NEW IN 2025

Institute for Catholic Education

Understanding Medical Assistance in Dying from a Catholic Perspective

Extended Lessons for Students in Grade 12 in Catholic Schools

extension of ***Exploring Palliative Care from a Catholic Perspective (2022)***

Table of Contents

BEFORE YOU BEGIN 3

LESSONS

Lesson One 5

Lesson Two 12

APPENDICES

Curriculum Expectations 17

Quotes from Chapter 1 - Handout / Reproducible 18

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

These lessons are an extension of the 2022 lessons for students in Grade 12 in Catholic schools titled *Exploring Palliative Care from a Catholic Perspective* (which draw from material from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops' resource *Horizons of Hope: A Toolkit for Catholic Parishes on Palliative Care*).

Given the shifting situation in Canada regarding Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) in 2024, the following lessons were specifically designed for use in the Ontario Grade 12 Religious Education course: Church and Culture (University/College). They may be used independent of or in conjunction with the lessons provided in the *Exploring Palliative Care from a Catholic Perspective resource*.

The topic of MAiD can be very personal, affecting families directly. The purpose of these resources and lessons is to express the reality of MAiD in Canada, help educators engage with Church teaching, and support educators, especially in the senior RE 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.

Following the two lessons, the Archdiocese of Toronto has provided a brochure that addresses two major questions: *Why Palliative Care? Why not MAiD?*

Many dioceses offer a variety of resources on this topic. Check with your local diocese for further information.

SENSITIVITY NOTICE

Sensitivity to each learner's needs, especially with difficult topics, is important. Teachers are encouraged to reflect on lesson materials ahead of time and prepare to support students who may struggle with the content.

"The sensitive nature of 'end-of-life' may elicit strong emotions and memories for some students. Be attentive to the emotional well-being of individuals. It may be useful to clarify some norms for conversation before engaging in group discussions. Advise students that they may excuse themselves from conversations or content that might be triggering, and that they need not share any personal stories or accounts. Alert school staff, such as the school Social Worker or Youth Counsellors, that students may require support." (*Exploring Palliative Care from a Catholic Perspective*)

CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

Medical assistance in 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)

TIMING

There are two lessons outlined in this supplement. Due to the reliance on group discussion throughout, you may want to extend the activity over three days.

LESSON ONE

This lesson gives students an opportunity to consider:

- what dignity is through a Catholic lens of faith and reason;
- some background regarding medically assisted death in North America;
- what the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches about euthanasia.

NOTE: Curriculum Expectations for both lessons are listed at the back of this resource.

RESOURCES:

- a four-part framework for recording notes (see example provided in lesson)
- video clip: Human Dignity in Catholic Tradition (running time 4:38) – Through a Catholic perspective this video explores a fourfold meaning regarding human dignity in connection to the common good: affirmation of inherent human worth; a consequence of choices and circumstances; a moral measure; and a shorthand for Christian beliefs and attitudes about the human person.
- video: Turning the Tide: Dignity, Compassion, and Euthanasia (2007). This Salt + Light video is provided in four chapters for use throughout the lesson.

BEGIN THE LESSON

Begin with an opening prayer, such as the one suggested below.

Let us pray. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Lord God, giver of life, you call us to bear witness to the authentic dignity of all human persons, as each of us is made in your image. May these words of thanksgiving be a joyful noise to you. May your divine joy be in us, so that we may deeply respect and show gratitude for human life in all its stages.

Psalm 100: A Psalm of Thanksgiving
Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.
Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations. Amen.

MINDS ON 10 minutes

Have students create a four-part framework for recording notes during this lesson.

Main Points - interesting and/or important information and ideas	**Key Words**
	Questions for higher-order thinking
Summary	

Have students explore the concept of dignity by first writing a non-dictionary definition of their own in the Main Points section of their four-part note. Then have students compare their definition to the secular and the Catholic definitions (below), which may be recorded on the board or chart paper or projected.

> A secular view of dignity: "freedom and power to run your own life"
>
> A Catholic view of dignity: in *Dignitatis Infinita* dignity is expressed as being "created in the image of God …to possess a sacred value … Every human being is loved and willed by God and, thus, has an inviolable dignity."

Have students prepare to watch a brief video about human dignity by asking them to record, in the Main Points section of their four-part note, new thoughts and information about the concept of dignity as they view.

Watch the video Human Dignity in Catholic Tradition (running time 4:38).

ACTION 50 minutes or more

In the Video Segments outlined below, students will watch the **four chapters** of the online version of the Salt and Light Media video from 2007, Turning the Tide: Dignity, Compassion, and Euthanasia (total running time is just under 30 minutes – link to video chapters here).

