

TO LIVE EACH DAY WITH DIGNITY

By Archbishop Gomez

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The euthanasia movement in our country is gaining strength and momentum. The reasons for this are complicated, but at its root, this movement is driven by fears that many of us share. The fear of pain, suffering, and death. The fear that one day we might lose our mental capacity or bodily functions. The fear of becoming a burden on others. Or of being left alone to die in some institution, hooked up to expensive machines.

With our American population getting older and people living longer, we are already starting to see economic pressures to ration health care among the elderly and the terminally ill. This, in a culture that already too much judges a person's "worth" on the basis of what the person can "produce" economically.

So people are afraid. Their fears are legitimate and they need to be addressed.

But euthanasia advocates are exploiting these fears "in legislatures and courtrooms, in ad campaigns and in the popular media. They use deceptive language to present euthanasia as a humane solution for individuals and a sensible policy option for the common good of society. We need to be clear. What they call "death with dignity" means basically giving people the permission and the means to kill themselves by a lethal overdose of prescription drugs.

Euthanasia advocates want to answer people's fears by killing the person who is afraid. And if they succeed in their efforts to legalize physician-assisted suicide, they would effect a significant change in American society.

Legalized euthanasia would involve doctors and nurses "healing professionals" in helping to kill people. It would lead to a society in which the government "in the name of maximizing health care resources" would essentially decide which lives are worthy of living, and which people would be better off dead.

Already in America, legalized abortion has made it "routine" for physicians to kill unborn children. About a million babies are killed this way each year. That is scandal enough. We cannot now allow the killing of the elderly, terminally ill, and disabled people to become "routine" also.

That's why the U.S. Catholic Bishops have published a new statement on the euthanasia movement, "To Live Each Day with Dignity." It is a good statement of our moral principles and offers clear guidance on addressing the fears underlying this debate:

Respect for life does not demand that we attempt to prolong life by using medical treatments that are ineffective or unduly burdensome. Nor does it mean we should deprive

suffering patients of needed pain medications out of a misplaced or exaggerated fear that they might have the side effect of shortening life. . . .

Effective palliative care . . . allows patients to devote their attention to the unfinished business of their lives, to arrive at a sense of peace with God, with loved ones, and with themselves. No one should dismiss this time as useless or meaningless. Learning how to face this last stage of our earthly lives is one of the most important and meaningful things each of us will do, and caregivers who help people through this process are also doing enormously important work.

Today, more and more people believe they only have one life to live. They think all they can hope for is contained between the span of years from their birth to their death. When there is no hope for any life beyond the grave, people live with a kind of hidden despair. That's one reason our society treats death and illness like enemies "to be feared and fought at all costs."

But Christians know the beautiful truth. That Jesus Christ rose from the dead and destroyed the power of death forever. That every human person has an infinite value in God's eyes. We must tell our society that our lives are more than biological . Our lives are also theological. We are creatures of body and soul, matter and spirit. We are created out of love to be in dialogue, in a relationship with God.

This relationship begins before we are conceived in the womb. It is not cancelled by illness, disability, or disease. As St. Paul taught us: Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ!

This is true even for the person who is no longer able to communicate. In the beautiful words of Blessed John Paul II: "The loving gaze of God the Father still falls upon them, acknowledging them as his sons and daughters, especially in need of help."

We need to resist the euthanasia movement in our day. At the same time, we need to rededicate ourselves to building a culture of truth and mercy. We need to help our brothers and sisters who are sick and afraid, beginning with those in our own families.

With modern palliative treatments we can alleviate the pain they feel. We need to reassure them that we will be there for them spiritually and emotionally too.

We need to send a signal to everyone in our society. That this is a society that values every individual. That there will always be someone there to love them and care for them even when they are no longer able to take care of themselves.

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