



Respect Life Sunday Talk

“Dignity at the End of Life”

9:00 minutes

During Respect Life Sunday, the Catholic Church encourages us to defend the dignity of all human life from conception until natural death. Today, I'd like to draw your attention to the issues of euthanasia and assisted suicide.

For years, we have heard assisted suicide referred to as “death with dignity.” But the movement to legalize it is not about allowing people to refuse excessive or overly burdensome treatment at the end of life. The Catholic Church has always supported the freedom of Catholics to refuse such treatment, and even provides resources to help you make good decisions at the end of life.¹ Instead, the movement is about allowing *physicians* to provide lethal doses of drugs to terminally ill people who want to kill themselves.

Now, some people think, “What’s wrong with that, as long as it’s voluntary? If people don’t want it, they don’t have to take it.” The problem becomes clear when we look at three major principles given to us by Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church.

The first principle is our duty to protect the life and dignity of the sick, weak, poor, and defenseless.

Some assisted suicide advocates use pain and depression as an excuse to legalize assisted suicide. But pain can be controlled in **up to 99% of terminally ill patients**,² and the clinical depression that can lead to suicide requests can be successfully treated so that suicide requests are reversed in 100% of the cases.^{3 4}

¹ See the California Catholic Conference’s document on End of Life Decisions and Directories <http://www.cacatholic.org/index.php/component/content/article/77-linked-articles-and-directories/583-frequently-asked-questions-end-of-life>

² Albert Einstein, 1992, “Overview of Cancer Pain Management,” In Judy Kornell, ed., *Pain Management and Care of the Terminal Patient* (Washington: Washington State Medical Association) p.4.

³ See Burke Balch and R. O’ Bannon, 2000, “Why Assisted Suicide Should not be Legalized.” (<http://www.texasrighttolife.com/about/159/Why-assisted-suicide-should-not-be-legalized>)

⁴ Kathleen Foley, M.D., and Herbert Hendin, M.D. 2002. p. 314.

So, many suicide advocates have now shifted their focus to the claim that “being in need of assistance is undignified.” If suicide is better than needing assistance, what does that say about the worth and dignity of disabled people? What are we saying about the weak, the dependent, the vulnerable, the elderly, and the poor who all need assistance? Are we not saying that death is better than compassion? Are we not reversing the teaching of Jesus Christ who said that love conquers death?

The second principle is our duty to assure that new laws do not impose unjust burdens, such as the duty to die, on vulnerable people.

Even the mere *option* of assisted suicide can put pressure on vulnerable people to request it against their wishes. Medical experts⁵ have written extensively about how the decisions made by dying patients are almost never autonomous, and how easily they are influenced or manipulated. It doesn't matter whether the people around them are well-intentioned. Even a mere *suggestion* that a person might be better off dead can appear to be a rejection of self-worth and can cause suicidal desires.

The pressure to commit assisted suicide can also come from insurance companies. In Oregon, for example, a cancer patient named Barbara Wagner was sent a letter by her insurance plan stating that they would not pay for any more drug interventions, but they *would* pay for her assisted suicide. She told the *Seattle Times*, “They won't pay for me to live, but they will pay for me to die.”⁶ Such letters are not uncommon, and the pressure to die that they cause did not exist before the legalization of assisted suicide. This burden to die is not only contrary to ethical laws; it is radically contrary to the teaching of Jesus who loved the weak and vulnerable.

The third principle is our duty to prevent the cultural decline the comes from laws that devalue or degrade human life. Physician-assisted suicide threatens the culture in two ways.

First, it completely changes our understanding of “quality of life.” We can choose to define quality of life in terms of our strengths, physical abilities, intellectual capacity, health, and

⁵Two of the most prominent experts are Dr. Leon Kass, M.D., Professor of Medical Ethics at the University of Chicago, and Dr. Edmund Pellegrino, former Director of Bioethics at the Georgetown University Kennedy Institute of Ethics – now renamed after him. See Leon Kass 2002 “I Will Give No Deadly Drug: Why Doctors Must Not Kill” in Kathleen Foley and Herbert Hendin 2002, pp. 17 – 40. See Edmund Pellegrino 2002 “Compassion is Not Enough” in Kathleen Foley, M.D. and Herbert Hendin, M.D., 2002, pp. 41-49. See also Leon Kass, M.D. 2001 “Preventing A Brave New World” in *The New Republic* June, 2001.

⁶ See Hal Bernton, “Washington's Initiative 1000 is Modeled on Oregon's Death with Dignity Act,” *Seattle Times*, October 13, 2008.

independence; or we can define it in terms of a relationship with the loving God, the compassion we show to others, and the contributions we try to make to others around us.

If we define “quality of life” in the first way, then suffering has no meaning, and as we lose function, we will see our quality of life slipping away, leading to a sense of worthlessness and emptiness.

But if we define “quality of life” in the second way and we put on the mantle of Christ, then we will see a remarkable transformation take place during the time of our physical and natural decline – such as greater trust in God, compassion for others, and forgiveness. As St. Paul said, “I will boast in my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me, for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12: 9-10).

Weakness and loss of function are not scandals – they are sublime dignities. We as Catholics must stand up for this truth by word and example so that the most vulnerable in our society will not only be protected, but will flourish in their ability to pass on faith, wisdom, forgiveness, and compassion before they die.

The second major cultural problem is the legitimizing of suicide itself. There is an old expression: “What becomes legal, soon becomes acceptable, and what becomes acceptable, soon becomes ‘moral,’ because ‘everyone’ is doing it.”

What are we saying to our young people when we legalize assisted suicide? Of course – we’re telling them that suicide is acceptable, which opens the door for them to conclude that it is moral. We are creating a cultural trend not merely for the toleration of suicide, but for its *goodness* and moral acceptability. We shouldn’t be surprised if suicide rates of both young and old increase. This has certainly happened in Holland, where lethal injection and assisted suicide rates have been increasing for years.⁷

These trends cast not only a shadow, but a deep darkness upon our culture—not lifting us up to the light of Christ, but pulling us down into the despair of death.

Catholics have championed these three principles throughout the centuries. Today, we must stand strong in reversing the trend toward euthanasia and assisted suicide. There are four ways that you can help.

⁷ Kate Connolly 2012, “Dutch mobile euthanasia units to make house calls” in *The Guardian* (United Kingdom) March 1, 2012.

First, go to the website “healingtheculture.com,” and download a free copy of this talk to pass on to others.

Second, in all the pews, you will find little cards that look like this [*hold one up*]. Please fill out this card and return it. We will send you free tools for teaching others about the dignity and sacredness of all human life. You can either put the card in the collection basket or give it to the ushers and our parish will mail them in for you, or you can take one home and mail it yourself.

Third, be with those you know who are terminally ill. If you have children, teach them how to be with those who are suffering and dying.

And **fourth**, one of the best ways you can help reverse the trend is by allowing others to minister to your needs when you are dying. There’s a great bumper sticker that says, “Lord, let me live long enough to become a burden to my children.” What seems at first to be a selfish thought, is actually a noble and worthy one. When we are generous enough to let go of our embarrassments, self-consciousness, and attachments to worldly things, and we are willing to share our burdens with others, we become Christ-like teachers of *agape* love. There is no better way for human beings to learn this kind of love than to be given the opportunity to serve those who are in need – and who is more in need than a person who is dying?

[The speaker may use the story below, but it is preferable to insert a story of your own in its place, of the same length or less.]

The President of Healing the Culture, Camille Pauley, tells a story about her parents, who were great examples of this kind of teaching at the hour of their deaths. She writes:

After suffering a massive stroke, my mom asked us to stay with her while she was dying. For seventeen hours, we stayed at her bedside. It was difficult and exhausting, but it was also one of the best gifts she had ever given to us because we learned what it meant to really love. Later, when my dad was dying of kidney failure, he seized the opportunity and spent his time issuing orders, calling up old friends, and telling stories we’d all heard a million times before. As he grew weaker and more lethargic, he asked us to just be with him. After the room had been quiet for some time, my father looked at us and said, “Dying is boring.” Later that night, he died in my arms. For my dad, who worked in television and was always a showman, dying was boring. It really wasn’t what he wanted to be doing. But he

lived through his dying in the same way that he lived through his life – giving every minute of it for us.

I hope I have the courage, wisdom, and generosity to be the kind of happy burden to my children that my parents were to me. And I hope you won't mind if pray the same for you. God bless you.