As each chapter ends students may respond to the designated questions through a think/pair/share with an elbow partner, followed by a large group share and discussion.

Since this video was created, Canada has seen the legalization of MAiD. This video is intended to provide background and context to where we are today. Prior to viewing the video, the teacher may choose to share this information with students regarding where Canada's government is on the issue in 2024/2025:

https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/news/2024/02/the-government-of-canada-introduces-legislation-to-delay-medical-assistance-in-dying-expansion-by-3-years.html

While viewing the videos, students will also add to the Main Points of their four-part note several key points from the video that they consider to be important for young people to wrestle with in our current time.

WATCH CHAPTER 1 appx. 8 minutes

Following the video, provide the handout with selected quotes to assist students with this first discussion question (see back page of this package).

QUESTION 1: Which quotes below from Chapters 1 most powerfully support the view that "medical assistance in dying" is not good for individuals or society? Explain your thoughts.

The opening quote from Mark Pickup, Founder of Human Life Matters Canada is "People do not generally die with any more dignity than they lived with. Dignity is not injected into somebody's blood stream when they are at their lowest point."

QUESTION 2: Is it dignity that is promoted when euthanasia (e.g., deadly chemicals injected into the bloodstream) is given to a person? Explain your thoughts.

WATCH CHAPTER 2 appx. 8 minutes

Consider the lives of the people mentioned in this section (or earlier in the film): Catharine Frazee, Bobby Schindler, Terri Schiavo, Wesley Smith, Karen Dieleman, Adrian Dieleman, Reg Hancock, Jean Echlin, and others.

QUESTION 3: Knowing that persons in this film are opposed to MAiD, but in favour of palliative care (a medical caregiving approach aimed at optimizing quality of life and mitigating suffering among people with serious, complex, and often terminal illnesses), which of these peoples' lives or ideas impact you the most and why?

WATCH CHAPTER 3 appx. 4 minutes

Several points are made regarding autonomy and safeguards. Autonomy refers to people in society being able to make up their own minds (be autonomous) regarding access to euthanasia. Safeguards can refer to limits placed by society on who can access euthanasia.

QUESTION 4: Do you agree with Catherine Frazee that individual autonomy "should not be able to trump the safety and well-being of society"? Why or why not?

QUESTION 5: If autonomy is all important, how do safeguards (preventing some but not all people from accessing euthanasia) make sense, since they get in the way of autonomy?

In this chapter, consider two items:

- the introductory quote from the British Medical Association in the year 2000: "Legalizing euthanasia would mark a fundamental change in the doctor-patient relationship where patients will have to wonder whether … 'the physician coming into my hospital room is wearing the white coat of the healer … or the black hood of the executioner.'"
- the case studies presented to this point

QUESTION 6: Considering the case studies and what you know about MAiD, does the British Medical Association have a point? Explain your thoughts.

WATCH CHAPTER 4 appx. 7 minutes

QUESTION 7: Are there any statistics you find to be surprising and/or problematic? Explain your thoughts. Remember, these statistics are from 2007. NOTE: The Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute is a good source for the current statistics.

After film is shown consider the following two questions that are adapted from the Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation Discussion Guide: Turning the Tide – Dignity, Compassion and Euthanasia):

QUESTION 8: Why should we not leave [good end-of-life care] to the health care experts and politicians to decide?

QUESTION 9: What role can we play, with respect both to our moral obligation to care for incapacitated persons and also to our civic obligation to protect vulnerable under the law?

Related film question in a more recent context:
The Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute, which has many good Canadian Catholic resources regarding MAiD, provided an encouraging news update in November 2024 indicating that a "recent survey in Canada revealed that the majority of people in British Columbia think Catholic and other health care facilities should be able to reject euthanasia on their premises."

QUESTION 10: What should Canadian Catholics continue to do to protect those who are most vulnerable in Catholic health facilities (e.g. the unborn, the elderly, those who are ill, those who need palliative care, etc.) in order to build a culture of life in Canada?

Post the three questions below on the board, chart paper, or screen. Have students engage in a Three for Three activity to develop thoughts in response to the video: Form a group of three. For Question 1, hear each group member say an answer. Vote on the best answer to share with the class. Record the answer on paper. *Repeat for Questions 2 and 3.*

Question 1: Theists often believe that only God has authority to rightfully bring an end to a human life, since God created that human life (i.e., authored the soul-body that each of us is). Is the view of theists reasonable? Explain.

