

A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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Responding to MAiD with the Joy of the Gospel of Life

by Derek McEachen and Sister Nuala Kenny*

Sensitivity Notice:

This monograph, which addresses Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) in Canada through a Catholic lens, is intended for Catholic educators. The sensitive nature of “end-of-life” content may elicit strong emotions and memories for some people; therefore, attentiveness to the well-being of individuals as they encounter this topic is important. The purpose of this monograph is to lay out the reality of MAiD in Canada at present, to help educators engage with Church teaching in this area, and to support educators, especially in the senior Religious Education classes, to present lessons in all areas that intersect with this topic, such as human dignity, palliative care, value of life from conception to natural death, as well as MAiD/euthanasia.

Clarification of terms

“Assisted dying can take two forms: euthanasia or assisted suicide. Broadly, **euthanasia** describes the situation where the person who is asking for assistance to die has someone else take the action that leads to their unnatural death (like injecting a lethal drug), and **assisted suicide** is when the person is prescribed drugs that they must take themselves in order to die... However, it is important to note that “[b]oth practices are distinct from the withdrawal or withholding of life-sustaining treatment in accord with accepted ethical and medical standards’.” ([Maxim Institute](#))

A Time for Reflection on the Medicalization of Death

Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) has been rapidly normalized in Canada as “death with dignity” and compassionate care.¹ Even many practising Catholics believe it is acceptable. Although the inclusion of mental illness as the sole condition has been delayed for political reasons, if ultimately approved, Canada will have the most liberal medically assisted death policy in the world.

In Catholic schools, especially in secondary school Religious Education classes, students have ongoing questions about the Catholic view of MAiD. Some people in Catholic school communities know a person, even a beloved family member, who has contemplated or received assisted suicide or euthanasia. Catholic educators may seek support in addressing this difficult topic while they themselves have questions, thoughts, and concerns. The Catholic community regularly pauses to reflect, and this monograph offers some content for such a moment of reflection.

Jesus’s Witness to Suffering

At the core of our faith is the person of Jesus, and it is “the Catholic way” to turn to our Lord Jesus for insight and direction. This is especially true when confronting the deeply human struggle with suffering.

Jesus's journey from Gethsemane to the cross is a model of the acceptance of suffering as a way to God. Nailed to the cross and in great pain, Jesus's final hours allow us to understand the sign of dying on the cross as a free, active process as well as a clear and compelling sign of God's unconditional love for us.

Catholics are called to enter the Paschal Mystery with Jesus who paid the price for our salvation through his suffering and death. This calls for rejection of the medicalization of death. It demands instead support from a faith-filled and evangelizing community which "... gets involved by word and deed in people's lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. An evangelizing community is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be."²

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A Look at the Legislation

On a Charter of Rights and Freedoms Challenge, on February 6, 2015, the Supreme Court of Canada decriminalized medically assisted death for competent adults with a "grievous medical condition (including an illness, disease or disability); that is *irremediable* (cannot be relieved by means acceptable to the individual); and causes *enduring suffering* that is intolerable to the individual in the circumstances of his or her condition."

The judgment promised protection of vulnerable persons as well as protection of conscience for practitioners and facilities. Experience reveals failure of protection of the most vulnerable, and free choice for the person seeking medical assistance in dying but not for practitioners or institutions.

On February 23, 2024, the Canadian Human Rights Commission acknowledged that many individuals have opted for MAiD because of lack of services.³

The covering message of the Minister of Health for the 2023 annual review of the legislation recognizes that "Laws must reflect Canadians' needs, protect the vulnerable, and support their autonomy and free choice."⁴ However, regulations require a clinician's active participation, including ensuring persons are informed of MAiD as an option to relieve suffering. Practitioners who are unable or unwilling to participate must "complete an effective transfer of care."⁵ This has created a crisis of conscience for Catholic doctors.

Medically assisted death is also a profound disruption of the Hippocratic tradition where doctors pledged never to "give a deadly drug to anybody, even if asked."⁶ This was compatible with the emerging Christian moral tradition. This moral core has been rejected as medicine has become commercialized and commodified.

Catholic Church Teaching

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter *Samaritanus bonus* has identified cultural obstacles to a *good death*, including a false understanding of compassion and a growing individualism.⁷ Christians have traditionally prepared for a *good death* through the *ars moriendi*, the art of dying. It depended on a shared faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus along with family and community for care.⁸ We now live in post-Christendom society where laws are no longer founded in Christian spiritual and moral beliefs. Historically, we pondered the meaning of death and the afterlife.⁹ Today, many fear the process of dying because it is no longer a natural, family and community event. We also live in a world where technology is used in the hope of relieving suffering and finding happiness in all aspects of life.

In the face of these shifts in society, the Church has provided consoling and supportive teaching. The Catechism of the Catholic Church establishes:

“Life and physical health are precious gifts entrusted to us by God. We must take reasonable care of them, taking into account the needs of others and the common good.”¹⁰

In 2009, Pope Benedict affirmed: “Euthanasia is a false solution to the drama of suffering, a solution unworthy of man. Indeed, the true response cannot be to put someone to death, however ‘kindly’, but rather to witness to the love that helps people to face their pain and agony in a human way.”¹¹ The empathic and respectful response of caregivers is essential.¹²

With respect to DNR (Do Not Resuscitate) orders, Pope John Paul II clarified: “To forgo extraordinary and/or disproportionate means is not the equivalent of suicide or euthanasia; it rather expresses acceptance of the human condition in the face of death.”¹³

Many people consider assisted death because of a perceived loss of dignity in serious illness and dependence on others for care. Our faith teaches that dignity is an inherent quality of the children of God, not an attribute lost in weakness. It is rooted in our creation “*in the image of God*” (Genesis 1:26-27) and is sustained by our belief that “[t]he dignity of man (*sic*) rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God.”¹⁴

As disciples of our compassionate Lord, we must hear the cries of those who consider MAiD because of inadequate pain and symptom control, feelings of loss of dignity, guilt at being a burden to others, loneliness and loss of meaning. Catholics are called to respond with spiritual and practical support for patients and families as they deal with death and dying. Pope Francis has affirmed:

*Palliative care is an expression of the properly human attitude of taking care of one another, especially of those who suffer. It bears witness that the human person is always precious, even if marked by age and sickness. ...The human person, in fact, in whatever circumstance, is a good in and of himself and for others, and is loved by God. For this reason, when life becomes very fragile and the end of the earthly existence approaches, we feel the responsibility to assist and accompany the person in the best way.*¹⁵

Canada has been a leader in palliative care.¹⁶ The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has an excellent educational program on palliative care.¹⁷ Every effort must be made to ensure this care to all seriously ill and dying patients.

Catechesis and the Role of Ontario's Catholic Schools

In our current context, faith formation for all Canadian Catholics could include these next steps:

- engage in spiritual formation centered in the Paschal Mystery;
- promote discernment in recognizing the devastating consequences to the poor and marginalized, mentally ill and disabled;
- increase understanding of the fragility of free choice and the ways guilt at being a burden to family, along with fear, loss of meaning, and lack of options compromise freedom and voluntariness;
- heighten attention to the formation and protection of a Catholic conscience;
- develop effective political advocacy to resist inclusion of mental illness as the sole criterion for a medically assisted death.

In Catholic schools, tasks for catechesis with respect to promoting the protection of human life from conception until natural death are connected to religious education: “The aim of catechesis, or handing on the Gospel message, is maturity: spiritual, liturgical, sacramental and apostolic... [A] school can and must play its specific role in the work of catechesis.”¹⁸

It is important that Catholic educators know that responding to such cultural challenges as MAiD is participation in both religious education and catechesis, and finds support in the very identity of the Catholic school and the mission of the Church.

“In a world mesmerized by materialism, with a declining respect for life, Pope Francis calls us to the transcendence of divine love.”¹⁹ In *Renewing the Promise* the bishops of Ontario remind us of the words of Saint Pope John Paul II and affirms that amidst “this social turmoil, young people... are searching for a firm place - a high ground - on which to stand. They seek a

sense of direction, a goal which will give meaning and purpose to their lives.”

As the cultural phenomenon of MAiD continues to challenge the authentic dignity of human persons who are made in the image of God, Catholic educators are called to respond with the joy of the Gospel of Life.

The Gospel tells us where the high ground is to be found. It is beside our Lord, sharing in his strength and love, responding eagerly and generously to his challenge to love and serve him, as he has loved and served us. Who can show young people the way to that secure place, to that dynamic and fulfilling life, better than the teachers to whom they look for guidance? No one else will ever be where you are. No one else will ever have the opportunity you have to accompany students in the search for truth, to foster in them a thirst for justice, and an appreciation of the goodness of God, to lead them patiently and lovingly in their journey of faith.²⁰

Notes

The Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute has a number of excellent articles on this issue. See the November 2024 Newsletter <https://bit.ly/ccbi-nov> and more at www.ccbi-utoronto.ca.

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Reflection Questions

1. In a culture of diverse values, how can we share with others the spiritually rich path the Church offers – to become a loving transformative community that accompanies people in their meaningful suffering which we help to alleviate while fundamentally supporting life?
2. Pope Francis has warned against a throwaway culture, which includes using people for as long as they are useful. What steps can we take especially for the most vulnerable in our society, so they might never feel discarded, unwelcome, or a troublesome burden?
3. How might we support students in exploring and critiquing elements of the throwaway culture?

*Sister Nuala Kenny

After a 34-year career in paediatrics, Dr. Nuala Patricia Kenny founded the Department of Bioethics of Dalhousie University. She has received the Order of Canada and seven Honorary Doctorates. Author of over one hundred and eighty papers and five books, ongoing research includes clergy sexual abuse and pandemic ethics.

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Ontario Institute for Catholic Education
44 Hunt Street, Suite 2F Hamilton, Ontario, L8R 3R1

office@iceont.ca
www.iceont.ca

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