

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON LIFE, SUFFERING AND DYING

Adhering to an atheist view of the world, certain people are calling for the legalization of euthanasia and assisted suicide, under the pretext that the human being is the sole master of his or her body, life and death. They claim that the person's autonomy reigns supreme and that his or her will must be respected at all costs.

An authentic humanism proposes a considerably different vision of the human person, founded on the belief that human life possesses an intrinsic worth, which must be respected in all its stages. For the Christian humanist, each person is created in the image and likeness of God for a destiny of eternal happiness with God. It is God who is the Author of life and He alone determines its beginning and its end.

The following excerpts from a publication by the Catholic Organization for Life and the Family (COLF), *"Living, Suffering and Dying... what for?"* (available online at www.colf.ca), provides the beginning of a reflection on the mystery of suffering and death. They are an echo of the words of the Second Vatican Council (Pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 22): "Through Christ and in Christ, the riddles of sorrow and death grow meaningful. Apart from His Gospel, they overwhelm us."

Here are some lines taken from *"Living, Suffering and Dying... what for?"*...

"As Pope John Paul II said, human suffering is a mystery. Sooner or later, all families experience it in the midst of life. It is either physical, psychological or spiritual. It always restrains our activities, it often limits our autonomy, and it sometimes seems to diminish our dignity. When it lasts too long and intensifies, some would think of ending life, which can appear to be a mere burden. Suicide, euthanasia and assisted suicide can then become attractive exit doors. Yet Christians still maintain that life – daily life, with its joys and its sorrows – is a gift from God, given with love and kindness...

"Since suffering and illness appear in the normal course of every human life, the question of their significance comes up in thinking about the meaning of life. Inevitably, the day comes when each person wonders: "Where do I come from? What is the purpose of my life? Why am I suffering? Where am I going? What is there after death?" Christians find answers to these questions in the Gospel. It is there that they understand they are not the masters, but the stewards of their life. It is there that Christ nourishes their hope in the Resurrection and eternal life...

"Yes, God's work is a work of love: He wants to share his life with every human person, and for all eternity... Each human being is offered the possibility of living with God and for God. That is where we find our happiness and the fulfillment of our lives..."

"Everything in our ordinary life can become an occasion for an extraordinary encounter. It is there that God awaits us patiently, wishing to share with us each moment of our lives, and to give it a divine meaning..."

"Throughout his or her life, each baptized person is called to be another Christ – Christ the Servant who walks with his friends and helps them to rise to their challenges, supporting them at the time of their suffering so that they remain courageous until the natural end of their lives. For Christians, this is the real meaning of "aid in dying": it is aid in living until the day when God invites his child to come home. This call to compassion, to responsibility, to fraternity and to solidarity is also always a call to serve the suffering Christ. Christ who is recognized and loved in each ill person who is afraid, who feels alone, impoverished, diminished, overwhelmed, anguished, abandoned..."

"No, suffering is not useless. And it does not diminish human dignity. Hanging on the wood of the cross, disfigured, unrecognizable, Christ was not undignified. At the time of our own suffering and death, we do not lose our dignity. Human dignity depends neither on the quality of our lives nor on our autonomy. It finds its source in God, who created us in his image and likeness and who calls each of us to live and die in the manner of Christ – to bring the world back to Him."

***The following documents and websites
provide further information on end of life issues
(click on the document):***

1. Catholic Organization for Life and the Family (www.colf.ca)
Living, Suffering, and Dying... what for?
Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide – Urgent Questions
2. Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (www.cccb.ca)
3. Catholic Health Alliance of Canada (www.chac.ca)
Advocacy Alert on Bill C-384
4. Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute (www.ccbi-utoronto.ca/)
The Question of Physician-Assisted Suicide in the UK and Implications for Canada
5. Assemblée des évêques catholiques du Québec (www.eveques.qc.ca)
En fin de vie... Prendre soin, dans le respect de la dignité humaine
(In French only)
6. Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario (www.occb.on.ca)
Going to the House of the Father