



A Bishop Speaks
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Assisted Suicide: A Christian Choice and a New Freedom

It's time for Christianity to grapple with the ethical issues that face us at the end of life.

A century ago it was not an option. The final moments of life came with no heart pump or ventilators, no shrinking of tumors with radiation, no ability to cleanse a person's blood supply. Death was normally quick, since medical science had little help to offer. Then came the quantum leap in medical knowledge that expanded longevity beyond anyone's fondest dreams.

I rejoice in these incredible human accomplishments, grieving only at their limited availability across the world. Religious leaders universally applaud these medical advances that seem to validate the claim that life is sacred and calls us anew to acknowledge and even to worship the Source of this sacred life, whose name, they proclaim, is God.

These stunning developments, however, did not come without raising huge issues. If death is not as inescapable as it once was, a whole new level of decision making must be engaged. We are no longer simply children leaning on the Deity with no responsibility except to embrace our destiny. New dimensions of maturity become obvious. We now share in the life and death decisions that once were thought to lie solely in the domain of God.

There is no virtue in refusing to accept this new human reality. Nothing is changed by hiding our heads in the sand. This revolution has called us to frontiers where many religious ideas about the end of life must be set aside as no longer fitting our world. When that occurs, assisted suicide--under certain conditions--emerges as a new alternative for Christian people; the values marking the Christian faith and those motivating the 'Death with Dignity' movement begin to merge. The key to this union lies in the commitment by both groups to defend the dignity and sacredness of human life. That is a rapprochement I welcome and hope to facilitate.

As these new realities engage both groups, core definitions demand to be recast. For Christians that will not be easy. Just as we have come to believe that St. Paul was wrong in his attitude toward women and homosexuality, we now must see that he was also wrong when he viewed death as an enemy, even the "the last enemy" that had to be destroyed. When Paul wrote those words, he was under the influence of the ancient biblical myth of creation.

In that story, first thought of quite literally and later regarded as only metaphorically true, the explanation was offered that the disobedience of the first man and woman had plunged the whole world into sin, breaking the divine image in human life and causing banishment from the Garden of Eden. This fall was also said to have destroyed our immortality, causing us ultimately to die. The fact that no one escaped death was *prima facie* evidence for those like Paul, who were shaped by this defining myth, that sin was universal and death, its punishment, was the ultimate human enemy that had to be overcome.

It is easy to understand how ancient people came to these conclusions, since death was a lurking presence ready to pounce upon its victims at every stage of life. This biblical definition of death, however, is clearly wrong and must be dismissed as no longer operative. It is not even a correct metaphor.

Death is not divine punishment endured because we are fallen people. Death is a natural part of life's cycle. It must, therefore, be embraced as something good--a friend, not an enemy. Can any of us really imagine life without death being a part of it? Far from being evil, death is simply that shadow which gives life its passion, its depth, its sense of urgency. Death walks with us from the moment we are born. It pressures life. It is that reality which makes life's experiences unrepeatable. Childhood lasts but a limited time. It should be neither rushed nor restrained. The same is true for our adolescence, adulthood, and every other identifiable stage of our lives. There is only one journey through the middle years, the aging process, and into old age itself. Each stage must be grasped with vigor.

Life is meant to be lived. We are to scale its heights, plumb its depths, and taste its sweetness. Death rings the bell on all procrastination. It cannot, therefore, be our enemy,

something we strive to defeat. It is our friend, something we must learn to accept as an ultimate source of life's meaning. When modern medicine pushes death back in order to expand the length and quality of our existence, it is not defeating our enemy, it is revealing our holiness.

But a perilous boundary becomes visible in this new consciousness when the efforts of medical science cease expanding the length and quality of life, and begin postponing death's inevitability. With that subtle and poorly defined moment comes, a new arena is entered where both a new Christian belief system and a new ethic about final things needs to be born.

Do we honor the God of life by extending the length of our days when the quality of our life has dissipated? Is a breathing cadaver a witness to the God of life? Should powerful narcotics be used to lessen our pain and thus to extend our days even if they rob us of the relationships which give life its meaning?

If I have a medically-confirmed incurable disease, and can bear the pain of that sickness only by being placed into a kind of twilight zone, where I neither recognize the sweet smile of my wife nor respond to the touch of her hand, do I not have the ethical right to end my life with medical assistance? Can dedicated Christians step into this process and say we have now reached the point in human development where we have not just the right, but the moral obligation, to share life-and-death decisions with God? Do we not serve our deepest convictions if we decide to end our life at the moment in which its sacredness becomes compromised?

I am one Christian who wants to say not just one 'yes' to these questions, but Yes! Yes! A thousand times yes! I want to do it not in the guilt of yesterday's value system that proclaimed that only God could properly make these decisions. I want to do it, rather, as a modern Christian, asserting that human skill has brought about a new maturity in which we are both called to and equipped for the awesome task of being co-creators with God of the gift of life. As such we must also be responsible with God for guaranteeing the goodness of our deaths.

I am not put off by the slippery slope arguments that are so often used by religious forces and that resort to fearmongering when they cannot embrace the new realities. I do not believe that this stance will lead to state-ordered executions of the elderly, or to health maintenance organizations curtailing medical payments until a quick death is achieved. I do not believe that greedy potential heirs will use this power to hasten the receipt of their inheritances. These are, in my mind, nothing but the smokescreens of negativity, designed to play on the fear present when childlike dependency is threatened and when mature human decisions are mandated.

A world that is bright enough to create these opportunities is surely bright enough to control those who might misuse them. All of these abuses could be eliminated by investing this life-and-death decision solely with the affected individual. Advance directives, signed when that person is in good health, should be honored. The decision-making power should reside with the individual, who alone is to be granted the legal right to determine how and when his or her life is to come to an end. That is how we will surround death with the dignity that this ancient friend deserves. I regard this choice as a right to be enshrined alongside "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" at the center of our value system, a basic human freedom that we must claim.

Above all, I affirm that the choice of death with dignity, whether by my own hand or with the assistance of my physician, is a moral and a more godly choice than passively enduring a life pointlessly devoid of hope or meaning. I believe this option is rooted in the Christian conviction that life is sacred. It is thus not life denying, but life affirming. It is because we honor life that we want to end it with our faculties still intact, our minds still competent, and our dignity still respected. Assisted suicide, as a conscious choice made amid the extremity of sickness, is the way that I, as a Christian, can pay homage to the Christ who stands at the center of that faith, whose purpose, says the Fourth Gospel, was to bring life and to bring it abundantly.

To accept the responsibility of making ultimate decisions about life; to celebrate the fact that I live in an age of remarkable ingenuity; to embrace the truth that death is not our enemy but the shadow that gives life its purpose; to claim the right to determine how and when I shall die; these are the opportunities that confront people in the 21st century. I embrace them as a Christian who deeply believes in the God who is the Source of Life, who makes all life holy.

I shall live as deeply as I can while I have the opportunity. I hope to end my life as gracefully as circumstances will allow. But in both my living and my dying, even if that dying is by my own choice or hand in the face of the end of meaning and dignity, I want to assert that my decisions

are within the framework of what I call Christian ethics.