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## Euthanasia and the Catholic Church

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## **Catholic Church in England & Wales**

### **Euthanasia and the Catholic Church**

#### **Definition**

The word 'euthanasia' comes from two Greek words whose literal meaning is "well death". Today it is also referred to as "mercy killing" and is understood as causing or bringing about a person's death painlessly, usually because the person is suffering greatly, terminally or irreversibly ill or severely mentally or physically disabled. It means doing something (or omitting to do something) with the intention of causing death: the intention is a very important element.

#### **History**

While presumably mercy killing has been practised throughout history and in different cultures, attempts to make it legal have been made only fairly recently. In England in 1936 the Voluntary Euthanasia Society sponsored a bill in the House of Lords for the legalisation of euthanasia. The bill was defeated, and similar attempts have also failed.

In 1940 the Catholic Church officially condemned the administering of euthanasia to a person with physical or mental defects or for economic or racial reasons. The Church has repeated its opposition many times since then.

#### **The Church's position: the right to life**

The Church's opposition to euthanasia is founded on the principle that all human life is sacred, and no-one has the right to take that life - there are exceptional circumstances when the Church would accept that life might be taken deliberately, but these are only self-defence and capital punishment. Even in the case of capital punishment, however, the Church would argue that there would appear to be very few cases when some other sort of punishment might not be found as an alternative to capital punishment.

The position was stated most recently in the Pope's Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae* (Latin for "The Gospel of Life") of March 1995.

The document takes as one of its starting points what it calls "the incomparable value of every human person"(EV n. 2). This means that each human life is to be valued from its very beginning (which the Church regards as the moment of conception) to the moment of natural death. Nobody has the right to take that life from another person, even if the person has appeared to give consent. Since it would be premeditated killing, the pope says that (depending on the circumstances) it is the same as murder.

The pope suggests that a prevailing tendency today sees life as something that should bring pleasure and well-being, and that suffering is seen as a setback that people cannot accept. In this case death becomes a 'liberation' from suffering. He also speaks of a culture which sees people in terms of their 'productivity' or efficiency: when people grow old they then become a burden on society and so their lives lose their value.

### **Euthanasia and the treatment of the dying**

The Church makes an important distinction between euthanasia and what it calls "aggressive medical treatment" to prolong the life of a terminally-ill person. Sometimes a person's life can be prolonged for a short period by medical treatment. If, however, that treatment is both costly (in terms of resources) and distressing for the patient (and family), it may be judged better to allow the patient to die naturally. Clearly, nothing can be done that will deliberately cause or hasten the death of the patient. In all cases ordinary medical treatment (especially pain-relief) should be continued.

In some cases, the use of large doses of pain-killers can actually bring on or speed up the death of the patient. Pope Pius XII in 1957 said that it is acceptable to relieve pain with drugs even if this leads to lower levels of consciousness and accelerated death. He did stress that it is not right to deprive people of consciousness without good reason, because people need to be able to respond to others, especially family, and (if they are religious) prepare themselves to meet God.

There is an important point to be made here with regard to what 'medical treatment' means. In some cases of what is called 'persistent vegetative state' (PVS), patients have had not only medical treatment but also food and water withdrawn from them. This of course leads to their death. The Church would not accept that food and water are medicine, and to withdraw this basic ordinary sustenance is effectively to kill someone by starving them to death.

### **Consent**

It is argued sometimes that the patient's own consent or request for euthanasia should be the most important consideration. There is a serious risk, however, that if people say while they are healthy that they want to be 'put to sleep' if ever they become a burden etc. they might actually feel very differently about it when they are in that condition; the problem is all the more difficult if they are no longer able to communicate their wishes clearly. Similarly, if I am in great pain or suffering from mental problems, for example, I am not in a position to make a free and balanced decision.

Decisions left in the hands of doctors or relatives are very risky also. It might not always be clear that relatives or doctors are always acting in the patients' best interests. A doctor may be waiting for an organ for a transplant, for instance, or for a bed to become free, and relatives may simply wish to be relieved of the burden of an ill member of the family.

Consent alone, however, would never justify the taking of another person's life.

There have been recent examples of people that have been diagnosed as PVS (see above), and when doctors have been able to communicate with them and ask them if they want to live, the answer 'yes' has come back clearly. This has led to calls for more research into PVS.

