

Beauty and Dignity in the Unhastened Passing of a Soul

On Good Friday, I joined John Corston's friends around his bed in his last hours of earthly life. We prayed, sang hymns, and reminisced. Jesus had healed him of alcoholism and given him abundant life in Christian faith. Obeying God's call, John, an Ojibwa, founded Kateri Native Ministry. Now, God called him home, bathed in human and divine love. It was a beautiful passage into the next life.

I contrast this with another kind of death, legal in Canada since June 17. Euphemistically called "medical aid in dying," it is in fact assisted suicide or euthanasia. However, legal permission to take one's life or to collaborate in terminating a life does not change God's moral law, which forbids them.

Here is an important distinction. A patient may request not to have treatment when the burdens it brings outweigh benefits. A doctor may honour this. Also, medication may be administered to relieve suffering, even when it might shorten the patient's life. This is on the condition that this medication is given solely to relieve pain, and not to end life. These decisions are morally permissible.

Many will say that euthanasia and assisted suicide are "compassionate" responses to suffering. Such faulty language must not hide the fact that they are the deliberate killing of a person.

True compassion calls us to stand with our suffering loved ones and affirm that they are always a gift and never a burden. As life nears its natural end, the compassionate response to any pain and hardship is good palliative care, not killing the patient.

The Catholic Church is committed to honouring and protecting human life from conception to natural death. God alone is the author of life. We are but stewards.

From its earliest days, the Church has opposed the killing of innocents. The Scriptures led Justin Martyr, among others, to oppose suicide and the “mercy killing” of infants by exposure in the early second century, when the law had long permitted them. This kind of true progressive thinking led to the legal protection of the lives of innocents across the Roman Empire. The Catechism is clear on euthanasia and assisted suicide about “the nature of this murderous act, which must always be forbidden and excluded” (CCC 2277).

For Christians, death is not the end, but rather the beginning of a resurrected life with God almighty. Our fate after death ultimately hinges on the state of our souls when we die.

The care of the Church for her children does not end with death. She continues to intercede for the deceased person and minister to the departed soul’s loved ones. Our funeral liturgies do both.

Christian chaplains in palliative care tell of the beauty and dignity in the unhastened passing of a soul. There are family reconciliations, deep expressions of love, and, yes, conversions to Christ. These experiences cannot compare with the distressing, guilt-inducing taking of a life that is euthanasia.

The Church is discerning the compassionate response to someone who has made the difficult and unfortunate decision to have their life terminated. We will do our best for the patient and their family, but we cannot pretend that euthanasia is an approved choice. The Sacrament of the Sick is intended for people who repent of past sins, not for people who are planning the sin of taking their life.

I invite you to affirm life. Accompany your loved ones in their old age and final illnesses, and the temptation to seek suicide and euthanasia will vanish. Bless them with your presence, affection, and prayers as they make the journey to their Creator and Saviour.

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