

Moral issues: Euthanasia (Fr. Stanley Harakas)

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Does an individual ever have the «right to die?» Must life be prolonged when there is little or no chance of its res-toration to «meaningful existence?» Is there any moral jus-tification for curtailing the life of a terminally-ill patient in order to free him from unbearable suffering? These ques-tions, punctuated by the much-publicized and controver-sial Karen Ann Quinlan case, are becoming increasingly important as we strive to enhance not only the quantity but the quality of human life. They concern a very real problem faced by our own Orthodox Christian clergy and laity alike in dealing with acutely and terminally-ill pa-tients. We therefore ask, «What is the stance of the Ortho-dox Church concerning mercy-killing or euthanasia?» And «to what extent are we the faithful enjoined to maintain human life?»



The Orthodox Church has always taught that euthana-sia constitutes the deliberate taking of human life, and as such is to be condemned as murder. Yet, rapid

advances in modern technology and new means of maintaining life have created a need for an explanation and clarification of this position.

The New Situation

Euthanasia (Greek for «good death») is defined as «the act or practice of painlessly putting to death persons suffering from incurable and distressing disease.» But the use of modern medical equipment and methods of treatment often leads to a prolongation of the dying of a terminally-ill patient and not to the recovery of his or her health. We must therefore consider whether the deliberate withholding of such «extraordinary measures» is morally equivalent to euthanasia and, thus, to murder.

The Old Situation

A partial answer to this question is to be found in the Orthodox perspective of death. The fathers tell us that death is an unnatural wrenching of the soul from the body leading to the destruction of the psycho-somatic unity that constitutes the human person. Here man is a microcosm, uniting in himself the material and spiritual realms of God's creation. In addition, he bears the imprint of image and likeness to God, and in this resemblance, Adam, the first man, enjoyed immortality. But through the Fall man rejected God, the only source of authentic life, destroying the likeness and fracturing the image. He strove to make his own life apart from God and, thus, chose death.

Nevertheless, God did not desire that His creation remain in its fallen state, and in His great mercy, He sent His beloved Son into the world to transform and unite all things in Himself. By His Life, Death, and Resurrection, Christ Jesus restored the image and likeness in man to its original wholeness. All aspects of human existence were thereby transformed including death which through the Resurrection has become a passage into eternal life.

As a consequence, Christians should cherish their life on this earth as a most precious gift from God entrusted to them for a time, never forgetting that this life has been bought with a price and already been made new in Christ. At the same time, we must accept the inevitability of our physical death, not in despair, but with anticipation of that Last Day when we shall all be raised up in a transfigured flesh.

A further inference from this conception of life and death is that we do not deliberately contribute to the death of others. Therefore, euthanasia being a deliberate taking of human life, does not constitute a viable alternative for the Orthodox physician or patient.

Some Guidelines

While the Church suffers with those who are in grave distress, she cannot so betray her commitment to the preservation of human life. Yet, the Church is not insensitive to the needs of those who suffer and in its concern stresses the Christian obligation to relieve pain and make the patient as comfortable as possible. The use of pain killers, such as morphine, is permissible; where they may constitute an undefined effect on the length of the patient's life, no serious attention need be given, when the motive is the comfort and over-all well-being of the patient.

Those experiencing great physical pain are also reminded that even suffering has acquired new meaning by our Lord's own passion and has become a means to an enhanced communion with God and an opportunity for spiritual growth.

At the same time, the Orthodox Church parts with those members of the medical profession and others who refuse to acknowledge the inevitability of physical death and advocate the use of «extraordinary measures», at whatever material and psychological cost, to keep a patient alive when there is no hope of restoration to a meaningful; functional existence. The Church which prays for the «quick and painless death» (Prayer for the Separation of Soul and Body) of the terminally-ill patient, considers this kind of treatment not only a poor use of scarce medical resources, but a denial of the will of God.

We must remember, of course, that there are no final, clear-cut answers: today's «extraordinary measures» fast become tomorrow's regular life-saving procedures. And any life-death decisions to withhold treatment must be considered on an individual case by case basis in consultation with the patient or his next of kin, his physician and spiritual advisor.

An Important Distinction

The Church, therefore, distinguishes between euthanasia and the withholding of extraordinary means to prolong life unable to sustain itself. It affirms the sanctity of human life and man's God-given responsibility to preserve life. But it rejects an attitude which disregards the inevitability of physical death. The only «good death» for the Orthodox Christian is the peaceful acceptance of the end of his or her earthly life with faith and trust in God and the promise of the Resurrection.

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