

Conscience and Why it Matters in the Question of Assisted Suicide

Reflections by the Catholic Organization for Life and Family

Euthanasia and the Erosion of Conscience Rights

- As of June 2016, euthanasia is legal in Canada. Euthanasia, also labelled (physician) assisted suicide, is now called ‘Medical Assistance In Dying’ and is typically referred to by the acronym MAID.
- Through the manipulation of language and by using the euphemism ‘MAID’, the grave evil entailed in intentionally ending (killing) a human life is obscured.
- Thou shalt not kill. This is not a suggestion but rather a Commandment. While the desire to eliminate suffering is good, it can never be done at the expense of eliminating the *sufferer*.
- We are called into existence by God; *sustained* in existence by God and called to an eternal existence with God. Human life is sacred. There is no clearer evidence of God’s will for us at any time than the fact that we are alive. To kill one’s self or another is to reject God’s Will.
- Tragically, our society has moved from the view that some things are by their very nature right or wrong to the view that things are right or wrong only to the extent that the majority of people say they are. Historically, this view has been linked to atrocities of staggering proportions.
- There is a common misconception that the Church would have us take *every* possible measure to sustain life. This is not the case. Sometimes it is perfectly permissible to refuse treatment; especially when the treatment is unreasonably burdensome. Refusing treatment—even when it is foreseen that death may result—is not the same as taking life: one respects God’s sovereign Will, the other rejects it.
- Every life is worth living. To suggest otherwise is to say that the value of human life is merely subjective.
- Most people are very influenced by the suggestions of their doctor, nurse or other caregiver. If a person is neglected, isolated, lonely or discouraged they might opt for MAID simply because society has let them down. Groups who represent persons with disabilities frequently express concerns about MAID because there is a real danger that it might be chosen during a moment of weakness.
- No one wants to suffer. Currently, only 30% of the population has access to proper palliative care. With legal euthanasia, what incentive is there for government to fund additional palliative care so that people can have a real choice at the end of life?
- In a pro-euthanasia universal health care system serving a rapidly aging population, and dependent on a shrinking tax base, how long will it be before access to services is limited to those who are deemed ‘worthy’ of continued life?
- A society in which the value of human life is not upheld is one in which the sick, the poor and the disadvantaged are at the mercy of the rich, the strong and the powerful.

- Since the royal assent to Bill C-14 which legalized euthanasia in Canada, many physicians and other healthcare practitioners have objected to participating in MAID on the basis of their freedom of conscience and/or religious belief.
- In Manitoba medical and nurse practitioners can legally refuse to participate in MAID for personal reasons. Unfortunately, this is not the case everywhere in Canada. For example, the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (CPSO) while allowing physicians to refrain from carrying out euthanasia for reasons of conscience and religion, require that they give an effective referral to ‘patients’ seeking euthanasia.
- Forcing health care practitioners to act against their consciences or religious beliefs, by providing an effective referral for MAID, is an action that is in direct conflict with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, section 2, which states that “Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms: (a) freedom of conscience and religion”.
- The Charter places a high value on freedom of conscience, but what is conscience? In its most basic form, conscience is the inner voice of the human person which recognizes and judges whether an action, anticipated or performed, is good or bad (evil). Conscience calls us to love and pursue the good and to avoid evil.
- The dignity of the human person requires that we be free to follow our consciences and that we act accordingly.
- Acting according to one’s conscience does not exempt one from the possibility of being wrong.
- Following an erroneous or badly formed conscience does not make an action morally right, nor does it limit the consequences of the action chosen. A person acting with an erroneous or badly formed conscience may have reduced responsibility for actions chosen, but a lack of culpability or responsibility does not affect the wrongness of the action.
- Conscience is not simply a subjective judgment but is the recognition of an objective law written on our hearts and upheld by God’s commandments and the teaching of the Church.
- It can be very difficult to discern this interior objective law in the context of contemporary society because of the clamor of competing voices which make claims contrary to the Gospel regarding what is good or evil.
- Everyone has a duty to form his or her conscience. It is the Church’s role to help us form our consciences and as Catholics our default position must always be to follow the defined teaching of the Church.
- “For a Catholic ‘to follow one’s conscience’ is not, then, simply to act as his [or her] unguided reason dictates. ‘To follow one’s conscience’ and remain a Catholic, one must take into account first and foremost the teaching of the magisterium [i.e., the official teaching authority of the Catholic Church]. When doubt arises due to a conflict of ‘my’ view and those of the magisterium, the presumption of truth lies on the part of the magisterium” (*Statement on the Formation of Conscience*, 41, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops).