

Vatican Reaffirms Stand On the 'Right-to-Die' Issue

Vatican City (RNS) — The Vatican has issued a declaration on euthanasia that affirms the right of patients faced with imminent death to refuse medical treatment that would prolong life in agony.

The document approved by Pope John Paul II defends "the right to die peacefully with human and Christian dignity."

While it emphatically rules out "mercy killing," the direct taking of life to end suffering, it condones not using "disproportionate" medical treatment in the face of death.

It states that "nothing and no one can in any way permit the killing of an innocent human being, whether a fetus, or an embryo, an infant or an adult, an old person, or one suffering from an incurable disease, or a person who is dying."

It continues that "no one is permitted to ask for this act of killing, either for himself or herself or for another person entrusted to his or her care, nor can he or she consent to it, either explicitly or implicitly. Nor can any authority legitimately recommend or permit such an action."

The declaration elaborates on principles to guide doctors and terminally ill patients in the choice of treatment.

In the past Catholic ethicists have relied on a principle, expounded by the late Pope Pius XII, that one need not use "extraordinary means" to prolong life.

While the "principle still holds good," says the declaration issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, it "is less clear today by reason of

the imprecision of the term and the rapid progress made in the treatment of sickness.

"Thus some people prefer to speak of 'proportionate' and 'disproportionate' means," the declaration states.

The declaration cites four "clarifications" to the general principles:

— "If there are not other sufficient remedies," patients may choose advanced, experimental techniques even if they entail risk to life.

— The means might be interrupted, "where the results fall short of expectation." This should be done in consultation with the patient, family, and doctor. It is noted that doctors "may in particular judge that the investment in instruments, and personnel is disproportionate to the results foreseen; they may also judge that the techniques applied impose on the patient strain or suffering out of proportion with the benefits."

— A patient may refuse "a technique which is already in use but which carries a risk or is burdensome. Such a refusal is not the equivalent of suicide; on the contrary, it should be considered as an acceptance of the human condition, or a wish to avoid the application of a medical procedure disproportionate to the results that can be expected, or a desire not to impose excessive expense on the family or the community."

— Faced with imminent, inevitable death, "it is permitted in conscience to take the decision to refuse forms of treatment that would only secure a precarious and burdensome prolongation of life, so long as the normal care due to the sick person in

similar cases is not interrupted."

The congregation said it prepared the declaration because "medicine has increased its capacity to cure and to prolong life which sometimes gives rise to moral problems."

In the United States questions have come to the forefront in the case of Karen Ann Quinlan, who has been in a coma for five years and whose parents, Roman Catholics, sought a New Jersey court order to remove her from a respirator. She lived after it was disconnected. Another major, recent "right to die" case involved another Catholic, Marianist Brother Joseph Fox of New York, whose superiors went to court to remove him from life-sustaining equipment. The 83-year-old brother died before a court gave approval.

In Washington, D.C., Bishop Thomas Kelly, general secretary of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the Vatican declaration was a "timely and welcome statement of the Catholic Church's teaching on the sanctity of life and the moral issues which pertain to the preservation of life."

The Vatican document, signed by Cardinal Jerome Hamer, OP, defines euthanasia as "an action or an omission which of itself or by intention causes death, in order that all suffering may in this way be eliminated. Euthanasia's terms of reference, therefore, are to be found in the intention of the will and in the methods used."

The declaration condones the use of painkillers, even if taking them risks shortening life, providing no other alternative exists, a principle enunciated by Pope Pius XII. That pontiff, who died in 1958, outlined many of the operative principles underlying modern Catholic medical ethics and is cited in a number of references in the new declaration.

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The newly formed Bishop Sheen Ecumenical Housing Foundation will continue to help find homes for people who ordinarily could not afford the required down payment.

At the meeting, held at Corpus Christi Church Hall, Georgia DeGregorio, outgoing president of the Sheen Foundation, briefly outlined the work done by the Foundation throughout the year.

A presentation, given by present and former members of both housing agencies, described the actions taken to further the housing cause during the past twelve years.

Elections also took place at the meeting. The officers for the 1980-81 year are: Lewis Childs, president; Sister Mary Wintish, vice president; John Burke, secretary; and Robert Dunbar, treasurer.

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However, for the bereaved — who are often attempting to deny the death of their loved one — confronting the fact of death by viewing the body is most important. Denial is a natural reaction to the death of someone close to us — but if this denial is continued, it can be mentally damaging. The viewing of the body is an important step toward accepting the fact of death.

There are no simple ways to work through the days and weeks after the death of a loved one. But there are steps that can be taken to help release grief and emotion — and, through our years of experience, we are familiar with many of them. If we can answer questions for you, at any time, please call any member of our staff.

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