

DISCUSSION GUIDE



TURNING THE TIDE
DIGNITY, COMPASSION AND EUTHANASIA



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DISCUSSION GUIDE

Background Definitions:

Euthanasia is to intentionally cause death, for allegedly merciful reasons, by an action or omission of an action.

Assisted suicide is to knowingly provide the means for a person to kill him or herself.

Hospice/Palliative Care is the active total care of patients who suffer from far-advanced progressively degenerating disease. Its purpose is to alleviate pain and other distressing symptoms and to enhance the quality of life, not to postpone or hasten death.



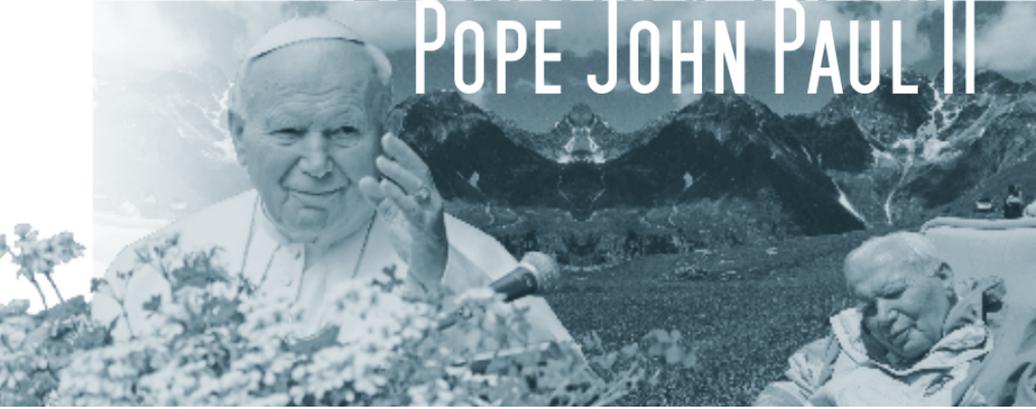
Questions for Discussion:

1. Why do people with chronic conditions or debilitating illnesses feel like they lack dignity? Why is suffering not an indignity?

Audience Reminders

- **Senator Sharon Carstairs** on making people feel undignified:
Why do people want euthanasia? [One reason] almost always is: I want my personal dignity. Well, that says something pretty awful about each and every one of us. Why have they lost their sense of dignity? Is it because we have made them feel less than dignified?
 - **Catherine Frazee** on the need for relationships to preserve her dignity:
There are not simply barriers to the things that we want to do. There are also impediments to our being: who we are, who we want to become. And these are much more abstract in many ways: that notion that a disabled person can be a whole person and can enter into the human family without having to pass a different threshold. ... I hear again and again that life with extreme forms of disability is undignified. And so, it really is a lifetime of work for me, to maintain my own integrity, my own sense of dignity.
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- Our dignity does not come from what we can or cannot do. Human dignity is not a matter of efficiency or productivity, but comes from being created in the image of God.
 - The quality and meaning of life come from who we are and how we relate to each other, not from the elimination of suffering and sickness.
 - In his earthly ministry, Christ's compassion was a sign of God's love for his people. Moved by so much suffering, Christ made the miseries of the sick his own. "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases" (Mt 8:17; cf. Isa 53:4). But he did not heal all the sick. His healings were signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God. They announced a more radical healing: the victory over sin and death. By his passion and death on the cross Christ has given a new meaning to suffering. It can configure us to him and unite us with his redemptive Passion. (Catechism Of The Catholic Church 1503-1505)

LEARNING FROM POPE JOHN PAUL II



Throughout his long and rich pontificate, Pope John Paul II taught powerfully about the sacredness of human life and the Christian meaning of human suffering, but he taught most eloquently in the final phase of his life. While his suffering and death unfolded on the world stage, this Pope showed us true dignity in the midst of debilitating illness.

