

Archdiocese of Halifax-Yarmouth

Guidelines Regarding the Funeral Rites for Those Who Have Asked for Euthanasia or Physician-Assisted Suicide

Funeral Rites For Those Who Have Asked For Euthanasia

The legalization of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide in Canada is having a profound impact on Catholics and society. In Canada, the term MAiD (Medical Assist in Dying) is an umbrella term and a euphemism for euthanasia and assisted suicide. The growing frequency and social acceptance of these practices create even more confusion and moral questions.

The Teachings of the Church on Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide

The Catholic tradition holds that each person is made in the image and likeness of God (*imago dei*) and therefore has an unalienable dignity by virtue of their very existence. Assaults against this dignity, especially those that result in death, are grave matters and morally unacceptable. Euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide are clear violations of this inherent dignity and of the commandment, “thou shall not kill”.

In 2020, The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reaffirmed the Church's definitive teaching that "euthanasia is a crime against human life because, in this act, one chooses directly to cause the death of another innocent human being" (*Samaritanus bonus*, no. V 1). Euthanasia and assisted suicide are intrinsically evil acts that can never be justified, regardless of the circumstances or intentions.

Instead, in imitation of Jesus' own actions of caring for the sick and suffering, we have a call to walk with those who suffer, helping them to feel cared for, accepted, and loved as they prepare for their eternal destiny. When people feel euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide are the only answer to suffering, loneliness, anguish, despair, and feeling burdensome, all people, especially Catholics, should work to overcome through accompaniment, and palliative and pastoral care.

Pastoral Care Regarding Euthanasia or Physician-Assisted Suicide

Instead of ending life prematurely, the Church calls us to a comprehensive, collaborative, and compassionate approach to pastoral care for those facing the end of life. This is focused on accompanying them spiritually and addressing their full range of needs: psychological, physical, social, and spiritual.

In the absence of concern for these spiritual realities in a secularized health system, close collaboration requires priests, deacons, religious, and laity all exercising their complimentary roles in a coordinated and intentional fashion. Each should seek to provide empathy and compassion in accordance with their calling. As well, parishes require strong networks of caregivers who work with hospital chaplains, staff, and families. Priests should make the sacraments part of this accompaniment, offering Anointing of the Sick, Reconciliation, and

Viaticum whenever possible. However, when a person decides upon a gravely immoral act of euthanasia and willingly persists in this decision, such a state involves a manifest absence of the proper disposition for the reception of the Sacraments of Reconciliation, with absolution, and Anointing of the Sick, with *Viaticum*. A person may receive these sacraments only when the person has modified their decision in regard to euthanasia or assisted suicide. If the person cannot be dissuaded and does choose either euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide, the Church still hopes that God will be merciful and that the dying person will turn to him in repentance, seeking forgiveness in the last moments, even without the visible help of the Sacraments.

As much as possible the option for palliative care and necessary supports to persevere in suffering must be made present and available. This requires health care professionals to take seriously their duty to “do no harm” and to “cure if possible, always to care” (John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*).

Funeral Services for Those Who Have Died by Euthanasia or Physician-assisted Suicide

At the death of a Christian, whose life of faith was begun in the waters of Baptism and strengthened at the Eucharistic table, the Church intercedes on behalf of the deceased because of its confident belief that death is not the end, nor does it break the bonds forged in life. The Church also ministers to the sorrowing and consoles them in the funeral rites with the comforting Word of God and the sacrament of the Eucharist (*Order of Christian Funerals*, no. 4).

The twofold nature of the Funeral Mass as prayers for the deceased and comfort for the living is itself a testament to the entirety of Christian life from conception to eternity. The choice of euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide ruptures this testament by way of a rational choice to contravene a clear moral teaching. This differs from other cases of suicide where a person takes their life while consumed by desperation or psychological compulsion, often completely alone, indicating that free will is not fully involved.

1. Thus, the celebration of a Funeral Mass for someone who has chosen euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide is not appropriate (cf. canon 1184). This is not a punishment of the deceased or their families, but the natural consequence of a clear, public, choice made in contradiction with our beliefs. This is also to avoid possible scandal that might arise from the faithful witnessing a funeral mass in this situation, which might send the message that assisted suicide and euthanasia are acceptable choices for Catholics to make. The growing acceptance of euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide may result in circumstances where the deceased was coerced through family or institutional pressures or lacking in proper faculties in making their decision. In these cases, a Funeral Mass may be possible on an exceptional basis with the explicit permission of the bishop or his delegate.
2. While a Funeral Mass is normally not possible, the Church does not abandon the works of mercy to bury the dead or comfort the sorrowful. For the sake of those who are

mourning, a Funeral Liturgy outside Mass may be celebrated and the deceased person may be buried in a Catholic cemetery.

3. Alternately or in addition, a priest or deacon may conduct a graveside service at the cemetery.
4. A public mass of remembrance may be celebrated for the deceased with family members at a later time.
5. Under no circumstances may a eulogy be given in any of these situations.

Appeal for the Lord's Intercession

As the great split between secular society and the moral order widens, I encourage all Catholics to pray for the conversion of the world and the fulfilment of the Great Commission so that we may all be one in mind and heart with the Lord Jesus. May our prayer echo that of our prayers for the deceased:

Lord God, Giver of peace and healer of souls,
Hear the prayers of the Redeemer, Jesus Christ,
And the voices of your people,
Whose lives were purchased by the blood of the lamb.
Forgive the sins of all who sleep in Christ
And grant them a place in the kingdom.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Given this 5 day of July, 2024.

+Brian J. Dunn