



The Catholic
Archdiocese
of Edmonton

Every Life Matters Easter Series

Session 2

Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia: What's Wrong with that?

A Consideration of Church Doctrine

Last month I took a flight from Toronto to Edmonton. During the boarding process I took my aisle seat. Shortly thereafter a woman came on the plane and indicated to me that hers was the seat next to mine, so I got up to let her in. When she noticed my clerical shirt, she slouched her shoulders in a gesture of frustration, and gave an audible "Ugh!" When she saw my surprised expression, she explained, "I was just short tempered with the agent at the gate. Now that I see you I know I'm going to hell for sure!" Now, honestly. I really hadn't thought my face has a particularly menacing demeanour, certainly not enough to instill fear of eternal damnation! I guess I'll have to work on my charm.

When the woman saw me she saw the Church. Somehow that brought her to a clear awareness of the nature of what she had done. Tonight what I'd like to do together with you is take a look at the Church and place the issue of assisted suicide and euthanasia against the background of her teaching. Doing so reminds us of the gravity of these practices, certainly, but also offers us insight into what is fueling the controversy that is engaging our country. It is actually upon this second aspect of the question that I'd like to spend time. We have already addressed in our first session the grievousness of the acts themselves. To recall that very briefly, the practices of assisted suicide and euthanasia are morally wrong because they violate the inviolable sanctity of human life, whose sole author is God. They are grievous sins against the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." As such they can in no circumstance ever be morally justified. Let's take some time now to seek insight into the dynamics of the controversy from the viewpoint of Christian revelation. We need to do this in order to grasp exactly what is happening and thus understand how we respond and move forward.

To begin, let's return to the Book of Genesis. Remember from our first session what is revealed therein about the great dignity of the human person stemming from having been created in the image and likeness of God. Tonight let's consider the account of the original sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2-3). The key symbol in the narrative is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which God placed in the middle of the garden, the fruit of which God forbade the man to eat. This tree and the prohibition symbolize the unsurpassable limits to our creaturely condition, parameters which must be respected with trust in the love of God. (cf. CCC, 396). These limits refer to our dependence, as creatures, on God who fashioned us, and to the natural laws and moral norms that God inserted into creation as guides for the use of our freedom. The tree is an invitation to accept the truth of our creatureliness and limits and to trust in the providence and wisdom of God.

We know what happened. Our first parents chose not to accept this truth and they reached out to pluck and eat the forbidden fruit. In other words, they reached out beyond their limits; they sought to be other than the creatures they were fashioned to be. This is the first, the original, sin of the human race.

Trust in God was allowed to die, they chose themselves over and before God, they disobeyed the command of the Creator and presumed to take to themselves control over their own lives. It is important also to recall that they were tempted by the serpent, the devil. This creature seduced our first parents by means of a lie. The lie was, precisely, that God was a liar and not to be trusted. The lie was also to make what is bad (eating the forbidden fruit and disobeying God) look very good. Trust in God was abandoned because of surrender to a lie.

Now, with this as background, the dynamics of our controversy today around assisted suicide and euthanasia come into clear focus. What is playing out before our very eyes is a repetition of the first sin. Just as Adam and Eve were seduced by a lie, we are being tempted today by means of falsehood to distrust the ways of God and to usurp control. We hear these lies in the use of euphemisms to hide harsh reality, such as "medical aid in dying", a term used to cover over the fact of murder. We hear echoes of the ancient serpent when human autonomy is exalted as absolute and our responsibilities to both God and neighbour are eclipsed. And when the choice for assisted suicide or euthanasia is demanded by a patient, facilitated by medicine or made possible by the courts, we are witnessing once again a choice of self over God, a reaching out beyond creaturely limit and a picking of forbidden fruit.

The way forward thus becomes clear. We need, first, to re-affirm, once again and in every circumstance, our trust in the love, the wisdom and the care of God; and, second, flowing from that act of trust, to surrender anew control of the entirety of our lives into his hands, especially in those moments when suffering or difficulty tempts us strongly to cling to the illusion of our own control.

Here I want to pause and recall with you a teaching of immense importance that comes to us from the Second Vatican Council. In the document *Gaudium et Spes* (n. 22) we are taught that, since Jesus is both God and man, and each fully, he alone reveals the truth about God, and he alone makes manifest what it means to be human. To understand the meaning of our lives and how to live them, we need look no further than to Jesus Christ. I love the way St. John Paul II once put it: "Jesus Christ is the answer to the question that is every human life."

When we look to him, what do we see? One who, in his humanity, trusted completely in the love of his Heavenly Father. As answer to the question of every human life, Jesus is teaching that we live our lives most fully and authentically when we acknowledge our dependence upon God, live peacefully within our limits, and entrust all to his never-failing providence. By his Incarnation, and by his words and actions, Jesus brought to the world a new awareness of the depths of the Father's love. He invited everyone to place our complete trust in that love. I have always loved the way he taught this in his Sermon on the Mount. What are you worried about? You see how your Heavenly Father looks after birds and flowers. You're worth more to him than they are. He knows what you need even before you ask! Don't be afraid. Trust. (Cf. Matthew 6: 25-33) Jesus lived out of this trust even to the point of his death, which he accepted as his ultimate act of trust in God: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." (Luke 23:46) That trust was not betrayed. His resurrection from the dead was the response of the Father to the perfect trusting obedience placed in him by his Son. God is trustworthy. He speaks truth to us; he does not lie. He is faithful to his word and will never betray us. Deception and betrayal is the work of the devil.

There is yet one final point to make. We know from experience that this act of complete trust in God that we are called to make is beyond our weak human capacities. The temptation to self-control remains strong, and confidence in the love of God can be very difficult in times of darkness and uncertain futures. Jesus knows this, so he makes our fidelity, our trust, possible. By the gift of the Holy Spirit bestowed in the Church's sacraments Jesus unites us to himself, shares his very life with us, and thus enables us to participate in his perfect fidelity to God's love, his own trust in the Father. Not only this, through our union with Jesus we are enabled to live from the response of the Father, who raises us up from any despair or discouragement to a discovery and embrace of the beauty and dignity of the life he has given us.

Who are we listening to? Many voices are being raised around this issue. One alone is trustworthy. As a Christian people, we place our full confidence in the voice of Jesus Christ.

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