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## Is Assisted Suicide the Compassionate Response?

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A private member's Bill euphemistically entitled "Dying with Dignity" is being processed through the Oireachtas. Without mentioning assisted suicide or euthanasia, the aim of the Bill is to legislate in principle for them. Since the contemporary culture is steeped in what Alasdair MacIntyre called emotivism, where feelings replace reason as the motive in decision making, there is a real possibility that such a Bill could eventually be passed on compassionate grounds as a response to a person's terminal illness, especially one that is marked by intense pain and suffering. But what is meant by compassion?

Compassion is the essence of Christianity. It is symbolized above all in the figure of the Good Samaritan, who, moved to compassion for the man who had been attacked and left to die, bound up his wounds, and then brought him to a nearby inn to be looked after (cf. Lk 10:33f).<sup>1</sup> Down through the centuries, that same Christian faith moved men and women to devote their lives to healing the sick in mind and body, people like St Camillus de Lellis, St John of God, the Venerable Catherine McCauley and St Teresa of Calcutta, to mention but a few.

Moved by the same compassion, the Irish Sisters of Charity, inspired by their foundress, the Venerable Mary Aikenhead, in 1879 set up the first ever hospice for the dying in Harold's Cross, Dublin, thus pioneering the hospice movement that has since spread throughout the whole world. Two giants of palliative care, Cicely Saunders (Anglican) and Anne Merriman (Catholic), drew their inspiration from the same Christian impulse. The most modern means of managing pain enable the dying today to face the last hurdle in life surrounded with that love and care that alone respects their dignity. Behind that attitude is the recognition of the innate dignity of every human being, old or young, sick or healthy. A

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1 See Pope Francis's extensive reflection on the Good Samaritan, *Fratelli tutti*, 62-86.

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German writer newly converted to the faith, who spent Christmas and New Year in St Joseph's Hospice in London, run by the same Sisters, was so moved by the atmosphere and loving attention paid to the patients of all religions and none – and their resultant peace and serenity – that she wrote a prize-winning book with the title: "Let me die in someone's hand."<sup>2</sup>

As Pope Francis pleads, "Everything [must] be done to protect the status and dignity of the human person."<sup>3</sup> Our dignity is based on the fact that: "We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary."<sup>4</sup> Further, to care for the sick, above all the terminally ill, is what most fully corresponds to our own dignity and purpose in life: "I was sick and you visited me ..." (Mt 25:36).

The earliest Christian theologians saw in the figure of the Good Samaritan not only an exemplar of Christian living but a symbol of God's love for humanity. Moved by compassion for fallen humanity, the Father sent his Son to heal our spiritual wounds, the source of human suffering, by pouring his Holy Spirit into our hearts. By his wounds we are healed (cf. Is 53:5). Christ Jesus did not remove suffering or death from our lives but by freely submitting to them he transformed them from within. He gives us the inner strength and peace to face our own suffering and death in such a way that our dignity is affirmed and our lives ennobled.

Flannery O'Connor, who herself suffered from lupus and died aged 39, warned against false compassion, what she termed "tenderness": "In the absence of [...] faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced-labour camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber."<sup>5</sup> This may sound exaggerated but, in fact, the first legal step that led to the Nazi gas chambers was the introduction of euthanasia for the disabled, who were reckoned to be "lives unworthy of living"<sup>6</sup>

2 Lore Bartholomäus, *Ich möchte an der Hand eines Menschen sterben* (Mainz: Matthäus-Grünerwald-Verlag, 1980).

3 Pope Francis, *Address at the Meeting with Authorities and the Diplomatic Corps in the Central African Republic*, Bangui (29 November 2015).

4 Pope Benedict XVI, *Homily at the Inaugural Mass of his Pontificate*, April 24, 2005.

5 Flannery O'Connor in Introduction to "A Memoir of Mary Ann" (from the collection *Mystery and Manners*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970).

6 *Life unworthy of Life* is the title of an essay by the German lawyer, Karl Binding, and the psychiatrist, Alfred Hoche, that was published in 1920 and is generally considered as a stepping stone toward the Nazi genocide policies; see Binding and Hoche's "Life Unworthy of Life": A historical and ethical analysis — UTMB Health Research Expert Profiles

or thought to be a burden on society. Is the situation today any better? Pope Francis referred several times to our contemporary “throwaway culture”.<sup>7</sup> Recently he stated that “the current socio-cultural context is gradually eroding the awareness of what makes human life precious. In fact, it is increasingly valued on the basis of its efficiency and utility, to the point of considering as ‘discarded lives’ or ‘unworthy lives’ those who do not meet this criterion. In this situation of the loss of authentic values, the mandatory obligations of solidarity and of human and Christian fraternity also fail.”<sup>8</sup>

Physical and psychological pain can be unbearable. Even more unbearable is the imagined fear of the sufferings that we may have to face in the future. If you feel that you cannot endure present suffering or face future suffering, then suicide is a real temptation. It is an escape. For society to approve of suicide is to send out the message that life is not worth living unless one is healthy and free of suffering. It implies that the dignity of a person is based on their subjective sense of well-being. It assumes that our innate dignity could be diminished by suffering, whereas in fact it can ennoble us. In an increasingly materialistic world that denies the existence of God or an immortal soul, that false compassion which undermines human dignity would treat the sick as we would animals and “put them down”.

Few people ever found themselves in the literarily dreadful situation of the great Russian-Jewish poet, Osip Mandelstam. He was relentlessly persecuted by Stalin after word reached his ears that Mandelstam had written a poem criticizing the Marxist tyrant. He and his wife were reduced to penury in 1934; they were hunted from one town to another as he was awaiting the inevitable day when he would disappear into the Gulag Archipelago, as he did during Stalin’s Great Purge, 1937-1938. His wife, Nadezhda, in her autobiography, *Hope Against Hope: A Memoir*,<sup>9</sup> recalls how he always rejected suicide. “His argument was: ‘How do you know what will come after? Life is a gift nobody should renounce.’ And then there was the final and most telling argument: ‘Why do you think you ought to be happy?’ Nobody was so full of joy of life as M., but he never sought unhappiness, neither did he count on being

7 Cf. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (24 November 2013), 53; See also his *Address to a delegation from the Dignitatis Humanae Institute* (7 December 2013) and the *Meeting of the Pope with the Elderly* (28 September 2014).

8 Pope Francis, *Address to the Participants of the Plenary Session of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* (30 January 2020): *L’Osservatore Romano*, 31 January 2020, 7. (Eng. trans.)

9 Translated from the Russian by Max Hayward, with an Introduction by Clarence Brown (London, 1989), 5. Nadezhda Mandelstam refers to her husband throughout the book as simply “M”.

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what is called ‘happy’.” On happiness, she wrote: “Who knows what happiness is? Perhaps it’s better to talk in more concrete terms of the fullness or intensity of existence, and in this sense, there may have been something more deeply satisfying in our desperate clinging to life than what people generally strive for”. “Although M. did not seek happiness, he described everything he valued in terms of pleasure and play: ‘Thanks to the wonderful bounty of Christianity, the whole of our two-thousand-year-old culture is the setting the world free for play, of spiritual pleasure, for the free imitation of Christ’. And elsewhere: ‘Words are sheer pleasure, a cure for anguish’.”<sup>10</sup>

For some years, Ireland has had a frightening rate of suicide, despite many efforts made to try to stem it. To legalize assisted suicide would undermine such efforts. It would encourage more and more people of all ages to take their own lives. And it would lead an ever-widening application of assisted suicide, as is happening in other countries. In 2014, Belgium extended the range of assisted suicide to include children. All suffered from untreatable illnesses. Among those who had recourse to this law, one was a child of only 9 years old.

The right to choose is invoked to legalize assisted suicide. But how free to choose are such sick children? How free to make a considered decision are those in agonizing pain? How free are older people, who are made to feel that they are a burden on their relatives and on society as a whole? How can such deaths be described as dying with dignity? By way of contrast, we still remember the inspiration of the Kerry teenager, Donal Walsh, as he faced death with courage and a smile on his face.

For all these reasons, the Church teaches that “it is gravely unjust to enact laws that legalize euthanasia or justify and support suicide, invoking the false right to choose a death improperly characterized as respectable only because it is chosen. Such laws strike at the foundation of the legal order: the right to life sustains all other rights, including the exercise of freedom. The existence of such laws deeply wounds human relations and justice, and threatens the mutual trust among human beings. The legitimation of assisted suicide and euthanasia is a sign of the degradation of legal systems.”<sup>11</sup>

We know from experience that people tempted to suicide don’t want so much to end their lives as to end their present condition that makes life so unbearable. Modern palliative care provides such

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>11</sup> Letter *Samaritanus bonus on the care of persons in the critical and terminal phases of life*, issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, on 14th July 2020, Feast of St Camillus de Lellis.

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means, and we have the dedicated staff to make life bearable. They affirm the dignity of sick and dying people, assure them that they are loved and wanted up to the end. The legalization of assisted suicide would in time undermine the selfless, indeed often heroic, dedication of palliative care staff and hospices, perhaps Ireland's greatest gifts to medicine.

**God's Mercy.** Amidst the debates around specific pastoral practices, we cannot lose sight of the fact that the free gift of God's mercy fundamentally involves a call to repentance. There are ways, as Pope Francis has warned us, that Christian communities can attempt to limit the extension of divine mercy by unjustly excluding certain persons or groups from fellowship. That being said, the opposite danger exists whereby mercy could be understood as excusing sin rather than as the invitation to amend one's life. It is unfortunate that this conversation has fixated on a few very specific moral cases (e.g., cohabitation, remarriage, and, to a lesser extent same-sex sexual relationships), when the call to turn away from sin in preparation for Holy Communion is a demand placed upon all of us. By focusing on the issue of Communion for remarried Catholics, we perhaps run the risk of failing to pay adequate attention to other serious sins – say defrauding workers of their wages – that are not frequently dealt with in homilies or spiritual direction

– KEVIN J. O'REILLY, ed. *Heart Speaks to Heart*. 2021 (Herefordshire: Gracewing Publishing) p.67.