

The way of suicide, assisted suicide and euthanasia, or *Evangelium Vitae's* way of mercy and compassion?

There is a passage in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel, *The Idiot*, in which the character, Ippolit, imposes upon a small gathering of friends in the early hours of the morning to listen to a lengthy written explanation of why he intends to kill himself. Ippolit is twenty years of age and dying of consumption. He is suffering - physically, emotionally and spiritually - and his life has 'assumed such grotesque and humiliating forms' that he wishes to end it now. And so, Ippolit gives voice to this challenge.

...by what right and with what motive would anyone take it into his head to impugn my right now to do what I liked with the two or three weeks I have left to live? What business is it of any court of law? Who wants me not only to be sentenced to death, but also to wait, like a good fellow, for the sentence to be carried out at the right time? Does anyone really want it? For morality's sake? I quite understand that if, while full of vigour and in the best of health, I were to take my life which might be 'of use to my fellow men', etc., morality might reproach me in the conventional way for having disposed of my life without permission, or for some other reason of its own. But now - now that the date of my death sentence has been fixed? What sort of morality is it that demands not only your life but also the last death-rattle with which you surrender the last atom of your life?¹

Ippolit's questions resound from the pages of this 19th century Russian novel, to the hospital wards, medical clinics and homes of contemporary Australia. By what 'right and by what motive' can anyone prevent me from killing myself (suicide), refuse to assist me kill myself (assisted suicide), or refuse to kill me at my request (voluntary euthanasia), so that my suffering would cease? What business is it of any doctor, lawyer or priest, yet alone those who directly love and care for me, to stand in the way of my choice to die? Today, the call for the acceptance, legalization and facilitation of assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia brings all of these questions together and packages them with an appeal for compassion and respect for the autonomy and dignity of the person. For the most part, though, these are expressions of impoverished notions of the meaning and value of human life and freedom. The truth about God and man, however, can speak through the confusion and bias of this age, to light up the way of true mercy and compassion. Christian morality instructs us that we do not have to buckle under the weight of Ippolit's questions and resign ourselves to killing. What then, is the merciful and compassionate response to Ippolit's questions, and what is also arguably, his cry for help?

Evangelium Vitae, is the first encyclical letter devoted to bioethical issues.² Foremost among the aims of this encyclical on the "Value and Inviolability of Human Life" is a restatement and explanation of the Church's teaching on the immorality of suicide, assisted suicide and euthanasia.³ However, it is clear from *Evangelium Vitae*, that the pope recognizes the Church's mission to both proclaim *and* give a clear account of the reasons for this moral teaching. *Evangelium Vitae* also attempts to expose and address the underlying anthropological, cultural and moral presuppositions which lead to the acceptance of euthanasia, suicide and other crimes and attacks against human life. The Pope acknowledges that in the face of suffering we all confront the growing temptation "...to take control of death and bring it about before its time, 'gently' ending one's own life or the life of others." Yet, he also demonstrates that: "*In reality, what might seem logical and humane, when looked at more closely is seen to be senseless and inhumane.*"⁴

¹ Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *The Idiot*. Translated with and introduction by David Magarshack, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1955, p.397.

² John Paul II. *Evangelium Vitae: Encyclical Letter on The Value and Inviolability of Human Life*. Homebush: St Pauls, 1995.

³ Having already affirmed Church teaching that the direct killing of an innocent human being is *always* gravely immoral (n. 57.), *Evangelium Vitae* clearly states that "...euthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person." (n.65) Suicide too, when viewed objectively, is described as a gravely immoral act, and to assist in suicide is to cooperate in an injustice which can never be excused, even if it is requested." (n.66)

Here, euthanasia is to be understood as "...an action or omission which of itself and by intention causes death, with the purpose of eliminating all suffering." (n.65) By this account, therefore, euthanasia must be distinguished from decisions to forego or withdraw burdensome or futile medical treatment, or the administration of analgesic or sedative medication in the terminal stages of illness where the intention is to relieve undue pain or agitation.

