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Euthanasia & Assisted Suicide

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Euthanasia & Assisted Suicide

Principles

Life is a gift from God that should be respected and protected through all of its stages. Care for the sick and the elderly is part of God's call for Christians. Palliative care and emotional support are appropriate responses to those who suffer from terminal diseases or are near death. We must not abandon those in need. However, we must not deliberately bring about their death even for compassionate reasons.

The Issue

As medical technology allows people to live longer, the questions of when and how life should end become more complicated. Many people do not want machines to keep them alive, particularly if they are in pain. However, there is a difference between a patient refusing medical treatment and the infliction of death on one who would otherwise be alive.

Assisted suicide is counseling or helping someone to commit suicide. Euthanasia is deliberately killing someone by action or omission, with or without that person's consent, for compassionate reasons. It is not euthanasia to refuse or discontinue medical treatment or give drugs to relieve pain and suffering, even if an unintended effect is to shorten life.

Current Status

Euthanasia is considered murder under the *Criminal Code*. While the offender's intention to murder is relevant for determining what charges are laid and what sentence is given, the motive for the offence (e.g. compassion, anger, greed) is not taken into consideration. Consent to death does not affect the criminal responsibility of the one who inflicts death. Counseling or assisting a suicide is also prohibited in the *Criminal Code*.

The Special Senate Committee on Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide held extensive hearings across Canada and recommended in its June 1995 report that euthanasia and assisted suicide remain criminal offences. In a five-year review of the report, released in June 2000, the committee strongly endorsed palliative care and called for national standards.

In January 2001, the Supreme Court of Canada released its decision in the case of Robert Latimer, a Saskatchewan farmer convicted of second degree murder in the death of his disabled daughter. Mr. Latimer argued, among other things, that he should have been able to argue the defence of necessity before the lower court, essentially that he had no choice but to kill his daughter Tracy. The Court was unanimous in upholding Mr. Latimer's conviction and sentence.