

## **Position on Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide**

### **Scripture References**

*“It is not without significance, that in no passage of the holy canonical books there can be found either divine precept or permission to take away our own life, whether for the sake of entering on the enjoyment of immortality, or of shunning or ridding ourselves of anything whatever. Nay, the law, rightly interpreted, even prohibits suicide, where it says, “Thou shalt not kill.” This we affirm, this we maintain, this we pronounce as in every way to be right, that no one ought to inflict on himself voluntary death, for this is to escape the ills of time by plunging into those of eternity...” St. Augustine, City of God (1.20, 26)*

*“What makes a person master of himself is having free will. He may accordingly fashion his life in respect of all things that go to make up his life, and this is the province of his free will. The passage from this life to a more blessed one is, however, not matter subject to human free will, but to God’s power. A person may not, therefore, kill himself in order to escape from any of his miseries of this life...So to inflict death on oneself in order to escape from the miseries of this life is to take on a greater evil in order to avoid a lesser.” St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae (2a2ae. 64, 5)*

*“God hath created nothing simply for itself, but each thing, in all things and of every thing, each part in another hath such interest that in the whole world nothing is found whereunto any thing created can say, I need thee not.” Richard Hooker, A Learned Sermon of the Nature of Pride*

### **Anglicans for Life Official Position**

**Scripture and Tradition forbid intentional killing.** For two thousand years, the Christian Church has forbidden suicide and other intentional taking of innocent human life. This prohibition stems from the clear witness of Scripture, following St. Augustine’s interpretation of the Sixth Commandment of the Decalogue, “Thou shalt not kill.” This command, as St. Thomas and Richard Hooker tell us, speaks to the fundamental value of human life as made in God’s image (Gen. 1:27, 9:6), endowed with God-like capacities such as free-will, called to friendship with God, and limited by God’s sovereign power over life and death. Most importantly, this command condemns any act as intrinsically evil where an innocent human life is intentionally taken either through omission, i.e. willfully refusing to provide available aid and treatment when truly need, or commission, i.e. willfully engaging in a direct, lethal act on another life.

**What is, and what is not, Euthanasia?** Given the clarity of this prohibition, Christians must never practice euthanasia, defined by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* as “the medical administration of a lethal agent to a patient,” for this would disobey God’s command through an act of commission. Christians also must never take actions which intentionally seek to end life by withdrawing and withholding effective medical treatment, sometimes known as “passive” euthanasia, for this would disobey God’s command through an act of omission. These prohibitions are to be distinguished from actions which are outwardly similar, but fundamentally different: the administration of palliative care that has the foreseen, but unintended, effect of shortening the patient’s life; and the withholding or withdrawing of treatment that would effectively worsen the patient’s condition.

**What is, and what is not Assisted Suicide?** Christians must also never practice Physician Assisted Suicide, defined by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* as the “facilitation of a patient’s death by providing the necessary means and/or information to enable the patient to perform a life-ending act.” While some may argue that assisted suicide is a moral alternative to euthanasia, since here the physician is not actually doing the killing, but merely respecting a patient’s autonomous wishes, this still violates the Sixth Commandment through an act of commission. For there is no way for the physician to say that he or she does not somehow intend the patient’s death by prescribing medication that has the death of the patient as its goal. This prohibition is to be distinguished from the advice a physician gives concerning withdrawing or withholding medical treatment that does not have death as its goal.

**What is, and what is not, intentional killing?** To say that the Sixth Commandment prohibits intentional killing is to use the word, *intentional*, in a precise way. Intentional signifies a crucial component of human action. Intentions are different from desires, which see something as attractive or unattractive, and from motivations, which provide the end or underlying emotion that our actions may fulfill. Intentions, by contrast, describe the willful choice of a reasonable plan, or the “game plan,” so to speak, of means and ends that each of us chooses in pursuing any deliberate course of action. The game plans that compose intentions are often described by one word, such as “offend”, which describes a game plan that results in wounding another’s feelings, or “murder”. Intentions are *reasonable* to the extent that they match the reality of our actions—we cannot say that our intention is to run faster than the speed of light. Intentions are moral to the extent that the game plan we choose performs an action that is good and avoids actions that are evil—we cannot say that we do not intend to kill if the action we choose is one where killing, rather than say relieving pain, is our game plan.

