Vatican reaffirms Euthanasia is an ‘intrinsically evil act’, and calls on Catholics to accompany the dying

By Hannah Brockhaus

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In a new document released Tuesday, the Vatican’s doctrinal office reaffirmed the Church’s perennial teaching on the sinfulness of euthanasia and assisted suicide, and recalled the obligation of Catholics to accompany the sick and dying through prayer, physical presence, and the sacraments.

The document also addressed the pastoral care of Catholics who request euthanasia or assisted suicide, explaining that a priest and others should avoid any active or passive gesure which might signal approval for the action, including remaining until the act is performed.

Samaritanus bonus: on the Care of Persons in the Critical and Terminal Phases of Life is a new document by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), published Sept. 22.

The 45-page text, approved by Pope Francis on June 25, is signed by CDF prefect Cardinal Luis Ladaria and secretary Archbishop Giacomo Morandi.

The letter presents Catholic teaching on a range of end-of-life issues, affirming the intrinsic value and dignity of every human life, especially for those who are critically sick and in the terminal stages of life.

The document's introduction noted that "it is widely recognized that a moral and practical clarification regarding care of these persons is needed."

"euthanasia is a grave violation of the Law of God, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written Word of God, is transmitted by the Church's Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium."
Evangelium Vitae

Pastoral accompaniment of those who expressly request euthanasia or assisted suicide "today presents a singular moment when a reaffirmation of the teaching of the Church is necessary," Samaritanus bonus said.

It explained that closeness to a person who has chosen euthanasia or assisted suicide is necessary, but must always be ordered toward the person's conversion.

The document recalled that a person who has made this decision, “whatever their subjective dispositions may be, has decided upon a gravely immoral act and willingly persists in this decision.”

This state “involves a manifest absence of the proper disposition for the reception of the Sacraments of Penance, with absolution, and Anointing, with Viaticum.” In this situation, the congregation explained, the priest must withhold absolution.

“Here it remains possible to accompany the person whose hope may be revived and whose erroneous decision may be modified, thus opening the way to admission to the sacraments,” it continued.

It added that “to delay absolution is a medicinal act of the Church, intended not to condemn, but to lead the sinner to conversion.”

The Church’s position in this situation “does not imply non-acceptance of the sick person,” the letter emphasized. Withholding absolution “must be accompanied by a willingness to listen and to help, together with a deeper explanation of the nature of the sacrament, in order to provide the opportunity to desire and choose the sacrament up to the last moment.”

“The Church is careful to look deeply for adequate signs of conversion, so that the faithful can reasonably ask for the reception of the sacraments,” it said.

It is “gravely unjust to enact laws that legalize euthanasia or justify and support suicide,” . . “such laws strike at the foundation of the legal order:
the right to life sustains all other rights, including the exercise of freedom.”

The purpose of the new letter, the CDF explained in the introduction, is to enlighten pastors and

the Catholic faithful “regarding their questions and uncertainties about medical care, and their spiritual and pastoral obligations to the sick in the critical and terminal stages of life.”

It said that there were particular situations today which require “a more clear and precise intervention on the part of the Church,” to reaffirm the message of the Gospel and its expression in the basic doctrinal teachings of the Magisterium, especially for the sick and dying and those who come into contact with them.

Euthanasia, the CDF letter affirmed, is “an intrinsically evil act, in every situation or circumstance” and “any formal or immediate material cooperation in such an act is a grave sin against human life.”

“Euthanasia and assisted suicide are always the wrong choice,” it said, because, as St. Pope John Paul II wrote in **Evangelium vitae**, “euthanasia is a grave violation of the Law of God, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written Word of God, is transmitted by the Church’s Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium.”

There is also “no right to dispose of one’s life arbitrarily,” it continued, which is why “no health care worker can be compelled to execute a non-existent right.”

It is also “gravely unjust to enact laws that legalize euthanasia or justify and support suicide,” the congregation stated, and “such laws strike at the foundation of the legal order: the right to life sustains all other rights, including the exercise of freedom.”

“The existence of such laws deeply wound human relations and justice, and threaten the mutual trust among human beings,” the document continued. “The legitimation of assisted suicide and euthanasia is a sign of the degradation of legal systems.”

The CDF explained that according to Church teaching, euthanasia “is an act of homicide that no end can justify and that does not tolerate any form of complicity or active or passive collaboration.”

It said: “Those who approve laws of euthanasia and assisted suicide, therefore, become accomplices of a grave sin that others will execute. They are also guilty of scandal because by such laws they contribute to the distortion of conscience, even among the faithful.”

To take one’s own life breaks one’s relationship with God and with others. “Assisted suicide aggravates the gravity of this act because it implicates another in one’s own despair,” it said.

The Christian response to these actions is to offer the help necessary for a person to shake off this despair, it emphasized, and not to indulge “in spurious condescension.”

“The commandment ‘do not kill’ ... is in fact a yes to life which God guarantees, and it ‘becomes a call to attentive love which protects and promotes the life of one’s neighbor,’” the letter said.

“The Christian therefore knows that earthly life is not the supreme value. Ultimate happiness is in heaven. Thus the Christian will not expect physical life to continue when death is evidently near. The Christian must help the dying to break free from despair and to place their hope in God.”

The letter affirmed that it is “a supreme act of charity” to spiritually assist the Christian at their moment of death.

“Death is a decisive moment in the human person’s encounter with God the Savior. The Church is called to accompany spiritually the faithful in the situation, offering them the 'healing resources' of prayer and the sacraments.”

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