

*The Lord asked Cain,
"Where is your brother Abel?"
"I do not know, "he replied.
"Am I my brother's guardian?"*

Genesis 4:9

Jim is dying of cancer. The disease has invaded his liver, bones and lungs. He needs morphine at regular intervals to keep the pain under control; the time between these intervals is growing shorter and the dose higher. But he still manages a toothless smile (his false teeth won't fit any more) and a joke. He knows he is dying, and the cancer has progressed too far for more chemotherapy. It is becoming increasingly difficult for him to get enough nourishment by mouth. The only question remaining for Jim and his family is: How long?

For the last year, Rosa has been living in a nursing home. A long series of small strokes have brought her life to a standstill. What is left of her memory is like an old photo album with faded snapshots of long ago times and people. She weeps easily, but forgets why she is crying seconds after the tears appear. She can no longer look after her most basic needs and must be fed, washed and diapered. When adult children visit, she smiles, but cannot remember their names.

Jim and Rosa are familiar to most of us. They are our parents, spouses, sisters, brothers, grandparents, co-workers, or neighbours. It is rare to walk very far along the path of adulthood without being faced with the reality of illness, suffering and death.

Most of us wish we could turn away from this reality, from Jim and Rosa. Sadly, some of us do. We are afraid of dying, of losing control over our bodies and our lives, of becoming a

burden. Above all we are afraid of physical and emotional suffering, whether our own or somebody else's.

For the last several years, Canadians have been engaged in a debate about the end of life and the rights of individuals to control how and when they will die. Despite the recommendation (Spring 1995) of the Special Senate Committee that euthanasia and assisted suicide should remain as offences under the Criminal Code, the debate is not over. There is likely to be continued pressure from pro-euthanasia groups and a few MP's for legislation that would allow these acts in certain circumstances.

How are Catholics to respond to these issues? When we are asked - why shouldn't Jim, with his doctor's help, have the right to end his suffering - how will we answer? And Rosa - does her life, diminished as it is, still have value and meaning?

Some Definitions

It is important to be very clear what we mean when we talk about euthanasia and assisted suicide:

- ✚ **Euthanasia** is a deliberate action, or a deliberate failure to act, that causes a person's death with the intention of ending his or her suffering.
- ✚ **Assisted suicide** is a deliberate act of helping another person to end his or her life, for example, by supplying drugs or some other means to commit suicide.

The following actions are not euthanasia or assisted suicide:

- ✚ Respecting a person's wish to refuse or stop a treatment that is of no benefit;
- ✚ Withdrawing or withholding a treatment

from a person who is dying when its burden outweighs its benefit;

- ✚ Giving drugs to relieve pain if an unintended effect is to shorten a dying person's life.

The Gift of Life

As Catholics, we are convinced that God creates each one of us out of love. We do not own or control our lives as we do a piece of property. Life is given to us as a sacred trust. We are responsible for caring for ourselves and making our time on earth a fruitful one. This time has natural limits. We do not know when our physical lives will come to an end or under what circumstances, but we do know that death is part of the human condition.

For someone like Jim very little time remains. There are some days when he longs for an end to the struggle. But even at those times he recognizes the blessings of his life - above all, in the people who surround him with loving care. They are his strength and his consolation. With their support, he waits, knowing that his life and death are in God's hands.

Human Dignity

We all want to be treated in a way that recognizes our worth as human beings. Does this worth lie in our accomplishments? In our ability to make decisions and determine the shape of our lives? In our contributions to society? These are all significant aspects of most people's lives, but none is the foundation of human dignity. Our dignity lies in our origin and destiny: We come from God and return to God. We are created out of love and for love.

Human dignity is an issue with which Rosa's children are struggling. It is hard for them to recognize the mother whom they have known

all their lives. Yet, as they help in providing physical care, sit beside her and quietly hold her hand, wipe her tears when they fall, and soothe her when she is restless, they are illuminating the dignity and value of her life through their compassionate response to her needs.

Suffering

Advances in medical science have not only resulted in prolonging human life; they have led to great improvements in the relief of pain. Much of the physical pain associated with serious illness can be controlled without seriously interfering with a patient's ability to interact with family and friends.

But physical pain is only one aspect of human suffering. There is the pain of loneliness and fear, of the loss of a sense of meaning, and of the separation from loved ones that is an inevitable consequence of death. It is our task as human beings to work to overcome suffering, but we cannot eliminate it. It is part of the mystery of life.

At the heart of Christian belief is the cross, in which suffering and love are united. When we turn to that figure on the cross with faith and hope, when we open ourselves to the anguish of others and share their pain, when we extend to the sick and dying the signs of God's love, we have entered into the suffering of Christ.

Choice

One of the arguments used in favour of euthanasia and assisted suicide is that they are private decisions that an individual should be able to make in a free society. But there is a balance that must be maintained between the rights of individuals and the good of society. Human freedom has limits. To kill another

person, even out of a sense of compassion, or to assist someone in ending his or her life, is not a private matter. Such decisions affect medical caregivers, family members and friends, and indeed, the whole of society. Each death by euthanasia dims our vision of ourselves as a compassionate human family. There is also a huge potential for abuse in a society that allows euthanasia. What would happen to the chronically ill, the disabled and the very elderly? As respect for human life diminishes, how would we protect Rosa and the other vulnerable members of our society?

A Compassionate Community

Isolation and loneliness can be overcome, but only when we abandon the fantasy of radical autonomy and acknowledge how deeply we need other people in both our living and our dying. Depending on others is not weakness. It is a recognition of our needs and our vulnerability.

The sick and the dying are a challenge to our humanity. One concrete action to which we can all commit ourselves is the provision of adequate palliative care services. Palliative care is a service for people who are dying; it involves a team of health professionals and volunteers who provide physical, emotional, and spiritual care for patients and families. The goal is to provide comfort and care when the hope of a cure is no longer possible.

A compassionate community has no place for euthanasia and assisted suicide. Instead, we are called to offer ourselves to each other. Jim and Rosa are not strangers to us. He is your brother and she is your sister. We are their guardians.

The Catholic Bishops of Ontario
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Euthanasia

A message from
the Ontario Bishops
on Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide