underlying progressive and fatal condition, certain measures to provide nutrition and hydration may become excessively burdensome and therefore not obligatory in light of their very limited ability to prolong life or provide comfort.

For more information:

1. National Catholic Bioethics Center Website: www.ncbcenter.org

(look under the heading “Publications” – there is a link to view their “*End-of-Life Guide*”)

2. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Website: www.usccb.org

Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services (5th Edition)

This website also has several other documents, etc. that may be helpful. Some notable ones are:

Health and Health Care

On Embryonic Stem Cell Research

Dignity of the Human Person

Nutrition and Hydration: Moral and Pastoral Reflections

3. Vatican Website: www.vatican.va

Evangelium Vitae (March 25, 1995)

Salvifici Doloris (February 11, 1984)

Declaration on Euthanasia (May 5, 1980)