

All Human Life has Dignity

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We will all die, yes, but only a few of us (less than 10%) will die suddenly. Most of us will suffer for a time before dying. The way we live out the time until that moment is of profound spiritual significance, and the moment of death itself is a sacred one. The way we care for loved ones with declining health through that moment of death is just as significant.

For many, that suffering will entail a prolonged and debilitating illness. Do we have trouble looking upon the frail? Are we made uncomfortable by the physically or mentally disabled? Does a lack of human beauty repulse us? An emergency physician once said about a patient, “If I ever get like *that* just shoot me.” What trust would you put in him, or even a family member, that thought like that? Does our own pride, with its need for control and independence, say, “I don’t want to live like *that*,” either? Do you trust yourself?

A mere 3% of people choose physician-assisted suicide because they are in pain. Most people choose it because they are afraid of what might happen, like future suffering, dependence on others, or a loss of “dignity”; in other words, because they don’t want to live like *that*. Imagine, then, what physician-assisted suicide says to the disabled. Young people who suffer sudden, debilitating illnesses become depressed; within a year they find happiness once again. Why, then, at some certain age (whatever age *that* might be) do we accept suicide over love and care, mistaking it for mercy and dignity? Will “old” age or time left to live no longer even matter as suicide becomes accepted? That is exactly what has happened in Europe.

Imagine, too, what physician-assisted suicide says to people who have been physically changed by treatment. Do the changes that happen as sicknesses progress—dementia, incontinence, inability to walk, tubes, baldness, radiation burns, bloating, or whatever else—change our love for those who are suffering? They need to be assured that we look upon them with the same eyes that Jesus Christ looks upon each of us, with love that sees beyond our human frailties and failings. Unconditional love.

As disciples of Christ we hand our lives over to Him and seek to do His will. The Father is all-knowing and all-powerful, and Jesus Christ pours out His great love and mercy on each of us; we trust that God’s will for us comes from that knowledge and power, love and mercy. Our lives, our sufferings, have a greater purpose, whether we suffer with our own illness or with our sick loved ones. Can we really know better than to end life before natural death?

The medical community also must rebuild a culture in which all human life has dignity. No frailty is undignified, no patient undeserving, and no life without meaning. Every beneficial medical treatment must be offered to every patient, and we as patients should accept them. This does not mean every treatment under every circumstance, not at all. We will refuse treatment if it does little to improve our condition or ease our suffering, but not because we are of a certain age or have a certain illness.

Acceptance of physician-assisted suicide forever changes our relationships with our families and our healthcare providers. It destroys human dignity by making vulnerable those

who are disabled, frail, or weak. Let us live, suffer, die, and care for one another as Jesus Christ did for us all, caring for all life until natural death.