

LIFE STANCES AND CHOICE IN DYING

A catholic viewpoint in favour of voluntary euthanasia and of assisted suicide

by Prof. Dr. Jacques POHIER

Religious concepts play a very important role among the various concepts that are brought forth in tackling the problem of choice in dying. Both my personal history and my theological background restrict the scope of my discourse to Roman Catholic concepts which often weigh very heavily in various parts of the world. Indeed in our various associations - for the right to die in dignity - we are prone to single out the Roman Catholic Church as one of our most formidable opponents. And yet, this assertion needs to be qualified.

Take France as an example. Several opinion polls, taken between 1987 and 2001, showed that regular church-going Catholics (I emphasize those adjectives) were in favour of voluntary euthanasia (64% in 1987, 71% in 2001. In 1987, 63% of those regular practicing Catholics were in favour of a law de-criminalizing voluntary euthanasia: by 2001, their percentage had reached 70%.

As for those numerous Catholics who attend church only occasionally or not at all, the percentages, both in 1987 and in 2001, were almost the same as those of the general French population (86% and 77%). Given the fact that the regularly practicing Catholics are aware of Pope John Paul II's formal, repeated and almost obsessive condemnation of voluntary euthanasia, how can one explain such a discrepancy between the opinion of the majority of French Catholics and the teachings of the Pope?

Since we are dealing with regularly practicing Catholics, we cannot invoke a lack of faith, a lack of religious observance or a lack of respect for the Church. In other areas (such as contraception, voluntary interruption of pregnancy, divorce by mutual consent), the opposition between the teachings of the hierarchy, on one hand, and the opinion and the behaviour of the practicing Catholics, on the other hand, compel one to recognize that the vast majority of regularly practicing Catholics have, in the name of their faith, different concepts of God, of life and of death, than those of the Pope and bishops. I intend to show here that this same opposition prevails in the question of "choice in dying."

First of all, a reminder: the second Vatican Council define the Church as "the people of God". Therefore, let us never say that "the Church" is against euthanasia, but only "hierarchy of the Church", not "the people of God." Neither the practicing Catholics, and, even less, the other Catholics, are our opponents. They could even - especially with our help - become our allies. Therefore, it is important to understand how, from the very viewpoint of their faith, they believe that God is not opposed to voluntary euthanasia--or to assisted suicide. I shall attempt an explanation in four points (some of which would probably apply also to Judaism and to Islam, but I shall not have time to dwell on these particular applications).

I. My first point is foremost as it shows that, even within Christianity, there are various life stances about the relationship between God and the human being. Some Christians view it as the relationship of obedience of a servant to the will of a supreme Master. Other Christians see it as a relationship of friendship between free beings. Didn't Jesus himself say "I shall no longer call you servants but friends"? Indeed many ancient Christian traditions do not

favour the servant-master model, nor even the model of a relationship between a Savior and a sinner to be redeemed, but rather the model of a friendship based on reciprocal freedom.

The most prestigious example is set by Thomas Aquinas (13th century), who was proclaimed Doctor par excellence by the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic church. Following the dogmatic part of his *Summa Theologica*, as he presents his treatise on moral human behavior, he heads the chapter with the following words: "Since the human being is made in the image of God - by which, according to John of Damascus, one is to understand that he is gifted with intelligence, with free choice and with a power to act which belongs peculiarly to him - we must, now that we have dealt with the Exemplar, which is God, and with the things which issue from His power according to His will, take up what concerns His image, that is, the human being, since he also is the initiator of his own actions, thanks to the choice and the power that he exerts over his works." (*Summa Theologica*, Ia-IIae, prologue).

Thus, freedom is at the crux of the human condition because it is through their freedom that human beings are in the image of God. The relationship is thus one of freedom to freedom. Therefore, it behoves the human being to assume, by his freedom, the essential elements of his human condition. Thereby, not only does he not enter into a contradiction with the vocation that he holds from God, but indeed he respects it and follows it (which of course does not imply that his decisions will be the right ones merely by the fact that he has made them freely, but instead implies that his decisions will not be human decisions unless they are reached freely). Therefore, the relationship between God and the humans is, according to the traditional biblical term, a relationship of Covenant, a covenant between two freedoms. Can one conclude from this finding that the death of a human being may, from a strictly Christian viewpoint, be the concern of his own freedom?

II. My second point is that is commonly held, in Christian thinking, that the human being may not apply his freedom to his own death because life is a gift from God. Since his life is considered to belong first to the God that gave it to him, the human being allegedly would have no right over his own death and therefore should not have the "choice in dying" which is a choice for God to make. However, the opposite assertion is true: precisely because life is a gift from God, the human being has the right to exercise his own freedom toward his own death.

Indeed, what prevails if the relationship between God and the human being is modeled after a relationship between two freedoms? One must grant that the answer lies first with God and His freedom. If God freely offers a gift, He does it more perfectly than anyone else, which is to say that He gives completely rather than keeping for Himself a part or all of the ownership of the gift He makes. God is neither a landlord with the human being as His tenant, nor a creditor with the human being as his debtor. If God is perfect, He gives free of charge. Far from installing the recipient of His gift in a dependent position, God installs the recipient of the gift in his autonomy, as we ourselves, human beings, do when we give from the bottom of our heart to someone we love. The quality of the donor and of the gift is appraised by the autonomy that they confer on the recipient of the gift.

Therefore, it is because God gives their life to the humans that the human being can exercise his autonomy over his life and thus over his death. As far as the beginning of life is concerned, recent history has shown that catholic women who contravene the interdictions of the hierarchy on contraception and on voluntary interruptions of pregnancy, act as if God

entrusted them with that control (in France, the practice of contraception is as commonly practiced by Catholic women as by others).

What is true for the beginning of life is true for its ending. Because human beings receive their life from God and because they are made in His image through their freedom, they have the same right to exercise their "choice in dying" as to exercise their choice to give life to another human being. This conclusion compels us to reject the following saying, even though it is classical in Christian discourse: "God gave it to me, God took it back from me, blessed be His holy name" (a saying that subscribes to the master-servant or to the owner-tenant model, and should be superseded by the biblical saying: "the gifts of God are without second thoughts").

III. My third point is the decisive impact of the radical transformation of the very concept of death on the problems of "choice in dying." We are barely beginning to measure the consequences of the transformations of the representations of the world which have intervened over the past three or four centuries. No longer is the world eternal; it has a beginning and an end; the solar system and our Earth began one day and will end some day; life on earth, the human species, the empires, the cultures, the languages were born one day and most of them have already disappeared; and the current ones will also disappear some day. The French Empire has disappeared. The French language is in the way of disappearing. May I dare to say: the British Empire will disappear; the English language may disappear one day...

In this context, it is becoming easier - and even necessary - to accept the fact that death is a natural and normal occurrence for human beings. Over the past two centuries, biological and physiological sciences have shown that death is programmed within human beings from the moment of the encounter between a sperm cell and an egg, and that this programmed death is even both necessary and useful. To quote Francois Jacob, Nobel Prize of medicine, -sexuality and death are the two great inventions of evolution."

Granted, there are still too many "accidental" deaths, deaths coming from the outside of the living being concerned; but we have gradually come to visualize death emerging from the very inside of life as a normal stage of life and a prerequisite for human existence. No longer is it possible to hold the view that death is the result, let us say, of a sin which would have made the human being mortal, or that it is the result of a decision of God, as it is still formulated in obituaries: "It pleased God to recall to Himself...". This transformation of concepts in no way prevents us from believing in God's intervention in human existence, or even from believing in resurrection. However, we are presently compelled to consider that death is a normal and natural stage of human life.

If this is how death is to be viewed, it behoves human beings - and here is the link with the "choice in dying" - to assume their death and what precedes it, just as it behoves them to assume, with their freedom, all the other normal and natural stages of their life. Their responsibility and their freedom have to assume the conditions of their death, as they have to do at all the important stages and for all the important decisions of their life (career, marriage, political or religious choices, etc.). No longer has God any reason to take away, where their death is concerned, that freedom through which He has made them in His image and which He grants them at all the levels of human life.

A human being is within his right if he chooses to go toward death without any intervention whatever. He is within his right if he decides to limit any intervention to palliative care. If he

decides to request voluntary euthanasia or assisted suicide, he also is within his right. There is no conferring an “objective superiority” to one of these choices above the others. The only qualification is that the human being concerned has, after serious deliberation, made the choice that he considered fitting his own dying. Of course, since, as in all uses of freedom, some choices can in certain circumstances, be unreasonable, it is important to engage in reflections and in discussions with others. But in and by itself, each one of these choices is reasonable as it consists truly in a “choice in dying.” If it were not so, we could no longer follow Thomas Aquinas, and so many others before him and after him, in asserting that it is by letting him be free that God has made the human being in his image.

IV. My fourth and last point is that it is therefore apparent that voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide are, among a variety of ways of dying, the free and responsible choices of the person concerned. Thus they are not choices between life and death, or of death against life, but choices of a certain way of dying. It is here that one meets the vigorous opposition to this choice which finds its inspiration in the commandment: “Thou shalt not kill”, an opposition one encounters not only in the religious hierarchy, but also in medical, political, philosophical, etc. hierarchies, and even outside of these hierarchies.

All the Associations who are represented here, and all the proponents of voluntary euthanasia and of assisted suicide consider the “Thou shall not kill” as one of the essential foundations of any civilization. But voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide are not killing, meaning “to take the life of someone against his will”. Indeed to help someone to die in the way that that person has freely chosen after due deliberation, is not killing. To respond to such a request is to help someone achieve his own goals in life and in that integral and natural part of it which is his death. This kind of assistance is just as normal as that which we try to bring to human beings in the accomplishment of their fundamental choices. Therefore, we are demanding that our countries should decriminalize euthanasia and assisted suicide, as was done in the Netherlands and in Belgium, it being understood that, based on accumulated experience, each society could set the conditions under which such assistance would be permitted, with the expressed wish of the concerned person as the only obligatory prerequisite.

A special remark concerns the physicians. Indeed one often hears the objection that the role of the physician is not to kill but to be at the service of life. Again, the concern is not about killing, but about helping to die; and if death is a part of life, and if the role of the physician is to help human beings to live better in the midst of the various functions and stages of their life, it behoves the physician to help us as much to die well as to help us to be born well, to breathe well, to digest well, to walk well, to procreate well, etc.

As regards God’s viewpoint, everything I have said emphasizes the fact that God gives us the control over our own death, even and particularly if life is a gift from God. Therefore, Christians do not betray their God but serve other human beings - and even God Himself - by helping them to die according to their will, be it by voluntary euthanasia or assisted suicide, or by palliative care (no contradiction here). If I may be allowed to bring in my personal testimony, I am a Roman Catholic (perhaps I am a heretic but I have not been excommunicated). I have helped several persons to die who had requested my assistance in their suicide. Not only do I not harbor any remorse or any guilt, but I accomplished those acts before God, and, I dare say, in His name. In peace.

In conclusion, I wish to return to the difference between those 74% of regular practicing Catholics who favour voluntary euthanasia and the 0% of the hierarchy who would favour it. Most of these 74% did not explicitly formulate for themselves the various points upon which I have just elaborated. However, I contend that their opinion is even stronger than those points, even if they could find in them the Christian support for it. Their opinion originates in what I shall call their Christian common sense" (theology, and even the Magisterium, have recognized what was called the *sensus fidelium*). They sense that God cannot be opposed to someone helping human beings in the image of God, to die the way they have chosen. They do not rebel against their hierarchy; they just abandon it, leave it aside, preferring to listen to what their conscience and their Christian common sense tell them about God and about the "choice of dying."

That is the reason why they are not the enemies of the cause our Associations are defending. What will happen to voluntary euthanasia and to assisted suicide is what happened to all the problems around conception and birth. The reflection and the actual practice of catholic women and men brought in, to the mores and to their faith, everything that the Popes prohibited. Despite the opposition of the Catholic hierarchy, countries with a Catholic majority have decriminalized those behaviours. In 1864, Pope Pie IX condemned in the *Syllabus* the Rights of Man and democracy. The common sense of the Catholics has assisted, or in any case did not prevent, the societal changes. Now the Popes themselves extol the Rights of Man and democracy. Let us not wait until they extol euthanasia. The large majority of regular practicing Catholics are not waiting either. We are grateful to them. When we meet regular practicing Catholics and discuss euthanasia with them, there are two chances out of three that they are in favour of euthanasia. Therefore, rather than confront them with a hierarchy which embarrasses them even more than it embarrasses us, let us instead say to them: "Join the club!"

Translated by Georges Reding

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