

**An excerpt from *Health Decisions and Care at the End of Life: A Catholic Perspective* by Sister Nuala Kenny, MD (Toronto Novalis, 2015), pp. 25-29.**

### **Understanding Requests for Assisted Death**

It is important to understand requests for death by assisted suicide or euthanasia. Sometimes, when coming from the dying person, it is a signal to review their pain and symptom control and their spiritual and emotional support. Sometimes it is a cry from the heart prompted by fear of the unknown; of being abandoned; of being a burden; or of pain and suffering. Sometimes it comes from a belief that the only way to die with dignity or have a “good” death is by means of assisted suicide or euthanasia.

For many, assisted death is about individual rights and autonomy. Christians, however, understand that life is a gift that has both personal and communal dimensions.

In the media and in public opinion polls, assisted suicide and euthanasia are often presented as acts of compassion for persons who suffer intractable pain. However, pain and other physical symptoms play a small part in the actual requests for assisted death. The most common reasons for wanting assisted death are fear of future pain or suffering; the sense of loss of dignity; feelings of being a burden to others, especially loved ones; and a desire for some control in the out-of-control experience of dying. These feelings are experiences of human suffering, not pain.

Assisted suicide and euthanasia are a medicalization of death and of human suffering – the false belief that somehow all human pain and suffering can be cured by a medical intervention. This is a notion that pervades contemporary society – the illusion that somewhere there is a “quick fix” for every ill and every kind of human distress. As part of this trend, assisted death would certainly not be confined to end-of-life care or terminal illness. The potential implications for all society are staggering. [...]

### **Is a “good” death possible in modern times?**

The traditional Christian notion of a good death offers insights that are essentially timeless. In the face of life-changing and life-ending illness, the thoughtful consideration of important life goals – material, relational and spiritual goods – may best be served through the thoughtful use of means to promote well-being, to protect and preserve life and, finally, to provide for a peaceful death. [...]

All life is a journey... and most of that journey is spent learning about what life means. We learn that all of life is a gift from God. We learn about the world, about relationships, about love, about dependence, about independence and about balance. We learn that there is so much about life that we do not control, and so must trust. Dying is part of that journey, part of life, and Christians believe that dying well means acknowledging our dependence, being thankful for life and for those who are part of that life, giving up control and trusting on God. A good death is the completion of life as this journey of faith and family. It is quite different from modern conceptions of assisted death.

Such a perspective does not minimize the need for good decisions as death approaches. Life is to be treasured and protected with “reasonable care.” But the spiritual goals of life require that decisions about treatments not be out of proportion to the benefits and burdens of the treatments.

Family and those that provide care should advocate for optimal pain and symptom relief and personal and spiritual comfort and support. Sometimes, what is most needed is that caring people be present with the dying person. Accompanying a dying person on that final part of their journey is a privilege. It provides comfort and shows respect for that person and for their journey. Such is death with real dignity: such is a good death.