Question 2: Why might people believe that pain medication, palliative care and positive community presence are together the best way to support those who are suffering before they die naturally?

Question 3: Though this video was created in 2007, before Medical Assistance in Dying was legalized in Canada, how does it reveal the importance of continuing to work together to improve laws to reflect God's will for human beings?

Circulate among the groups to assess student understanding in group conversations. Collect the written answers from each group (three written answers in total) and choose answers that will lead to a beneficial large group discussion. (If necessary, this discussion might extend to another day in class.) During the teacher-led large group discussion, students might add insights to their four-part note. Note that the answers provided by groups may serve as a diagnostic assessment, helping the teacher to know what understandings may need more attention.

CONSOLIDATION

 10 minutes

Present the following paragraphs from the Catechism of the Catholic Church on a handout or projected on a screen. Have students write a summary of these paragraphs in the Summary section of their four-part note. (Students may collaborate as they formulate a summary.)

Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraphs concerning euthanasia:

2278 Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate; it is the refusal of "over-zealous" treatment. Here one does not will to cause death; one's inability to impede it is merely accepted. The decisions should be made by the patient if he is competent and able or, if not, by those legally entitled to act for the patient, whose reasonable will and legitimate interests must always be respected.

2279 Even if death is thought imminent, the ordinary care owed to a sick person cannot be legitimately interrupted. The use of painkillers to alleviate the sufferings of the dying, even at the risk of shortening their days, can be morally in conformity with human dignity if death is not willed as either an end or a means, but only foreseen and tolerated as inevitable. Palliative care is a special form of disinterested charity. As such it should be encouraged.

Have students complete the Key Terms and Questions for higher order thinking sections of their four-part note. This note may then be handed in for informal assessment.

Students may use higher order thinking question stems/cue questions to help them generate higher order thinking questions. Note also that students need not write answers to these questions.

CONCLUDE THE LESSON

with a prayer, such as the following prayer for the elderly:

Heavenly Father,
We lift our hearts to you in prayer for our cherished elderly,
the bearers of tradition, wisdom, and faith.
In your infinite wisdom, you have given them the gift of years,
and we thank you for the life, experiences,
and blessings they have shared with us.
Bless them, Lord, with comfort in times of loneliness,
strength in weakness, and peace in their hearts.
May your love surround them, your grace uplift them,
and your mercy reassure them of their invaluable worth in your eyes and ours.
Grant them, O Lord, a renewal of hope and joy in their days.
Let their wisdom guide the younger generations,
and their faith inspire us all to walk closer with you.
Provide them with the compassion and care they deserve,
and help us to honour and support them in their golden years.
May we be your hands and feet, reflecting your love through acts of kindness,
patience, and understanding.
We ask for your blessings upon them,
that they may continue to be a light for us and for the world.
We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, Father,
and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Source: https://brisbanecatholic.org.au/articles/lets-pray-honouring-wisdom-and-grace-a-prayer-for-the-elderly/

OPTIONAL HOMEWORK TASK

Have students respond to the following questions on a slip of paper for submission at the beginning of the next class as an entrance ticket.

What are the two most important things you learned from today's lesson?
What higher order thinking question from your four-part note was your most important question? Why?

LESSON TWO

This lesson gives students an opportunity to consider:

- what mercy is;
- how the issue of medically assisted death has evolved in North America;
- what the Church teaches about euthanasia.

RESOURCES:

- a four-part framework for recording notes (see example provided in lesson)
- Matthew Kelly video: What is Mercy? (running time 1:56) – This video explores how "the mercy of God is much more than an act of pardon or the cancellation of punishment. It is more dynamic than the passivity of looking the other way. It is intimate and deeply personal."
- Bishop Barron video: The Rise of Euthanasia (2024) (from 3:24 to 26:50 – running time 23 ½ minutes) – This video explores alarming trends concerning the rise of euthanasia in the United States and Canada. The video was made just before Canada decided to postpone loosening restrictions so that people could choose euthanasia not only to avoid pain and suffering in the face of terminal disease, but simply for mental health reasons.

BEGIN THE LESSON

Begin with an opening prayer, such as the one suggested below.

Let us pray. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Creator God, you call us to open our hearts to authentic mercy for all human persons, as each of us is made in your image and each of us needs your loving mercy. Help us to know through Psalm 139 that we can always trust you and rely on your mercy, as you know us with the greatest depth and love:

Psalm 139:13-18: The Inescapable God
For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you. Amen.

MINDS ON 10 minutes

As in the previous lesson, have students create a four-part framework for recording notes during this lesson.

Main Points - interesting and/or important information and ideas	**Key Words**
	Questions for higher-order thinking
Summary	

Have students define mercy by first writing a non-dictionary definition of their own in the Main Points section of their four-part note. Then have students compare their definition to the secular and the Catholic definitions (below), which may be recorded on the board or chart paper or projected.

> a secular view of mercy: "showing kindness and leniency when not necessary"
>
> a Catholic view of mercy: in *Misericordiae Vultus* mercy is expressed as "the bridge that connects God and [humankind], opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness."

Have students prepare to watch a brief video by asking them to record, in the Main Points section of their four-part note, new thoughts and information about the concept of mercy as they watch.

Watch the Matthew Kelly video: What is Mercy? (running time 1:56).

ACTION

50 minutes or more

You may introduce Bishop Robert Barron, possibly using information from https://www.wordonfire.org/about/bishop-robert-barron/.

Have students watch the video, The Rise of Euthanasia (2024) (from 3:24 to 26:50 – running time 23 ½ minutes).

While viewing the video, students will add to the Main Points of their four-part note several key points that they consider to be important for young people to wrestle with in our current time.

Following the video, post the three questions below on the board, chart paper, or screen. Have students engage in a Three for Three activity to develop thoughts in response to the video:

> Form a group of three. For Question 1, hear each group member say an answer. Vote on the best answer to share with the class. Record the answer on paper. *Repeat for Questions 2 and 3.*

Question 1: Pope Benedict XVI maintained that history "has demonstrated the absurdities to which [humankind] descends when he excludes God from the horizon of [our] choices and actions". What does it mean for a culture to exclude God from the horizon of our choices?

Question 2: Why do you think some people believe that our bodies are completely our own to do whatever we want, while Christians maintain that we are accountable to God for how we use our bodies? Explain.

Question 3: While the Catholic Church supports palliative care (providing relief from symptoms of serious illness) instead of medical assistance in dying, could both be considered good moral choices? Explain.

Circulate among the groups to assess student understanding in group conversations. Collect the written answers from each group (three written answers in total) and choose answers that will lead to a beneficial large group discussion. (If necessary, this discussion might extend to another day in class.) During the teacher-led large group discussion, students might add insights to their four-part note. Note that the answers provided by groups may serve as a diagnostic assessment, helping the teacher to know what understandings may need more attention.

CONSOLIDATION 10 minutes

Present the following paragraphs from the Catechism of the Catholic Church and from The Gospel of Life, Pope John Paul II on a handout or projected on a screen. Have students write a summary of these paragraphs in the Summary section of their four-part note. (Students may collaborate as they formulate a summary.)

Catechism of the Catholic Church concerning euthanasia:

2276 Those whose lives are diminished or weakened deserve special respect. Sick or handicapped persons should be helped to lead lives as normal as possible.

52 *Evangelium Vitae* - The Gospel of Life, John Paul II, 1995 concerning the gift of life: The Gospel of life is both a great gift of God and an exacting task for humanity. It gives rise to amazement and gratitude in the person graced with freedom, and it asks to be welcomed, preserved and esteemed, with a deep sense of responsibility. In giving life to humankind, God demands that he love, respect and promote life. The gift thus becomes a commandment, and the commandment is itself a gift.

Have students complete the Key Terms and Questions for higher order thinking sections of their four-part note. This note may then be handed in for informal assessment.

Students may use higher order thinking question stems/cue questions to help them generate higher order thinking questions. Note also that students need not write answers to these questions.

CONCLUDE THE LESSON

with a prayer, such as the following prayer for respect for life:

Almighty God,
giver of all that is good, we thank you for the precious gift of human life:
For life in the womb, coming from your creative power,
For the life of children, making us glad with their freshness and promise,
For the life of young people, hoping for a better world,
For the life of people who are disabled in any way, teaching us that every life has value,
For the life of the elderly, witnessing to the ageless values of patience and wisdom.
Like Blessed Mary, may we always say "YES" to Your gift of life.
May we defend it and promote it from conception to its natural end.
And bring us at last, O Father, to the fullness of eternal life in Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.

- adapted from prayer from Archdiocese of Vancouver

OPTIONAL HOMEWORK TASK

Have students respond to the following questions on a slip of paper for submission at the beginning of the next class as an entrance ticket.

What are the two most important things you learned from today's lesson?

What higher order thinking question from your four-part note was your most important question? Why?

See the Archdiocese of Toronto brochure, which addresses two major questions: Why Palliative Care? Why not MAiD?

