

## **Administrative Committee National Conference of Catholic Bishops September 12, 1991**

Current efforts to legalize euthanasia place our society at a critical juncture. These efforts have received growing public attention, due to new publications giving advice on methods of suicide and some highly publicized instances in which family members or physicians killed terminally ill persons or helped them kill themselves.

Proposals such as those in the Pacific Northwest, spearheaded by the Hemlock Society, aim to change state laws against homicide and assisted suicide to allow physicians to provide drug overdoses or lethal injections to their terminally ill patients.

Those who advocate euthanasia have capitalized on people's confusion, ambivalence, and even fear about the use of modern life-prolonging technologies. Further, borrowing language from the abortion debate, they insist that the "right to choose" must prevail over all other considerations. Being able to choose the time and manner of one's death, without regard to what is chosen, is presented as the ultimate freedom. A decision to take one's life or to allow a physician to kill a suffering patient, however, is very different from a decision to refuse extraordinary or disproportionately burdensome treatment.

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. Our tradition, declaring a moral obligation to care for our own life and health and to seek such care from others, recognizes that we are not morally obligated to use all available medical procedures in every set of circumstances. But that tradition clearly and strongly affirms that as a responsible steward of life one must never directly intend to cause one's own death, or the death of an innocent victim, by action or omission. As the Second Vatican Council declared, "euthanasia and willful suicide" are "offenses against life itself" which "poison civilization"; they "debase the perpetrators more than the victims and militate against the honor of the creator" (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, n.27).

As the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has said, "nothing and no one can in any way permit the killing of an innocent human being, whether a fetus or an embryo, an infant or an adult, an old person, or one suffering from an incurable disease, or a person who is dying." Moreover, we have no right "to ask for this act of killing" for ourselves or for those entrusted to our care; "nor can any authority legitimately recommend or permit such an action." We are dealing here with "a violation of the divine law, an offense against the dignity of the human person, a crime against life, and an attack on humanity" (*Declaration on Euthanasia*, 1980).

Legalizing euthanasia would also violate American convictions about human rights and equality. The Declaration of Independence proclaims our inalienable rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." If our right to life itself is diminished in value, our other rights will have no meaning. To destroy the boundary between healing and killing would mark a radical departure from longstanding legal and medical traditions of our country, posing a threat of unforeseeable magnitude to vulnerable members of our society. Those who represent the interests of elderly citizens, persons with disabilities, and persons with AIDS or other terminal illnesses, are justifiably alarmed when some hasten to confer on them the "freedom" to be killed.

We call on Catholics, and on all persons of good will, to reject proposals to legalize euthanasia. We urge families to discuss issues surrounding the care of terminally ill loved ones in light of sound moral principles and the demands of human dignity, so that patients need not feel helpless or abandoned in the face of complex decisions about their future. And we urge health care professionals, legislators, and all involved in this debate, to seek solutions to the problems of terminally ill patients and their families that respect the inherent worth of all human beings, especially those most in need of our love and assistance.