Rather than hide his infirmities, as most public figures do, he let the whole world see what he was going through. Before the cameras, John Paul II demonstrated that although science can ease discomfort, palliative care should not be used as a cloak to hide the fact of dying. As the curtain was about to fall, nothing made him waver, not even the devastating sickness hidden under the glazed Parkinsonian mask or his inability to speak and move.

Pope John Paul has become a living “argument” for the appeal to respect the most frail and vulnerable, who he upheld during his pontificate. Who can say his life was not fruitful? Who didn’t feel the paradoxical influence of his presence when his voice was muted?

In our youth-obsessed culture, Pope John Paul II reminded us that aging and suffering are a natural part of being human. Where the old and infirm are so easily put in homes and forgotten, the Pope was a powerful reminder that the sick, the handicapped and the dying have great value.

John Paul II taught us how to live, to suffer, and to die. Let us learn from him how to embrace infirmity and the trials of illness, whether they be our own or of those we love. May he watch over us now and strengthen us as we turn the tide in our time.

2. How does euthanasia attack human dignity, instead of preserving and deepening its true meaning?

- Even when undertaken in good faith, euthanasia is a false and misguided kind of mercy. True compassion and respect for human dignity consists in lovingly supporting the handicapped, sick, or dying persons, rather than killing them because we cannot bear their sufferings.
- The Church teaches that euthanasia constitutes a murder gravely contrary to the dignity of each human person and to the respect due to the living God, our Creator. (CCC 2277)

