



*Welcome to the webinar on the
proposed Bishops' Statement on
Assisted-Suicide!*

To Live Each Day with Dignity: A Statement on Physician-Assisted Suicide

Webinar Hosted by the
Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities

May 24, 2011

3:00 – 4:00pm EDST



Physician-Assisted Suicide (PAS): Background

- Euthanasia movement has been active in the U.S. for decades; became more visible with a failed attempt to qualify an initiative for the 1988 California ballot (“Humane and Dignified Death Act”).
- Later initiatives qualified for state ballots, but were **rejected** by voters after intense public debate:
- Washington, 1991
- California, 1992



Background (continued): Oregon law

- An assisted suicide measure was finally approved in Oregon in 1994 (and an initiative to repeal the new law failed in 1997). Keys to the measure's approval:
- Limited to physician-assisted suicide (PAS) (no lethal injections by doctors)
- Campaign had ample financial support, and endorsement from respected local figures (e.g., former governor)
- Focus on (alleged) "safeguards"
- Appeal to the state's "frontier" mentality and indifference to religion (very unchurched state with a history of anti-Catholic sentiment): Don't let the church tell you what to do.



1994-2007: An Agenda Whose Time Had Come and Gone?

- Dr. Peter Goodwin of Oregon Right to Die: "Once we have broken through, once voters across the nation see a system that works – with safeguards that protect everyone involved – I believe we will see death with dignity legislation sweep across the country" (*Hemlock Quarterly*, October 1993).
- The reality:
- Referenda defeated elsewhere:
 - Michigan, 1998 (71% to 29%!)
 - Maine, 2000
- Legalization proposals defeated in all other state legislatures
- From 1994 to 2004, at least 13 new state laws passed to BAN assisted suicide or strengthen old laws (GA, IA, KS, KY, LA, MD, OH, OK, RI, SC, SD, TN, VA)
- 1997: U.S. Supreme Court unanimously upheld laws against PAS as valid



2008: It's Baaaack....

(The Wages of Complacency?)

- Hemlock Society “grows up”: New funding and sophistication; run not by activists but by attorneys, nurses, etc. (Kevorkian and Humphry edged out)
- Careful, nationally coordinated selection of venues: Unchurched and libertarian segments of Northwest and New England
- Hemlock’s new gentler name: “Compassion and Choices” (allowing infiltration of medical and hospice groups, “living will” policy discussions, even a congressional briefing on end of life care in health care reform)



Result: PAS resurgent

- Nov. 2008: Washington ballot initiative passes, establishing Oregon-style law
- Dec. 2009: Montana Supreme Court says the state has no policy against “aid in dying” for terminally ill (despite longstanding state law against assisting suicide)
- Serious efforts in other states: New Hampshire, Hawaii, Connecticut, Idaho, Vermont -- none has passed so far



Elements of a Renewed Church Response

- Assistance to states facing proposals (analysis and advice, help in raising funds, educational materials)
- Coalition building: Nightingale Alliance, Euthanasia Prevention Coalition, Not Dead Yet and other disability rights advocates, Patients Rights Council (new name of IAETF), sympathetic medical groups and experts, etc.
- Bishops' statement making the case against legalization and mobilizing Catholic community



Bishops' Statement: "To Live Each Day with Dignity"

- To be voted on at U.S. bishops' general meeting in Seattle, June 16, 2011
- First statement by all U.S. bishops on this issue (NCCB Administrative Committee issued a brief "Statement on Euthanasia" in September 1991 before Washington vote)
- Not a teaching document as such, or a complete view of Church teaching on end-of-life issues
- A policy statement, directed to those who make public policy and to Catholics who may influence them



Key Elements of Bishops' Statement

- Begins **and** ends by acknowledging people's fears about the dying process, and supporting genuine solutions
- Recounts policy background and the revival of this debate
- A radical change in society – opposed not only by Catholic teaching but by many religions, moral concerns of millions, Hippocratic oath undergirding medicine as a profession
- Proponents evade seriousness of issue through euphemism: “aid in dying”; “Compassion and Choices” (new name for Hemlock Society)



Responding to claims about “choice” and “compassion”

- Main body of statement explores two central claims by the assisted suicide movement:
 - 1. Does this agenda promote free **choices**?
 - 2. Does it promote true **compassion**?
- Both times the answer is “no,” and several reasons are given (ranging from the practical to the more deeply principled).



