

Opinion Piece in the newspaper Le Droit - September 26, 2006

Today, some people promote the legalization of euthanasia and assisted suicide because, they say, we should all have the right to choose the time and means of our own death. They argue that society doesn't have the right to impose continued suffering on us by forcing us to live against our will.

This point of view is the mantra of the 16th Conference of the World Federation of Right to Die Societies, happening in Toronto on September 7-10. This major international event focuses on "how to move a social agenda forward based on the concept of individual choice". In other words, how to legalize "mercy killing" in the name of individual rights and freedom.

The phrase "individual choice" sounds appealing in our freedom-loving society. However, these words are harmfully misleading when applied to assisted death. Euthanasia and assisted suicide are not purely personal choices; rather, they require the legal approval of society and the participation of other citizens in acts that many view as ethically wrong. They are in their truest sense social actions.

So we should be talking about "collective choice" rather than "individual choice." Do we want to become the kind of society that supports the weakest in weeding themselves out? What about compassionately killing the depressed, the elderly with pneumonia, newborns with malformations and children with cerebral palsy? All of these can now be put out of their misery in the Netherlands.

If we listen to right-to-die advocates, these developments are only logical. It's all about having a life that's "worth living" by avoiding suffering, and all about maintaining personal dignity, which they say decreases as the body is distorted by illness and pain.

But consider the other side of the coin. Might it be that a life overwhelmed by suffering is still worth living? Perhaps it is an invitation to moral and spiritual growth. Might it be that human dignity does not decrease as the body is attacked by illness? Perhaps dignity belongs to us by virtue of being human rather than based on our autonomy, health or usefulness to society. Might it be that the suffering are calling us to human solidarity? Perhaps what we need to give to the sick, dying and disabled is not a premature death, but more care and more love. This is true compassion.

So we can do the easy thing, and offer death to people at the time of their life when they are most vulnerable. Or we can do the more demanding and human thing: when our brothers and sisters feel alone and on the verge of despair, we can assure them of their inalienable worth and dignity. We can show

them that they matter to us and are not mere burdens. We can roll up our sleeves and accompany them as they naturally end their earthly pilgrimage. They still have so much to teach us.

The current push to legalize euthanasia and assisted suicide requires us to choose what sort of Canada we want. If we really believe that all Canadian citizens are equal, we should protect everyone equally by maintaining the legal prohibition of killing. This is essential to the basic trust of living together.

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