John Paul II's starting point in *Evangelium Vitae* is once again to reflect upon the individual in society. From this perspective, he proposes that **at the heart of the acceptance of euthanasia is the denial or neglect of the human person's fundamental relationship to God.**⁵ Throughout a lengthy discussion of present day threats to human life, he describes this as having become concretized in two main ways – in an *eclipse of the value of human life, and the emergence of a culture that denies solidarity*. Indeed, this fundamental eclipse of the sense of God and of man is seen to be the root cause of the practical materialism, individualism, utilitarianism and hedonism which so pervade contemporary culture, particularly that of the affluent 'West'.⁶ "When God is not acknowledged as God, the profound meaning of man is betrayed and communion between people is compromised."⁷

With regard to the **value of life**, *Evangelium Vitae* observes of contemporary man, that:

Enclosed in the narrow horizon of his physical nature, he is somehow reduced to being a "thing", and no longer grasps the "transcendent" character of his "existence as man". He no longer considers life as a splendid gift of God, something "sacred" entrusted to his responsibility and thus also to his loving care and "veneration. Life itself becomes a mere "thing", which man claims as his exclusive property, completely subject to his control and manipulation.⁸

The suggestion is that if life is seen to have no meaning and purpose beyond what we experience here and now, the only values 'worth living for' become those such as autonomy, success, beauty, strength, pleasure, and increasingly, economic productivity and consumption.⁹ When disease, illness or disability conspire to deprive us of these, life appears to have been emptied of value. Life comes to be regarded as a burden and perhaps even unbearably meaningless. At the same time, if we regard life as having no intrinsic meaning and value besides that which we give to it, it is little wonder that we reject as outright the meaning and value of undesirable 'givens' such as pain, suffering and dependency. It is at these times that, like Ippolit, we might *feel* that we would be 'better off dead'. Related to this, is the even more disturbing temptation to make such 'quality of life' judgements about the lives of others and make them our 'death project' without their consent.¹⁰

Of course, by the Christian understanding, we ought to shirk from suffering.¹¹ Suffering, as an encounter with evil, is always terrible. As John Paul II writes: "Suffering is the undergoing of evil, before which man shudders. He says: 'Let it pass from me,' just as Christ says in Gethsemane."¹² Suffering is not to be sought or celebrated for its own sake. It is a sign and a consequence of the fact that things are not as they should be - a consequence of humankind's sin. At the same time, however, Christians also hold that while this evil is in some mysterious way permitted by God, it is never caused by God.¹³ And if it is true that God

Although it may be foreseen that these acts may hasten death, this is not euthanasia as the intention is not to end life, but to relieve symptoms and the burdens of disproportionate treatments.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *EV* n.23.

⁷ *EV* n.36.

⁸ *EV* n.22.

⁹ *EV* n.23.

¹⁰ Thus, John Paul II writes in *Evangelium Vitae*: "The choice of euthanasia becomes more serious when it takes the form of a *murder* committed by others on a person who has in no way requested it and who never consented to it. The height of arbitrariness and injustice is reached when certain people, such as physicians or legislators, arrogate to themselves the power to decide who ought to live and who ought to die." *EV* n.66.

¹¹ David Jones writes: "It is right for us to rail against our sufferings and recoil from the evil that they represent. This may not seem very pious, but it is the attitude of Job, Jeremiah and many of the Psalms. Jesus himself did not welcome suffering but shrank from it, praying "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (Mat 26:39). If we are to imitate Christ then we too should accept suffering as our lot only when it cannot be avoided or when it is for some great good." Ref: Jones, David. "The encounter with suffering in the practice of medicine in the light of Christian revelation," in *Issues for a Catholic Bioethic*, edited by Luke Gormally, London: The Linacre Centre, 1999, p.166.

¹² John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris, Apostolic Letter on the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*, February 11, 1984. Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1984, n. 18.

