

PHYSICIAN ASSISTED DEATH

Some Questions and Answers

What does the Church teach about medical decisions and end of life care?

The Church has always taught that life is sacred, and willfully taking a life – one's own or another's – is morally evil. This much is clear. It is also clear that, whatever the motives; euthanasia or assisted suicide puts an end to the life of the person, and is morally unacceptable. At the same time, we know that we are human, and that our human life sooner or later will end in death. We are not trying to escape death, and are not required to take extraordinary or disproportionate measures to try to avoid it at the end of our lives. We believe that at death life is changed not ended.

The Catechism also teaches that “The use of painkillers to alleviate the sufferings of the dying, even at the risk of shortening their days, can be morally in conformity with human dignity if death is not willed as either an end or a means, but only foreseen and tolerated as inevitable.” (no. 2279) We know that it is acceptable to help those who are in pain, even if that help might risk shortening their days, but it is not acceptable to end a person's life as a way to end their suffering.

How can Catholics respond to those who are sick and suffering, especially in this Year of Mercy?

“As Catholics who believe in the way of the Lord, the response to suffering is to provide care! Christ healed the sick and broken-hearted by being understanding and compassionate. The Christian response to suffering, in keeping with Christ's actions, is to transform suffering with meaning. When there is no meaning to suffering, it is only pain, and of course people are afraid; they become angry and depressed. But where there is meaning, where there is love and proper care, where there is community support, suffering can become sacrifice! Sacrifice is not just another word for ‘put up with’. It literally means from its Latin root, to make something ‘sacred’”.
Archbishop Anthony Mancini

What does this mean for the people of my parish?

The Christian Community in its words and actions brings to life the call of the Gospel to be the presence of Jesus Christ to the sick, the suffering and their families. We are called to be companions in the difficult parts of life's journey. A community is not able to offer treatment or a cure, but when a person enters their last days of this earthly life, there they can be supported, not left alone or forsaken, but more importantly, valued and loved. Each parish needs to develop teams of people who will accompany those approaching the end of life, being the presence of Jesus and his caring community.

What does it mean for me?

As a member of the Body of Christ I need to offer my time and presence to the sick and suffering. I need to keep them in my prayers and I need to pray for a good death. Mary our Mother prays for us, “... now and at the hour of our death”.

Physician Assisted Death (PAD) Explained

What is physician assisted death (PAD)?

Physician assisted death is either ‘physician assisted suicide’ or ‘physician performed euthanasia’.

- In physician assisted suicide the doctor provides drugs that will cause death, with the intention that the sick person will take those drugs on their own.
- In physician performed euthanasia, the doctor administers drugs that will cause the death of the patient.

What does it mean that Physician assisted death comes into effect in Canada on June 6, 2016?

After this date, a doctor will not face criminal charges for causing the death of a patient who conforms to specific criteria:

- who requests assistance to die
- who is a competent adult
- who has a grievous and irremediable medical condition (including an illness, disease or disability)
- that causes suffering which is intolerable to the individual

Why would a person ask for Physician Assisted Death?

It is not always possible to know all the motives, but it could be for any one or any combination of the following reasons, all of which cause human suffering:

- fear of intractable (intolerable, unmanageable, uncontrollable) pain
- fear of loss of dignity, dependence
- fear of sense of guilt, of being a burden
- uncertainty regarding the future and care needs
- fear of loss of control
- sense of hopelessness
- fear of loss of meaning

Is it possible that a patient’s voluntary informed consent can be endangered?

Yes, because of:

- disordered insights and self-stigma
- social marginalization
- depression, hopelessness, other mental health issues
- inducement, influence and coercion from others

What can a physician, nurse practitioner or other health professional do who conscientiously objects to PAD?

- freedom of conscience and religion is protected under the Canadian constitution
- no one can be forced to participate
- options, like transfer of care to another physician or third party agencies, have been discussed to respect patient’s wishes while protecting conscience rights
- caregivers should not abandon their patients or refuse to provide them with care even when there is a profound difference on the subject of PAD

“Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid” – Isaiah 12:2