3. Why are individual autonomy and choice insufficient criteria for community well-being?

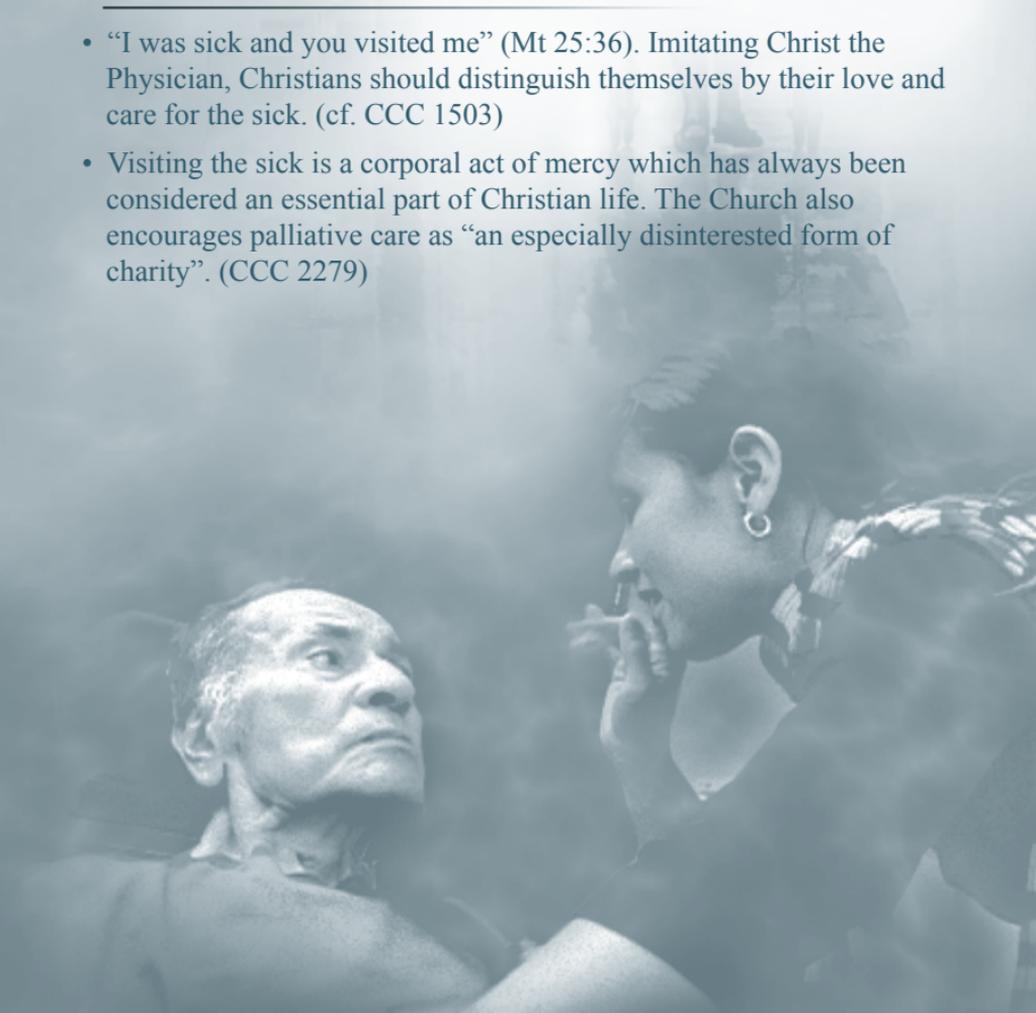
Audience Reminders

- **Catherine Frazee** on autonomy: *People like to frame this debate in the language of autonomy of the individual choice. They'll say to me that it's all right, you can say no, but other people will want to say yes. But I don't think that individual autonomy ever should be permitted to trump the safety and well-being of the community.*
 - **Wesley Smith** on safeguards: *As soon as you decide that, a) personal autonomy means that you can be killed if that's what you want, and, b) that killing is an acceptable answer to human suffering, then safeguards make no sense, because they get in the way of autonomy and they get in the way of what is now been defined as "good": the idea of killing or suicide.*
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- In the name of autonomy and freedom of choice, safeguards are destroyed. As a result, the strong end up deciding the fate of the weak. Their identity and dignity becomes what others say about them as opposed to being who they really are.
 - Human life becomes disposable. The weakest and most vulnerable become "tools" in the hands of others.

4. What should we do to support people who are terminally ill?

Audience Reminders

- **Wesley Smith** on the difference that community support made to Bob in the hospice: ...*What brought him back to being happy to be alive was the fact that he became included: a church brought them into their fold and people began visiting him. He felt like he was part of the world again.*
 - **Adrian Dieleman** on compassion: *Compassion is not to give them an option out, but to give them a hand up. To help them to get beyond what they're enduring, so that they can see themselves, and show the people around them that life does have value.*
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- “I was sick and you visited me” (Mt 25:36). Imitating Christ the Physician, Christians should distinguish themselves by their love and care for the sick. (cf. CCC 1503)
 - Visiting the sick is a corporal act of mercy which has always been considered an essential part of Christian life. The Church also encourages palliative care as “an especially disinterested form of charity”. (CCC 2279)



5. What is the Christian notion of death? How can we distinguish between causing death and accepting natural death?

Audience Reminder

- **Bobby Schindler** on recognizing nourishment through a feeding tube as basic care for Terri Schiavo: *[My sister] was not hooked up to any kind of machine; she was not on a respirator. The law in Florida, and I believe in every state in our country, in America, recognizes food and water as medical treatment, as artificial life support, as extraordinary care. Our family believes that food and water should never be looked upon as... as extraordinary care, as medical treatment, as artificial life support. It should be basic and ordinary care.*
- Christians know that to rise with Christ, we must die with him. Although bodily death is a consequence of Original Sin, Christ has transformed it by his redemptive death. Death is thus seen as a normal transition to eternal life. As Catholics, we should prepare for death, but we should not seek it out. (CCC 1005-1014)
- Since Christians do not aim to preserve bodily life at all costs, it can be appropriate to refuse “over-zealous” treatment. Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be morally legitimate. In such cases, it is important that we do not will to cause death, but merely accept that we are unable to impede it. (CCC 2278)
- Even if death is thought imminent, ordinary basic care is still owed to the sick person and cannot be legitimately interrupted. (CCC 2279)



