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## Pastoral Guidelines: church positions regarding the sanctity of human life

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## **PASTORAL GUIDELINES: CHURCH POSITIONS REGARDING THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE**

**Rev. Dr. Stanley S. Harakas**

### **THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE**

A major and overarching concern of the Church arises with its commitment to the God-given sanctity of human life. Some of the developments of the biological manipulation of human life, though promising amazing therapeutic achievements, may also be understood and undermining respect for the integrity of human existence. Others may be seen as providing a new means of healing human illness. Discerning the difference is the challenge the Church faces in developing its teaching on these newly appearing issues.

### **HUMAN LIFE**

The Church's teaching about human life is based on Holy Tradition, including the Scriptures as a primary resource and the ongoing teaching and interpretation of the Orthodox Faith. Life is a gift of God in the formation of the created world. All life is precious, but God uniquely creates human life in the "image and likeness of God." Human life as such is deserving of deep respect and individual human beings are to be treated in accordance to their inherent human dignity.

Thus, racism, unjust prejudicial treatment of men and women, genocide, forms of sexual exploitation, domestic violence, child abuse, rape, theft or destruction of legitimately owned property, deceptions and deceit, environmental plunder and other such manipulative behaviors violate the human dignity of others. Human life as a gift of God should be respected. Some specific issues are the following.

### **DONATION OF ORGANS**

Although nothing in the Orthodox tradition requires the faithful to donate their organs to others, never the less, this practice may be considered an act of love, and as such is encouraged. The decision to donate a duplicate organ, such as a kidney, while the donor is living, requires much consideration and should be made in consultation with medical professionals and one's spiritual father. The donation of an organ from a deceased person is also an act of love that helps to make possible for the recipient a longer, fuller life. Such donations are acceptable if the deceased donor had willed such action, or if surviving relatives permit it providing that it was in harmony with the desires of the deceased. Such actions can be approved as an expression of love and if they express the self-determination of the donor. In all cases, respect for the body of the donor should be maintained.

Organ transplants should never be commercialized nor coerced nor take place without proper consent, nor place in jeopardy the identity of the donor or recipient, such as the use of animal organs. Nor should the death of the donor be hastened in order to harvest organs for transplantation to another person.

## **CREMATION**

Because the Orthodox Faith affirms the fundamental goodness of creation, it understands the body to be an integral part of the human person and the temple of the Holy Spirit, and expects the resurrection of the dead. The Church considers cremation to be the deliberate desecration and destruction of what God has made and ordained for us. The Church instead insists that the body be buried so that the natural physical process of decomposition may take place. The Church does not grant funerals, either in the sanctuary, or at the funeral home, or at any other place, to persons who have chosen to be cremated. Additionally, memorial services with kolyva (boiled wheat) are not allowed in such instances, inasmuch as the similarity between the "kernel of wheat" and the "body" has been intentionally destroyed.

## **MEDICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND THE CHURCH**

With high frequency, new developments in the area of the life sciences appear in our technologically advanced culture. The Church welcomes efforts and techniques that contribute to healing of human diseases. Yet, many of these advances raise moral questions. Some of the Church's responses to these developments are based on older issues for which the Church has clear and unambiguous guidelines. Other responses are not so evident.

Thus, many of these developments form challenges to Orthodox Christian spiritual concerns and moral values. In numerous cases, the Church is still in the process of clarifying its response. The following serve to indicate the general positions and direction of thought in the Orthodox Church.

## **SEXUALITY**

The Orthodox Church recognizes marriage as the only moral and spiritually appropriate context for sexual relations. Thus, all other forms of sexual activity such as fornication, adultery, homosexuality, lesbianism, pornography, all forms of prostitution, and similar forms of behavior are sins that are inappropriate for the Orthodox Christian. Marriage is only conducted and recognized in the Orthodox Church as taking place between a man and a woman. Same-sex marriages are a contradiction in terms. The Orthodox Church does not allow for same-sex marriages.

## **ABORTION**

The Church from the very beginning of existence has sought to protect "the life in the womb" and has considered abortion as a form of murder in its theology and canons. Orthodox Christians are admonished not to encourage women to have abortions, nor to assist in the committing of abortion. Those who perform

abortions and those who have sought it are doing an immoral deed, and are called to repentance.

## **SUICIDE**

Suicide, the taking of one's own life, is self-murder and as such, a sin. More importantly, it may be evidence of a lack of faith in our loving, forgiving, sustaining God. If a person has committed suicide as a result of a belief that: such an action is rationally or ethically defensible, the Orthodox Church denies that person a Church funeral, because such beliefs and actions separate a person from the community of faith. The Church shows compassion, however, on those who have taken their own life as a result of mental illness or severe emotional stress, when a condition of impaired rationality can be verified by a physician.

## **AUTOPSY**

When a person dies for reasons that are uncertain, a qualified medical examiner may, with the permission of the next of kin, perform an autopsy to determine the cause of death. In some states, this is required by law. In all cases, however, the Orthodox Church expects that the body of the deceased be treated with respect and dignity.

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