

FROM THE BISHOP

“LESS WORTHY THAN OTHERS”

Assisted suicide violates the incomparable dignity of every human being

Certain books make a lasting impression. More than 50 years ago in a class on “The Meaning of Suffering,” I remember reading *A Doctor at Calvary*. It was a physician’s graphic and objective analysis of the suffering Jesus underwent on the cross, based on archeological evidence and the descriptions found in the Gospels. Along with the book, we were also studying St. Paul, particularly his phrase, “I make up in my own body what is lacking in the suffering of Christ.”



It seems strange to think that Jesus’ suffering was finite – limited – and yet, because he was human like us in all things but sin, such had to be the case. Nevertheless, his suffering was acute and we are reminded that any pain we undergo can be joined to his for the sake of others – if we will it.

All this is brought to mind because the question of pain and suffering for the dying is now something to be determined by the citizenry of Massachusetts. In November, on the ballot, there will be a proposal to allow doctors to prescribe lethal pills to terminally ill patients at their request. The patient would then be able to commit suicide with the lethal dosage.

Without even considering the faith-based arguments against such a course of action, I find the idea abhorrent. Perhaps it is put best in the question: “If it were a loaded pistol instead of a lethal pill, would we even discuss the matter?” It seems to be a case of turning an old adage upside down. In this instance, the means (lethal pill) justifies the end (suicide).

What does this do to the doctor/patient relationship? Doctors, in times gone by, took the Hippocratic Oath, the primary principle of which is “first, do no harm.” Sadly, that is no longer so. Sections in the oath dealing with abortion have been removed; sections dealing with giving harmful drugs have been removed. And now, here in Massachusetts, we see an effort to make physicians the dispensers of death-dealing drugs

If the ballot measure is passed in November, physicians will be authorized to give death-dealing drugs so that people with serious illness can commit suicide. The proponents will tell you they are only interested in easing the suffering of the sick and the burden carried by loved ones: they call it “compassionate care.” They won’t tell you

that there are far less drastic means to ease pain and relieve suffering. People familiar with hospice and palliative care know the difference that true compassion makes for those facing death.

The ballot proposal is based on a utilitarian ethic – a judgment as to whether or not the individual can be considered useful by themselves or by others, whether they are still productive members of society. If they are not, the reasoning goes, they are disposable. And too many sick and elderly individuals are being made to feel that way. Even some who profess to be firmly religious can become infected with the utilitarian ethic that places less of a premium on some human lives, deeming them in some way “less worthy than others.”

We have experienced the “less worthy than others” argument in the death of 50 million unborn babies. We have experienced the “less worthy than others” argument in the marginalization of the poor. We have experienced the “less worthy than others” argument in the isolation of the elderly. We have experienced the “less worthy than others” argument in the demonizing of people because of their religion. We have experienced the “less worthy than others” argument in the profiling of persons because of appearance. We have experienced the “less worthy than others” argument in disdain for those who seem different. We have experienced the “less worthy than others” argument in the readiness to execute the condemned even when questions remain. We have experienced it in too many ways, in too many circumstances, among too many in our society. Are we now to experience it in physician-assisted suicide?

We need to remind ourselves and our society of each person’s God-given inherent dignity. Acceptance of the inherent dignity of each human being, realization of the role of the Creator, and belief in the fundamental right to life have in too much of our society given way to a judgment that values the individual in relation to how useful he or she is to others. Too many in our society are saying: If you stop being useful, you’re no longer of value. What a topsy-turvy world that makes.

Think rather on the incomparable dignity of every human being. Reflect on the gift of life, for it is a gift – a God-given one – from conception to natural death.

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