

True and false compassion



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For this November issue of the *Transcript*, I want to anticipate the coming holiday and wish you all a Happy Thanksgiving. Let's remember that it is God whom we are thanking, as the Author of life and the Source of all that we are, and of all that we have. May he continue to bless our country and each of us in these challenging times.

Before you know it, 2015 will be here. Of great concern at the start of the new year will undoubtedly be a renewed attempt to introduce assisted suicide legislation in Connecticut. The bishops and our Connecticut Catholic Conference, together with many other groups, will be striving to defeat this measure because we believe that it is based on false arguments, it is unnecessary and it is destructive of human life and dignity. As an offense against God, the Author of life, assisted suicide can only lead to our diminishment as human beings and to a bad outcome for our society.

I will be asking all of you to stand up and be counted in resisting the efforts to pass this legislation.

An argument will be made by the proponents of assisted suicide that this is a compassionate thing to do, but the reality is far different. In the words of the U.S. bishops: "True compassion alleviates suffering while maintaining solidarity with those who suffer. It does not put lethal drugs into their hands and abandon them to their suicidal impulses, or to the self-serving motives of others who may want them dead."

It is argued that physically, people should not have to endure the excruciating pain and suffering that may accompany a terminal illness. The fact is that modern pain management, more and more widely acknowledged and practiced, is very effective in meeting this challenge. What we need to do, and can do, is to kill the pain, not the patient.

I should add that opposition to suicide does not mean that a person is obliged to undergo medical procedures that, in the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, are "over-zealous," that is to say, "burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary or disproportionate to the expected outcome" (no. 2278). There is a great moral difference, however, between refusing such treatments and committing suicide.

It is also argued that mentally and emotionally, people should not have to be plagued by fears of losing control or being a burden. But that is why a truly compassionate society, medical profession, family and church community are present: to rise to the challenge of palliative care that includes hospice and specialty consultation, spiritual support, family counseling and other assistance. Again, to quote the U.S. bishops: "People who request death are vulnerable. They need care and protection. To offer them lethal drugs is a victory not for freedom, but for the worst form of neglect. Such abandonment is especially irresponsible when society is increasingly aware of elder abuse and other forms of mistreatment and exploitation of vulnerable persons."

Legalizing suicide has proven to be a slippery slope to euthanasia, and to broader application than terminal illness. In Holland, what began as suicide for those in "unbearable suffering" who voluntarily

requested it now extends to patients without their knowledge or consent, and to those who are said to have “psychic suffering,” or “potential disfigurement of personality.” Among this group is a disproportionate number of the most vulnerable – the poor, the elderly, the mentally ill and the disabled. The Royal Dutch Medical Association eventually concluded that doctors should be allowed to perform euthanasia on patients who are not ill but are “suffering through living.” In Switzerland, “suicide because of old age” is now permitted. In our own country, there are those who want to broaden the agenda to include chronic illness and disability.

And it is sobering to note that in Oregon, a decade after its law allowing physician-assisted suicide took effect, suicide had become “the leading cause of injury death” and “the second leading cause of death among Oregonians ages 15-34.” The suicide rate in Oregon in 2010 was 41 percent higher than the national average – without counting physician-assisted suicides of seriously ill patients, which Oregon law does not allow to be counted as suicides.

For more data of this nature, go to the U.S. bishops’ website at www.USCCB.org.

Clearly, the morality of Western civilization that has governed health care is now at a crossroads. I say “Western civilization” because it is not just a matter of Judeo-Christian religious beliefs. It was the pagan Greek world that gave us the so-called “Oath of Hippocrates,” which, according to the American Medical Association (AMA), “has remained in Western civilization as an expression of ideal conduct for the physician.” One of the tenets of the original oath from ancient Greece reads: “I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody who asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect.” The AMA’s Code of Ethics, and that of the American Nurses Association (ANA) both prohibit participation in physician-assisted suicide.

In 1995, Pope Saint John Paul the Great warned that “a new cultural climate is developing and taking hold, which gives crimes against life a new and – if possible – even more sinister character, giving rise to further grave concern: broad sectors of public opinion justify certain crimes against life in the name of the rights of individual freedom, and on this basis they claim not only exemption from punishment but even authorization by the State, so that these things can be done with total freedom and indeed with the free assistance of health-care systems” (*Evangelium vitae*, 4).

What is emerging is a militant secularism that affirms man’s absolute autonomy, cut off from any relationship with a transcendent authority. This represents nothing less than an attempt to redefine the human person without reference to any God-given law or even to human nature as traditionally understood.

It has often been said that the Roman Catholic Church is the last great moral institution in the Western world to resist these forces in a principled, coherent and forceful manner. Let us work and pray that with God’s help our efforts will succeed.