To speak of intention, then, is to identify what is at stake in the crucial distinction between directly killing and merely allowing someone to die. For two thousand years, the Christian tradition has disallowed any direct killing, but has allowed that in certain situations persons may cause a death, called *indirect* killing, that they do not intend, but only permit or cause out of self-defense. In every case where these permissible deaths occur, the game plan is not one of killing, but one where persons are trying to protect their neighbors, or themselves, from harm. Thus the Christian tradition understands these certain actions as having death as *foreseen, but not intended*, effect. In terms of medical ethics, this would mean that a physician may intentionally administer palliative care to address pain or may intentionally withhold unproductive treatment. These actions may lead to a death the physician foresees, but does not intend, and a test of this game plan is this: *should the patient survive, the physician does not consider his or her aims frustrated.*

While some might see the concept of intention as obsolete, it forms the backbone of most of our moral considerations surrounding life and death. In the legal system, for example, the difference between First Degree Murder and Second Degree Murder is that the former is a killing that is deliberate and premeditated, i.e. intentional, while the latter is killing that is only motivated by malice. More significantly, on June 26, 1997, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that the distinction between directly killing and indirectly allowing dying “comports with fundamental legal principles.” Chief Justice Rehnquist contrasted the physician who intends only to treat pain or to withdraw burdensome treatment and the physician who assists a suicide or practices euthanasia:

*“A doctor, who assists a suicide, however, must necessarily and indubitably, intend primarily that the patient be made dead. Similarly, a patient who commits suicide with a doctor’s aid necessarily has the specific intent to end his or her own life, while a patient who refuses or discontinues treatment may not. The law has long used actor’s intent or purpose to distinguish two acts that may have the same result.”*

**Other considerations regarding euthanasia and assisted suicide.** While Anglicans for Life prefers to argue against euthanasia and assisted suicide from the perspective of Scriptural and Christian tradition, there are many arguments and studies that argue against these practices from the perspective of common sense. If studies have shown that there is great potential for the practices of euthanasia and assisted suicide and if they are widely accepted by our society, we will suffer severe repercussions—manipulation of vulnerable persons, such as women, the poor, the disabled, the elderly, and those who suffer from depression and other mental illnesses.

This has certainly been the case in the Netherlands, where assisted suicide and euthanasia are legal. A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (June 4, 1997) found that “the Netherlands has moved from considering assisted suicide” alone, “to giving legal sanction to both assisted suicide and euthanasia to nonvoluntary and involuntary euthanasia.” There is also potential for ruining the integrity of the medical profession and the bond of trust that develops in patient-doctor relationships. As the *New York State Task Force on Life and the Law* notes, many physicians believe that, “Medicine is devoted to healing and the promotion of human wholeness; to use medical techniques in order to achieve death violates its fundamental values...allowing physician to act as ‘beneficent executioners’ would undermine patients’ trust, and change the way that both the public and physicians view medicine.”

### **Official Church Positions**

*The Episcopal Church has not passed a resolution officially acknowledging Euthanasia. At the 1998 Lambeth Conference a resolution affirming “that life is God-given and has intrinsic sanctity, significance and worth; resolved that Euthanasia is neither compatible with the Christian faith nor should be permitted in civil legislation.”*

### **Anglicans for Life**

promotes the Biblical view of the sanctity of human life  
at every stage of biological development  
and seeks to influence our Church and culture  
to embrace this Biblical attitude  
morally, legally and in practice.  
Anglicans for Life and its chapters reach out  
to protect life and offer compassion  
in communities across the nation.