

Now and at the Hour of Our Death

Catholic Guidance for End-of-Life Decision Making



TEACHINGS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

LIFE IS SACRED

Human life is sacred, from the first moment of conception to the moment of natural death. Life is a gift from a loving God, and we are stewards of that gift, called to respect and protect it. Euthanasia is an action or omission, which of itself or by intention causes death in order to eliminate suffering. It is therefore a rejection of God's gift of life.

LIFE IS ETERNAL

For Catholics, death is not the end but the beginning, the beginning of eternal life with God the Father. Our faith assures us that we “look forward to the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come, Amen.”

ORDINARY VS. EXTRAORDINARY TREATMENTS

While it is never permissible to directly choose to bring about one's death in order to relieve pain or suffering, the Catholic Church has never taught that the faithful are required to use all available means to sustain life. The Church teaches that we are obligated to provide – and to accept – ordinary means of sustaining life. Such treatments are those that offer a reasonable hope of benefit without excessive burdens. If a particular treatment entails significant burdens that are out of proportion to the expected benefits, it can be termed “extraordinary” and it is optional.

BENEFITS VS. BURDENS

There are many factors that must be considered when making this “burden/benefit” analysis, including the nature of the treatment, the cost, the prognosis, the side effects, the pain, as well as emotional consequences. Each judgment is unique, and is not a medical judgment, but a moral judgment. Each patient, or their proxy decision-maker, should pray for guidance and graces, seek counsel from their family and trusted spiritual adviser, and gather all pertinent information from the medical professionals.

NUTRITION AND HYDRATION

In principle, there is an obligation to provide patients with food and water, including medically assisted nutrition and hydration such as feeding tubes. At times, however, such tubes may be deemed excessively burdensome and of little or no benefit, such as when death is imminent and the body can no longer assimilate the food and water. When nutrition and hydration are withheld or removed for such reasons, death occurs as a result of the underlying condition, not through starvation or dehydration.

PAIN MANAGEMENT

Modern medical care has become increasingly skillful in the area of pain relief. Our Church teaches that patients should be kept free of pain as possible, so that they may die comfortably. This is part of our Christian obligation to be charitable and to love our neighbor. Even pain medications that may indirectly shorten a person’s life are morally permissible, as long as the intent is to alleviate pain and not to hasten death.