CURRICULUM EXPECTATIONS

PF3 Faith Lived: Show how the Church's Catholic social teaching recognizes the gifts of diverse cultures, while calling and challenging Christians in their societies to express their true identity in Christ and live their vocation to seek the common good. [CCC nos. 1928-1942]

PF3.3 critique, with theological reflection using Catholic social teaching, some social, political, and economic structures in Western culture [CCC nos. 2234-2246]

CM1 Foundations: show understanding of ethical concepts from the Catholic Tradition as they relate to moral concerns within the Church and contemporary culture (e.g., the meaning of goodness; the problem of evil; the need for gratitude to God to experience deeper joy; the interaction between conscience and natural law; the reality of objective moral truth; the importance of 'self-mastery' in community life); [CCC nos. 1810-1811; 1950-1954]

CM1.4 explain the importance of God's objective moral truth as the loving final authority in formation of conscience, especially within a culture of moral relativism; also explain how we can discover God's objective moral truth, and the double duty of forming and following one's conscience [CCC nos. 1776-1802]

CM3 The Moral Life: Explain how upholding a Catholic understanding of human dignity affects society, by leading people to honour God's image in every human person, and calling them to exercise their gifts in joyful service of others, especially those who are marginalized or have no one to defend their dignity (e.g., persons who are poor, refugees, sick, dying, or unborn). [CCC nos. 1730-1734]

CM3.1 show how our common human dignity is rooted in God (i.e., we are 'imago Dei'), and why our essential qualities (e.g., rationality, free will, natural law, conscience) must be distinguished from accidental qualities (e.g., hair or skin colour, size, cultural background) in order to avoid unjust discrimination based on race, creed, sexual orientation, ability, mental health, etc. [CCC nos. 1700-1715; Aristotle De Anima, Metaphysics Book 7; Pacem in Terris par. 86-89]

CM3.3 evaluate a variety of moral issues in modern culture through a Catholic lens (e.g., religious freedom, unfair wages, substance misuse, bullying, euthanasia, protecting the environment, abortion, unbridled capitalism, premarital sex, capital punishment, just war) using the criteria of object, circumstances, and intention, indicating how good moral acts increase community happiness and wholeness through respect for human dignity [CCC nos. 1749-1761; *Evangelii Gaudium* Chap.4]

QUOTES FROM CHAPTER 1 - HANDOUT

@ 3:49 "If you had to move into it (a disability), you would find ways of accommodating that move; you would find extremely rich surprises that you're not able to perceive from the outside. Of course, you would find losses but there are losses in (your) own life; they don't destroy what's worth living about your own lives. That's what life is – it's a series of losing and finding, losing and finding. There is no need for that process to be interrupted when we're in the midst of the lost cycle, because then we'll get to the found cycle" (Catherine Frazee – Co-Director for the Ryerson Institute for Disability Studies)

@ 4:27 "… what is frightening for me and our family is how we are taking this leap from not wanting to live in a certain condition to, ok, let's do everything we can to kill this person" (Bobby Schindler, brother of Terri Schiavo)

@ 4:50 "Holland now has accepted this protocol which allows for them the euthanasia of disabled infants. Most of these infants tend to be children with spinal bifida", and Daryl @ 4:41 "I'm Daryl Thomas and I had spinal bifida when I was born … the only result that I haven't been able to do as a result of this is have feeling in my toes" (Alex Schadenberg - Director, Euthanasia Prevention Coalition)

@ 5:27 "Physical pain, social, emotional, spiritual pain. They're combined in one person and frequently the spiritual or the emotional might have as much impact on a person's physical pain as their disease." (Jean Echlin, Palliative Care Nurse Consultant)

@ 5:44 "I think of one girl in particular; she came through rehab a number of years ago and has a ton of neuropathic pain – pain that I don't have. She says she remembers the days in the last 6 months when she woke up pain free and it drives her life" (Adrian Dieleman – Counsellor, Hamilton Health Sciences Centre Spinal Cord Injury Rehabilitation Program)

@ 6:45 "Really we've got to listen to that person and their pain experience and just what it's doing to immobilize them … it's comfort care; it's looking at total pain." (Jean)

@ 7:02 – "Why do people want euthanasia? Well, some because the pain is just too horrible. But we can deal with that. We know we can deal with that. And the other is 'I want my personal dignity'. Well, that says something pretty awful about each and every one of us. Why have they lost their sense of dignity? Is it because we have made them feel less than dignified?" (The Honorable Sharon Carstairs, Senator for Manitoba)

@ 8:00 – "a disabled person can be a whole person and can enter into the human family without having to pass a different threshold" (Catherine)

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