

# Freedom to Die?

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"Freedom" is a highly cherished value in our society, not only in all aspects of life, but increasingly in aspects of death as well. The chant, "My life is mine" has also become, "My death is mine." There is a move in our country and in the world to permit the terminally ill to end their lives through euthanasia. Some claim that it is the ultimate civil liberty to decide the time and manner of one's own death. (A moment's thought about that idea, however, reveals its absurdity.)

For a Christian, however, is "my life" really "mine"? Is my death really mine? The answer has to be yes and no. It is mine in the sense that it has been given to me and nobody else; it is not mine alone, however, because I am not the source of my own existence, and I am accountable for it to another, namely, God. "You are not your own," St. Paul declares (1 Cor. 6:19). "If we live, we are responsible to the Lord, and when we die we are responsible to the Lord. Both in life and in death we belong to the Lord." ( See Romans 14:18). Not one of us decided the time or manner in which we came into this world. Our life is a sacred gift from God, and only He can give it. It is therefore His right alone to take us out of this world.

We do not possess a "right to die." A right is a moral claim. We do not have a claim on death; rather, death has a claim on us! Some see the "right to die" as parallel to the "right to life." In fact, however, they are opposite. The "right to life" is based on the fact that life is a gift which we do not possess as a piece of property ( which we can purchase or sell or give away or destroy at will ), but rather is an inviolable right. It cannot be taken away by another or by the person him/herself. The "right to die" is based, rather, on the idea of life as a "thing we possess" and may discard when it no longer meets our satisfaction. "Right to die" thinking says there is such a thing as a "life not worth living." For a Christian, however, life is worthy in and of itself, and not because it meets certain criteria that we or others set.

Must we, then, in the case of terminal illness, do everything and anything possible to stay alive, despite the condition we may be in? The answer to this is a clear NO. There is no law of any state or religion which says that we must stay alive at any cost. Death is an inevitable part of life, and when it is clear that God is calling us from this life, we accept His summons with faith. We firmly believe as Christians that life on this earth is not our final destiny or our highest good. "Our citizenship is in heaven." ( Phil. 3:20) "We have here no lasting city, but are seeking that which is to come" (Heb.13:14 ). All of our activities on earth, in fact, are meant to bring us closer to our true goal, union with God. In some circumstances, prolonging life would not serve that purpose, and may, because of severe burdens, hinder a person from drawing closer to God.

So the question is, "Where do we draw the line?" In serious illness, what means of treatment are we obliged to use, and what are we not required to use?

The means we use have traditionally been classified as either "ordinary" or "extraordinary." "Ordinary" means must always be used. This is any treatment or procedure which provides some benefit to the patient without excessive burden or hardship. "Extraordinary" means are optional. These are measures which do present an excessive burden, or simply do no good for the patient.

The distinction here is NOT between "artificial" and "natural." Many artificial treatments will be "ordinary" means in the moral sense, as long as they provide some benefit without excessive burden. It depends, of course, on the specific case in point, with all its medical details. We cannot figure out ahead of time, in other words, whether or not we ourselves or a relative want some specific treatment to be used on us "when the time comes," because we do not know in advance what our medical situation will be at the time. When the time does come, however, we must consult on the medical and moral aspects of the situation. Remember, procedures providing benefit without unreasonable hardship are obligatory; others are not. You should consult your clergyman when the situations arise.

What is never permitted, however, is any act or omission which causes, or is intended to cause, death, in order to remove a person from suffering. This is "euthanasia," sometimes called "mercy killing." We cannot take the life of another person, or our own, no matter what the good consequences may be. Most people who think euthanasia is a good idea are motivated by the fear of pain and the loss of control they will experience in terminal illness. Yet pain control in modern medicine has made very great progress; there are very few situations in which pain cannot be managed medically. Regarding control over our life, we need to adopt the approach that if we cannot cure, we care. Caring comes through the presence of loving, concerned people with whom the sick can share their thoughts and feelings and from whom they can receive respect and care for their emotional and spiritual needs even in the worst physical conditions. To give "dignity" to the dying is to always respect them as human persons with an eternal destiny, not to push for the option to kill them. A Christian, moreover, knows that suffering is not meaningless. It was by his suffering and cross that Christ redeemed the world. A Christian joins his/her suffering to Christ's, and has a part to play in saving the world as well.

One of the leading advocates of euthanasia, Derek Humphrey, writes, "The 1990's is the decade when the issue of voluntary euthanasia for the terminally ill will be decided." (*Dying With Dignity*, p. 19) Christians must become more informed on this issue, and speak and act so that the issue is not only decided, but decided rightly. May God give us the wisdom and strength we will need