¹³ By 'mysterious' permission, I imply that there remains a very clear limit to the extent to which we are able to explain why a loving God continues to allow suffering. David Jones' helpful essay points out that while it is possible to give a very general metaphysical account that shows that the reality of suffering is compatible with the reality of a

permits suffering, it is also true that God never abandons the human person to the evil of suffering and death. Indeed, it is God's desire to transform the experience of suffering into an encounter with goodness and life. Obviously, however, a culture which denies or neglects its fundamental relationship to God, is unable to perceive any such meaning or value in suffering. In this situation, suffering is not only an encounter with evil, but an encounter with the greatest of evils to which the only logical response is despair.¹⁴

In this context, *Evangelium Vitae* displays the Church's awareness of, and sensitivity towards the suffering of others. John Paul II is aware of the many factors which can contribute to the judgement that a life is no longer worth living. He demonstrates an appreciation of the anguish, discomfort and desperation brought on by intense and prolonged suffering, such that the suffering individual risks feeling overwhelmed by his or her own frailty, or becomes the object of an understandable, if misplaced compassion.¹⁵ Throughout *Evangelium Vitae*, then, we encounter not so much an expression of condemnation towards those who fall into despair, but an expression of heartfelt grief and regret that they could lose sight of God and the great value of our lives.

Another major theme throughout *Evangelium Vitae* is that by neglecting our fundamental relationship to God, we have also lost sight of our inherent relationality with other people. **Solidarity** is no longer considered to be an intrinsic component of the human condition¹⁶, with its own obligations to both give *and* receive. While Christian faith would always want to affirm values such as independence and individuality, it also affirms the humble acceptance of limitation and the gracious acceptance of care as a necessary part of the human condition.¹⁷ John Paul II observes that we are increasingly beset by a "mentality which *carries the concept of subjectivity to an extreme* and even distorts it, and recognizes as a subject of rights only the person who enjoys full or at least incipient autonomy and who emerges from a state of total dependence on others." At the same time, we increasingly have recourse to "...a notion of freedom which exalts the isolated individual in an absolute way, and gives no place to solidarity, to openness to others and service of them."¹⁸ Both of these profoundly influence the way in which we approach our own inevitable suffering and death, and the way in which we respond to the suffering of others.

But is there a God who entrusts life to us as a gift; who confers intrinsic value on our lives; who gives us to each other so as to discover and realize ourselves through giving *and* receiving? If our answer to these questions is a resounding "yes" – or even a small and feeble act of faith – suicide and euthanasia are indeed senseless and inhumane.

Chapter II of *Evangelium Vitae* proclaims "The Christian Message Concerning Life" in all its profundity, as a source of freedom and hope. Like all good Catholic morality, this is consistent with the truth about the value and inviolability of human life which can be known by all people of good will through the exercise of their natural reason.¹⁹ At the same time however, because the human person is ordained to God, an end which surpasses the grasp of human reason, and often impeded by the effects of sin from understanding truths which human reason could have discovered, we must also have recourse to those truths which are taught to us by divine revelation.²⁰ Certainly, even the best philosophical arguments about the immorality

single source of all that is good, and to recognize the love of God in creation and redemption, it is not possible to explain why God allows suffering despite loving us. Ref: *Issues for a Catholic Bioethic*, pp. 159-165.

¹⁴ *EV* n. 15.

¹⁵ *EV* n.15. See also *EV* 11.

¹⁶ *EV* n.12.

¹⁷ Stanley Hauerwas makes an insightful comment along these lines. "Suicide is not first a judgement about the agent, but a reminder that we have failed to embody as a community the commitment not to abandon one another. We fear being a burden for others, but even more to ourselves. Yet it is only by recognizing that in fact we are inescapably a burden that we face the reality and opportunity of living truthfully."

Hauerwas, Stanley. *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped and the Church*. Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986, p106.

¹⁸ *EV* n.19.

¹⁹ A clear affirmation of 'natural law' morality can be found at the very beginning of *Evangelium Vitae*: "Even in the midst of difficulties and uncertainties, every person sincerely open to truth and goodness can, by the light of reason and the hidden action of grace, come to recognize in the natural law written in the heart (cf. Rom 2:14-15) the sacred value of human life from its very beginning until its end." *EV* n.2.

²⁰ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae*, 1,1.

of suicide and voluntary euthanasia can lose their persuasiveness under the weight of anguish and pain, and before the mystery of suffering and death. Thus, it is ultimately from Christian revelation, particularly in the person of Jesus, that we learn the truth about every man and every woman. Ultimately, we discover the Gospel of Life most clearly in the blood of Christ. This is the concrete revelation of "...*how precious man is in God's eyes and how priceless the value of his life,* " and that man's "...greatness, and therefore his vocation, consists in *the sincere gift of self.*"²¹

It is here that we discover that man is not 'enclosed in the narrow horizon of his physical nature', but instead:

Man is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God. The loftiness of this supernatural vocation reveals the greatness and the inestimable worth of human life even in its temporal phase. Life in time, in fact, is the fundamental condition, the initial stage and an integral part of the entire unified process of human existence. It is a process which, unexpectedly and undeservedly, is enlightened by the promise and renewed by the fit of divine life, which will reach its full realization in eternity (cf. 1Jn 3: 1-2)²²

Revelation informs and enriches our understanding of human dignity and vocation by revealing our true origin and end. Within this context, we discover the truth that human life, however burdened, is always of inviolable and inestimable value. Although it may sometimes seem mysterious, perhaps even absurd in light of grave suffering, life is always intrinsically good. Hence, the choice to dispose of one's own life, or to kill another person, even out of the noble motive of relieving suffering, is always a rejection of the goodness of life, of the Creator's gift and plan.

It is also within this horizon that we discover the true meaning of freedom. *Evangelium Vitae* recalls the truth that freedom possesses an *inherently relational dimension*.²³ On one hand, freedom is always related to truth. Freedom is not unlimited or unfocussed, but finds its fulfillment and perfection in the moral law given by God who alone is good, knows perfectly what is good for man, and by virtue of his love proposes this good to man.²⁴ We are reminded that our attitude towards our own lives ought to be that of a steward and not a master. Man is a creature to whom God has granted being and life *as a gift and a duty*, and it is only by acknowledging his innate dependence that he can live and use his freedom to the full.²⁵ Life on earth is a sacred reality, entrusted to man. By this understanding, then, seeking death as an end to suffering is never a legitimate expression of individual freedom, but a rejection of the gift of life.

Evangelium Vitae also emphasizes the notion that freedom possesses an inherently relational dimension insofar as it is a gift of God which is to be placed at the service of the person and of his fulfillment through the gift of self and openness to others.²⁶ We are not free, therefore, to choose to act in ways that directly sever the bonds of solidarity between ourselves and others. Understood in this way, the choice to commit suicide, request assistance with suicide, or submit to euthanasia does not only involve rejection of love of self and of God's absolute sovereignty over life and death, but also the renunciation of the obligation of justice and charity towards one's neighbour, the communities to which one belongs, and towards society as a whole.²⁷ Admittedly, it is often difficult to appreciate how a chronically or terminally ill person's choice to die, can be regarded as an unjust or uncharitable act. We may say, 'Surely they are the 'victims' of their suffering, not us? However, choosing to kill or be killed gives witness to the idea that under certain conditions and circumstances, life ceases to have intrinsic value and dignity and that when this is the case,

²¹ EV n.25.

²² EV n.1.

²³ EV n.19.

²⁴ John Paul II. *Veritatis Splendor: Encyclical Letter on Certain Fundamental Questions of the Church's Moral teaching*. Homebush: St Pauls, 1993, n.35.

²⁵ EV n.96.

²⁶ EV n.18.

²⁷ EV n.66. See also: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on Euthanasia*, May 5, 1980, n. I ;and *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 2281-2283.

the world would be a better place if such people were dead.²⁸ This has grave implications for the way in which society values the life of other vulnerable people. John Paul II warns that if we detach ourselves from the truth of life, we condemn ourselves to meaninglessness and unhappiness and possibly become a threat to the existence of others as the "...barriers guaranteeing respect for life and the defence of life, in every circumstance, have been broken down."²⁹ At the same time, this act can offend others insofar as it represents a rejection of their care.³⁰ Hence, it may even be the case that the suffering are called to show mercy upon those who surround them: a heroic perseverance and acceptance of care which could at times paradoxically become a more generous and sanctifying act than that performed for them by their carers. Writing about *Evangelium Vitae* and euthanasia, Edmund Pellegrino suggests that: "The way a dying person dies may be the last gift of self as an example to those who survive."³¹

Evangelium Vitae reminds us then, that: "Man's life comes from God; it is his gift, his image and imprint, a sharing in the breath of life. God therefore is the sole Lord of this life: man cannot do with it as he wills." However as John Paul II immediately follows:

If it is true that human life is in the hands of God, it is no less true that these are loving hands, like those of a mother who accepts, nurtures and takes care of her child.³²

The truth of life, revealed in the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" and indeed in the whole moral law, is not an arbitrary imposition of divine will but an expression of the providential love of God for all human persons. The gift is a commandment and the commandment is a gift.³³ The absolute prohibition of suicide and voluntary euthanasia is given to urge us not to abandon ourselves to despair in the face of suffering, but to walk the path that leads to blessedness. Furthermore, the human person is never abandoned to the face the demands of this law in his or her own strength, but has available that new heart and new spirit (Ezek 36:25-26 and Jer 31:34) found in life in Christ.

At the same time that this 'life in Christ' empowers the person to endure suffering, it also transforms the very meaning of human suffering. The light of salvation now shines upon every suffering. As John Paul II wrote in *Salvifici Doloris*:

Human suffering has reached its culmination in the passion of Christ. And at the same time it has entered into a completely new dimension and a new order: It has been linked to love...to that love which creates good, drawing it out by means of suffering, just as the supreme good of the redemption of the world was drawn from the cross of Christ and from that cross constantly takes its beginning.³⁴

Suffering remains evil, yet now the redeeming love of Christ draws goodness out of evil. Suffering remains a mystery, yet now, the redeeming love of Christ empowers us to live and die with hope in the face of the mystery. In *Evangelium Vitae*, John Paul II recalling the words of St Paul – "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we are the Lord's" (*Rom 14:7*) – explains 'dying to the Lord' as experiencing death at the hour chosen by God, and therefore, as the supreme act of obedience to the Father. He explains 'living to

²⁸ Finnis, John. "A philosophical case against euthanasia," *Euthanasia Examined: Ethical, Clinical and Legal Perspectives*. Ed. John Keown, Cambridge: CUP 1995, p. 34.

²⁹ *EV* n. 48.

³⁰ This is one of the main reasons against voluntary euthanasia proposed by Stanley Hauerwas in his book, *Suffering Presence*, p.106. : "For our creaturely status is but a reminder that our existence is not secured by our own power, but rather requires the constant care of, and trust in, others. Our willingness to live in the face of suffering, pain, and sheer boredom of life is morally a service to one another as it is a sign that life can be endured and moreover our living can be done with joy and exuberance. Our obligation to sustain our lives even when they are threatened with, or require living with, a horrible disease is our way of being faithful to the trust that has sustained us in health and now in illness. We take on a responsibility as sick people. That responsibility is simply to keep on living, as it is our way of gesturing to those who care for us that we can be trusted and trust them even in our illness". Hauerwas, Stanley. *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped and the Church*. Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986,p106.

³¹ Pellegrino, Edmund. "Physician-Assisted Suicide: John Paul II's Dialogue with the Culture and Ethics of Contemporary Medicine," in *Choosing Life: A Dialogue on Evangelium Vitae*, Kevin Wm. Wildes, S.J. and Alan C. Mitchell, eds. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1997, p.243.

³² *EV* n. 39.

³³ *EV* n.52.

³⁴ *Salvifici doloris*, n.18.

the Lord', as recognizing that suffering can always become a source of good – to grow more fully conformed to Christ and more closely associated with his redemptive work on behalf of the Church and humanity.³⁵

What then, is the merciful and compassionate way of responding to Ippolit's suffering? Clearly, Ippolit does not have the right to kill himself, just as no person ever has the 'right' to kill the innocent. This is much more than a pragmatic conclusion. Moral truth impugns his right. Insofar as a court of law should give witness to moral truth, it is the business of law to protect him and others from this act. Insofar as the medical profession should always seek to do no unnecessary harm and to provide care and comfort if it cannot cure, it is the business of medicine to resist cooperation with every act of voluntary euthanasia or suicide and to give practical expression to the value of human life in other ways.³⁶ And insofar as we are called to proclaim the moral law, it is the business of the Church to prevent him from this, but not as Ippolit would put it, simply "for morality's sake". Ultimately, it is for Ippolit's very own sake and salvation that we should impugn his supposed 'right' to kill himself.

John Paul II wrote in *Veritatis Splendor*, that genuine understanding and compassion must mean love for the person, for his true good and for his authentic freedom. This love cannot be shown, therefore, by concealing or weakening the moral truth which is at the service of man's growth in freedom and happiness.³⁷ Again in *Evangelium Vitae*, the Pope warns against alternative, yet widely accepted notions of compassion, particularly as they are used by advocates of voluntary euthanasia. We need to recall that, generally speaking, there are two levels at which 'compassion' can operate. Compassion may only refer to an emotion – a natural feeling which is morally neutral in itself. In its fullest sense, however, compassion is said to refer to mercy, which being a virtue, disposes someone to act in morally upright ways. St Thomas Aquinas describes 'mercy' as compassion for the misery of another; to grieve over another's misfortune.³⁸ Here, then, mercy is more than a movement of the sense appetite – of the emotions of feelings. It is a movement of the intellective appetite, which can regulate the lower sense appetite by right reason.³⁹

Therefore, compassionate feelings which are integrated with mercy, share in the virtue's goodness, while compassionate feelings which are not integrated with mercy run the risk of inclining people to act unreasonably.⁴⁰ Compassion may accompany our moral actions, but it can never justify them.⁴¹ People may be moved by compassion, yet fail to fulfill responsibilities for fear of inflicting hardship. As the moral theologian Germain Grisez rightly notes, a secularized culture which tends to regard altruistic sentiments as a sound guide to right and wrong, overlooks the potential moral ambiguity of compassionate feelings and reduces morality to attempts to minimize pain and suffering. If supposed 'compassion' moves us to comply with the intentional death of the suffering, we are complying with a morally wrong choice and not acting with compassion. As Grisez reminds us that "...charity creates, sustains, nurtures, and cherishes; it never destroys. Therefore, loving self and neighbour with charity and acting with authentic mercy, one never will choose to kill oneself or anyone else."⁴² This, then, is what John Paul II is suggesting in *Evangelium Vitae* when he writes:

Even when not motivated by a selfish refusal to be burdened with the life of someone who is suffering, euthanasia must be called a false mercy, and indeed a disturbing "perversion" of mercy.

³⁵ EV n. 67. See also *Salvifici Doloris*, n 14-24.

³⁶ In this context, *Evangelium Vitae* states that: "Moreover the act of euthanasia appears all the more perverse if it is carried out by those, like relatives, who are supposed to treat a family member with patience and love, or by those, such as doctors, who by virtue of their specific profession are supposed to care for the sick person even in the most painful terminal stages." n. 66.

³⁷ *Veritatis Splendor*, n. 95.

³⁸ Aquinas, St Thomas. *Summa Theologicae*, 2a.2ae. 30,2. Blackfriars Edition. Thomas Gilby (General Editor), Vol 34 (2a2ae. 23-33), "Charity." R.J. Batten O.P. (Trans.), London: Blackfriars, 1974.

³⁹ *ibid*, ST 2a,2ae. 30,3.

⁴⁰ Grisez, Germain. "Death in Theological Reflection," in *The Dignity of the Dying Person: Proceedings of the 5th Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life, Feb 1999*, edited by Juan de Dios Vial Correa and Elio Sgreccia, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, p. 158.

⁴¹ Pellegrino, in *Choosing Life*, p.244.

⁴² *ibid*. p. 159.

True "compassion" leads to sharing another's pain; it does not kill the person whose suffering we cannot bear.⁴³

Undoubtedly, this is one of those instances where moral theology must leave the green slopes of the Mount of the Beatitudes and stand at the foot of the cross. To many people this understanding of mercy and compassion may look like the sort of morality which Ippolit so disdains; "...that demands not only your life, but also the last death-rattle with which you surrender the last atom of your life". It is here, therefore, that we face the real challenge of responding to Ippolit's discourse, lest our moral theology becomes empty piety. Ultimately, our response must give *practical* expression to the importance of rooting the virtue of mercy, not in acts of annihilation, but in acts of acceptance, reintegration and care. As *Evangelium Vitae* reminds us:

The request which arises from the human heart in the supreme confrontation with suffering and death, especially when faced with the temptation to give up in utter desperation is above all a request for companionship, sympathy and support in the time of trial. It is a plea for help to keep on hoping when all human hope fails.⁴⁴

The mission of Christian health care has always given a particular prominence to the care of the dying and those suffering from disabling and chronic illness. *Evangelium Vitae* reaffirms the value of palliative care, either in institutions or the home, especially where suffering, pain and death are acknowledged in their human and specifically Christian meaning.⁴⁵ Medical and nursing care that respects and reveres the dying process, aimed not at an unreasonable vitalism, but at the relief of symptoms and the proper discernment and withdrawal of burdensome or futile treatments, is the proper basis of compassionate care.

Caring for the person will also involve supportive counseling and pastoral care. For some people, this may involve amongst other things, the presentation of a better account of the transcendental meaning of suffering. The experience of suffering is at the outset an experience of evil which may have become an obstacle to acknowledging the reality of a transcendent good God.⁴⁶ Indeed, the question "why?" often lies at the heart of the experience of suffering, defining its very content.⁴⁷ Through sharing the quest for answers, however partial these answers may be, good pastoral care can begin to foster acceptance and courage, trust and hope. Good pastoral care will also recognize the indispensable place of sacraments; for the Christian, those Sacraments of the Church which are a source of grace and virtue, as well as those everyday 'sacraments' - the tangible and efficacious signs of our love and care by which we express God's love for all persons. To help people to die means *to help them to live* intensely the final experience of their lives.⁴⁸

It is possible, therefore, to answer Ippolit's questions and propose a genuinely merciful and compassionate response, which does not make concession to his 'right' to kill himself. Within a proper understanding of human dignity and freedom, Ippolit does not have the 'right' to do whatever he likes with his life. At the

⁴³ *EV* n.66.

⁴⁴ *EV* n.67.

⁴⁵ *EV* n. 88.

⁴⁶ Jones, David. *Issues for a Catholic Bioethic*, p. 161.

⁴⁷ John Paul II comments upon this in *Salvifici Doloris* n.9, and notes that this 'why' does not only "...accompany human suffering, but it seems even to determine its human content, what makes suffering precisely human. It is obvious that the pain, especially physical pain, is widespread in the animal world. But only the suffering human being knows what he is suffering and wonders why; and he suffers in a humanly speaking still deeper way if he does not find a satisfactory answer."

⁴⁸ Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers, *Charter For Health Care Workers*, Vatican City, 1995, n. 116.

Catholic Health Australia's *Code of Ethical Standards*, states that: "In receiving physical, psychological, social and spiritual support, patients may need help to make the most of what remains of their lives, not only by the alleviation of their suffering but also by the respect accorded their personal dignity and the quality of their being. Vulnerable patients many need to be protected from pressures which lower their self esteem or encourage self-abandonment. They may need help not only with the many symptoms of illness such as pain and discomfort and its psychological sequelae such as anxiety, fear and distress, but also with its spiritual effects such as crises of faith, hope and love." Catholic Health Australia, *Code of Ethical Standards for Catholic Health and Aged Care Services in Australia*. Canberra: Catholic Health Australia, 2001, n 5.5.

same time, however, this understanding of dignity and freedom also informs our own Christian vocation of charity and mercy, so that by our evangelization and acts of love, the Church can authentically proclaim the Gospel of Life. As we face this challenge, it pays take note of John Paul II's turn of phrase throughout *Evangelium Vitae*. Our present age is characterized and beset by an 'eclipse' of the sense of God and of man, but it is only an eclipse. This is but a temporary overshadowing of truth. Truth remains, and it is well within our grasp.

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