Physician-Assisted Suicide Does Not Promote Free Choices Because...

- 1. Most people who attempt suicide suffer from depression and mental disturbance – they need to be freed **from** these influences; but the proposed laws do little to address this or even allow scrutiny of the problem
- 2. Undue influence and pressure (even including financial pressure) from a society that has officially declared the suicides of some people to be good and acceptable, unlike suicides by others
- 3. Because our first right is life itself, undermining the value of some people's lives will undermine respect for their freedom as well – see legal systems where voluntary has led to involuntary euthanasia



Physician-Assisted Suicide Fails to Promote Compassion Because...

- 1. It focuses not on eliminating the suffering but on eliminating the person; true “com-compassion”, “suffering with” the patient and dedicating oneself to meeting his or her needs, presupposes a commitment to the equal worth of that person
- 2. “Compassion” not rooted in such respect for the person inevitably finds more and more cases where suffering is serious enough to justify assisted death – e.g., chronic illness, disability
- 3. Can **increase** suffering – by worsening the emotional and spiritual suffering of feeling worthless and “a burden,” and by undermining society’s commitment to optimum palliative care



Offering “A Better Way”

- Statement ends by advancing what Blessed John Paul II called “the way of love and true mercy” – brief account of Catholic ethics on ordinary/extraordinary means, control of pain, and solidarity with/care for persons facing the end of life .
- A call for Catholics to work with others to uphold the right of each of us to **live** with dignity to the end of our days: “We can help build a world in which love is stronger than death.”



On Documentation

- Statement makes factual claims about current laws, the role of depression, the “slippery slope,” etc.
- Instead of footnotes, statement will direct readers to a web site featuring fact sheets on each point and other supportive material
- Site will include an online version of the statement with live link to each fact sheet from the relevant passage
- Thus statement will have long active life, while supporting documentation is constantly updated and supplemented



Projected Fact Sheets for Site to Include...

- Suicide: The role of depression
- Statements of medical societies/medical experts
- From voluntary to involuntary
- From terminal illness to disability etc.
- Assisted suicide as threat to equal protection
- Assisted suicide as threat to good palliative care
- Lessons from Oregon and Washington state
- Lessons from the Netherlands



Is Victory Achievable? Recent Lesson from Vermont

- November 2010: Vermont widely seen as next domino to fall; legislature had pro-assisted suicide majority, and new governor called legalization a high priority. Liberal state with libertarian profile; national assisted groups targeted it for their next victory. Those opposing assisted suicide developed a strategic plan.
- A credible non-denominational voice already in place, from past debates: Vermont Alliance for Ethical Healthcare, founded by Dr. Robert Orr. Close collaboration with disability rights community.
- New grassroots organization, True Dignity Vermont.
- Campaign for educating legislators and constituents; letter writing to legislators and newspapers; TV ads and public access TV; speaking tour of Catholic deaneries
- **Outcome: NO action on legalization bill in Vermont in 2010**



Other Recent Lessons

- Idaho: “Compassion and Choices” campaign to get medical society supporting PAS created backlash – led to new state law AGAINST assisted suicide
- Connecticut: Lawsuit designed to carve out legal loophole for “aid in dying” dismissed by courts
- New Hampshire: Overwhelming vote against legalization measure
- Since Washington in 2008, no proposal for PAS has passed – but we have learned that complacency is not an option



In Conclusion

- General suggestions:
- Join debate from concern for responsible policy, using non-religious arguments in public arena
- Dismantle euphemisms, “tell it like it is”
- Make common cause especially with concerned medical and disability advocates
- Offer positive solutions grounded in the equal dignity of all, especially poor and vulnerable



Embargoed Resource Webpage

www.usccb.org/toliveeachday

On www.usccb.org/toliveeachday you'll find:

- Internal advance resources
- For state & diocesan officials and their official consultants
- Embargoed/private until bishops' approval of the policy statement
- Password access required
- Privacy restrictions will be lifted at that time
- Page to receive "facelift" with updating of entire USCCB site (Summer 2011)

Bishops and diocesan staff may request password access to the page by sending an email citing diocesan affiliation to [Lucy McVicker](mailto:LucyMcVicker@usccb.org) (lmcvicker@usccb.org) in the Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities.