

"Assisted Suicide"

The most conventional definition of "suicide" is "intentionally caused self-destruction". Increasing numbers in Canada endorse suicide as a legitimate means to end life. And there are societies which produce detailed handbooks on how it may be best committed. For \$30, the Victoria (B.C.) Based Right to Die Society of Canada is selling a "customized Exit Bag", through its Victoria post office box. For \$10 more, it is selling "illustrated brochure" describing how to use the oversized plastic bag, in conjunction with a drug overdose, to ensure a quick and painless "death with dignity". The society is headed by John Hofsess, who supported Sue Rodrigues' quest for a doctor assisted suicide to end her life.

The rationale for assisted suicide is compassion for the terminally ill. It is done, supposedly, in the best interests of the patient. Sue, a B.C. woman, suffered from an incurable neurological disorder, commonly known as Lou Gerhig's disease. Sven Robinson, New Democratic Party M. P., tearfully acknowledged that he had been present when she died. He claimed that his support of Sue was motivated purely by love. "The highest duty of a Member of Parliament is love." said Robinson, describing his feelings as he watched her die.

Canadian law does not treat suicide as a crime. Since it is not considered a crime, it has become increasingly difficult to punish people like Dr. Jack Kervorkian, a retired pathologist from Michigan, who uses his famed "suicide machine" to assist patients in their choice to end life. In May, Ontario resident Austin Bastable killed himself with the help of Kervorkian, who, so far, has helped 40 people commit suicide since 1990. Kervorkian believes in "the right not to suffer" He gave a candid and chilling indication of his desire to extend "suicide rights" in an address to the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. (Oct. 27, 1992) He said that "every disease that shortens life, no matter how, is terminal."

According to him, those who may need suicide assistance include quadriplegics, people with multiple sclerosis and sufferers from severe arthritis. He bases his view on mercy and the right to privacy and individual choice. He calls Christian opposition to the "right to suicide" religious zealotry trying to impose its view of morality.

In July 1, 1996, the new Right of the Terminally Ill Act came into effect in Australia's Northern Territory. Mr. Bob Dent, a man who had been suffering from prostate cancer for five years and claimed the pain was no longer bearable, became the first person to die by legal euthanasia. The computer asked him a series of questions. When it got to the last question "Do you want to do this?", he pushed the "Yes" button and an intravenous pumped barbiturates and a muscle relaxant into his bloodstream. After a few convulsions, he was dead. They called it "death with dignity".

Although in Canada the support for assisted suicide is growing and even the Liberal Youth Caucus voted in favour of it, Canadian physicians are still cautious about it This past June, Dr. Maurice Genereux of Toronto had the dubious distinction of becoming the

first Canadian doctor to be charged with assisting the suicide of a 31 year-old HIV positive homosexual, who had yet to develop any chronic AIDS symptoms. The Federal government shows no readiness, as yet, of wanting to introduce the legislation to liberalize suicide at the eve of an election, as it may cost it votes.

In his encyclical "*The Gospel of Life*", Pope John Paul 11 states that our culture is taking on the form of a veritable "culture of death". Our society is witnessing a profound change of attitude towards life. For the secular man, death has become the twin of life. It is no longer man's last enemy. The favourable disposition toward assisted suicide is not surprising. If abortion on demand has become a woman's right, death on demand can become everyone's right. In both cases, it is claimed that human beings can decide about life and death for themselves. However, there is one major difference. With abortion, the babies have no choice; only the mother has it.

What position should the Christian Heritage Party take on assisted suicide?

The Hippocratic Oath states very clearly "I will not give poison to anyone though asked to do so, nor will I suggest such a plan.". Every Code of Medical Ethics since then has either directly or implicitly forbidden any physician from taking the life of a patient. And this fact should be reaffirmed today.

In Christian tradition, suicide has found few advocates. There is almost unanimous opposition to what is stigmatized as self-murder. Even Samson's heroic death was evil, says St. Augustine, unless God specifically granted him inner guidance to destroy himself with the Philistines. Human life is God's sovereign gift. Only God is entitled to determine when and how life is to end. Men and women are created in the Image of God. They are unique. The life of each human being is so sacred that none may dare offend it. No one has the right over his or her own life. No one lives to himself, no one dies to himself (Rom 14:7) Our times are in the Hand of God (Ps 13:15)

Traditional opposition to suicide is based on the sixth commandment "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus.20:13cf, Genesis 9:6) Life is God's property and not ours. Therefore, we may not end life whenever we want to do so. The termination of life is under the control of God's Providence.

Advocates of assisted suicide forget that each person has an obligation to oneself, to others and to God. Therefore, the argument of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) still holds true. "It is altogether unlawful to kill oneself, for three reasons:

- (1) everything naturally keeps itself in being ... Wherefore suicide is.. Contrary to the natural law and to charity.
- (2) Because ... every man is part of the community, and ... by killing himself he injures the community.
- (3) Because life is God's gift to man, and is subject to His power Hence whoever takes his own life, sins against God.

What should be done to ban assisted suicide? The courts are not an option. The courts should strictly be held to enforcing existing laws. If a small group of judges would have the right to change existing laws or suggest new ones, it would be the end of democracy. We should demand Parliament to act on the question.

We should remind our elected representatives that each individual is equal under the law and that it is their duty to protect life. (Rom.13:4) Furthermore, the government should encourage palliative care. Only five per cent of dying patients in Canada receive it. Drs.Elizabeth.J.Latimer and James McGregor remarked that the true measure of a caring society can be seen in the way it treats its most frail members. Dying people are frail and vulnerable. They have a right to society's care and protection and a right to expect the best palliative care.

The CHP, therefore, should, besides adamantly opposing assisted suicide, also strongly support palliative care. A context should be developed for making life meaningful for the elderly, the handicapped and the terminally ill. And we have our personal responsibility. We are to show mercy and compassion toward our fellow human beings. (Matt.5:17., James 2:13)

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December, 1996