6. How would we all be at risk if euthanasia or assisted suicide were legalized?

Audience Reminders

- **Daryl Thomas** on being born with Spina Bifida:
I had spina bifida when I was born. The first thing my mother was told once I was laid on her thigh was that I was abnormal... The only thing that I have not been able to do as a result of this is have feeling in my toes. I've been curling, skiing, golfing, hockey, baseball, football, and never concerned about my medical conditions. Thank God I was born 50 years ago in Canada and not over in the Netherlands!
 - **Wesley Smith** on Bob, who had Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, also known as Charcot's Disease and Lou Gehrig's Disease: *I've been a hospice volunteer. My last patient's name was Bob. And Bob had A.L.S., which is sometimes called motor-neuron disease where you become completely quadriplegic... And he said that the reason he became suicidal was not because of his decreasing capacities, but because he felt abandoned.*
 - **Adrian Dieleman** on life not having value:
The fear is that other people are going to be making that decision for them, saying, "You know, your life doesn't have value", and talking them into it. And again, giving that option to say, "You know, you're a strain on the health care system. It's going to cost a lot of money to keep you rehabilitated." And it's the easy way out for them to say, "Okay, you know, you're right. Let's end it."
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- People who are emotionally depressed or lonely could consider ending their lives, which they feel is nothing more than a token presence in the world. However, this self image could change if they encountered real compassion and inclusion in a community.
 - The elderly and people with disabilities may be pressured into accepting euthanasia or assisted suicide. But life is worth much more than the cost of medical care. Social services exist to help the poor and weak members of our society, to care for them, not to kill them.
 - Killing should not be an option for dealing with people with disabilities, especially for newborn children.

Additional Questions:

7. **What needs to be done to provide good end-of-life care? How can pain and symptom management help people with chronic illness?**

Audience Reminders

- **Senator Sharon Carstairs** on the quality of end-of-life care:
Until every single Canadian can be guaranteed quality end-of-life care so that they have a legitimate choice to make, then I would suggest to you we cannot start that other debate. And we are not there yet. And we are a long way from being there yet.
- **Wesley Smith** on health services:
People are having difficulty getting access to basic care. They're having difficulty in some respects getting access to good pain control, good psychiatric involvement, and good social services; are we going to say that the answer to that is for these people to have assisted suicide?
- **Jean Echlin** on pain management (cf. CCC 2279):
I could not ever advocate for someone to commit suicide when I can offer them pain management and symptom management right where they are.

8. **Why should we not leave this to the health care experts and politicians to decide?**

9. **What role can we play, with respect both to our moral obligation to care for incapacitated persons and also to our civic obligation to protect the vulnerable under the law?**

Resources:

- ***The Catechism of the Catholic Church:***
www.vatican.va/archive/catechism/ccc_toc.htm
- Pope John Paul II, ***The Gospel of Life:***
www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0141/_INDEX.HTM
- Pope John Paul II, ***On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering:***
www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris_en.html
- Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops, ***Going to the House of the Father: A Statement on the Dignity and Destiny of Human Life:***
www.occb.on.ca/english/StatementEuthanasiaENMarch07.pdf
- Catholic Educator's Resource Center, Euthanasia Articles:
www.catholiceducation.org/directory/Current_Issues/Euthanasia
- National Catholic Bioethics Center, ***A Catholic Guide to End-of-Life Decisions:*** www.lifeissues.net/writers/mis/mis_11endlifedecisions.html

For a downloadable copy of this discussion guide or further information about Salt + Light Television, please visit our website at:

www.saltandlighttv.org

For Fr. Thomas Rosica's interview on Euthanasia with Zenit:

http://www.saltandlighttv.org/about_family_rosica.html#R2007.05.06

For Fr. Thomas Rosica's article on Euthanasia:

http://torontosun.com/News/Columnists/Rosica_Father_Thomas/2007/02/18/3642710-sun.html



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