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Is It Wrong to Wish For Death?

by

Germain Grisez

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As readers may know, I am working on a multivolume restatement of Catholic moral theology under the general title, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*. The work is meant to be both up-to-date and entirely faithful to the Church's teaching. Volume one, *Christian Moral Principles*, was published in 1983, and volume two, *Living a Christian Life*, in 1993. I now am working on a third volume, *Difficult Moral Questions*. This volume will include many timely questions of interest to physicians and other health care professionals.

Each question will be presented pretty much as someone has asked it, or might have asked it, of me. Then, after a brief analysis of the essential ethical elements of the question, I will propose an answer, including not only the necessary moral theological explanation but any additional suggestions and advice that I think would be appropriate. Thus, the volume will serve as a training manual for seminarians and others whose professional work will require them to respond to people's moral questions not in a narrowly legalistic way but in a way as helpful as possible for dealing constructively with problems.

The following is one of the questions on which I am working. The response given here will be revised further before the book is published. So, I will welcome readers' letters with criticisms and suggestions for improvement. I also will be glad to receive other difficult moral questions to which readers have been unable to obtain an answer.

Statement of the question:

I do volunteer work at a nursing home. Most of the residents are elderly, and very few ever will be able to leave. Some have few, if any, visitors. I visit some of these regularly, try to make friends with them, get some of them involved in simple activities, bring them little gifts, and, in general, try to brighten their lives.

Many of these elderly friends are bored and have little to look forward to in this life. Most are not sick with anything in particular; they are not dying of something. But they are debilitated, burdened with various handicaps and health problems, and more or less depressed. Some regularly speak of death, clearly looking forward to it eagerly, and some who are religious pray to die soon.

I know that wishing for something can be a sin of thought. Wishing to commit adultery is adultery in the heart, and wishing that an enemy would die certainly seems to be a serious sin of hatred. Is it wrong for these elderly friends of mine to wish for death? I am not asking whether they are sinning, for I realize only God knows that, but whether what they are doing is wrong in itself. And if it is, how should I respond to talk of the sort I have described?

Another point. Federal law requires the nursing home to give patients information about their rights to refuse treatment and give advance directives excluding life-sustaining treatment in case they become terminally ill. Most patients in the nursing home have signed such directives, and one of my friends there told me that makes sense because "we are just waiting here to die and don't want to be kept alive longer than necessary." Since I did not know what to say in reply, I just changed the subject. What should I have said?

Analysis:

Two related but distinct moral questions are presented here. The first is whether wishing for death is the matter of sin, that is, whether a person with a correct conscience would judge that he or she should not wish for death. The answer to the question depends on whether the wish for death involves an unreasonable act of the will. The phrase *wish for death* is ambiguous. Sometimes it does refer to a state of mind involving an unreasonable act of will, but sometimes not. The act of the will involved in a wish for death can be unreasonable in either of two ways: if it endorses an unreasonable emotional desire to die, or if it is a conditional intention to kill oneself. Thus, an adequate response to the question must clarify those two wrongful will acts. The second question presented here is how one ought to deal with persons whose state of mind seems to involve one of those wrongful will acts. The answer is that one should try to help such persons to stop willing wrongly, if indeed they are, and to encourage them to wish rightly for death.

A suitable reply might be along the following lines:

You say that your elderly friends are "more or less depressed." I assume that you do not mean that all of them are suffering from some degree of psychological illness. However, I suggest that you familiarize yourself, if you have not already done so, with the signs of clinical depression, so that you will be able to encourage any who may need treatment to seek it. On this matter, of course, you should look for guidance to those responsible for the health care of the home's residents. But it also would be helpful to call their attention to anyone whose apparent depression they seem to have overlooked.

You are doing a good thing in visiting these elderly people, talking with them, and trying to cheer them up. The questions you raise about their attitudes concerning death are not incidental to your relationship with them. Indeed, these questions ought to be central to your effort to understand and help these people. Since nothing is more important than they go to heaven, you can do nothing better for them than help them prepare for death. I do not mean that you should focus exclusively on the prospect of their death, constantly initiate discussion of it,

or stop doing any of the good things you have been doing. Rather, I mean that you should keep in view the all-important benefit to your elderly friends of being prepared to die in God's love, do nothing incompatible with their sharing in this benefit, and try to do other things you do for them in a way conducive to this benefit.

You do well to distinguish between asking whether someone wishing for something is sinning, which only God knows, and whether what he or she is doing is wrong in itself. Of course, to deliberately wish wrongly is to commit a sin, and anyone guilty of an unrepented sin is responsible for bad wishes arising from that sin. But very likely most virtuous people wish for many things that they should not, without ever choosing to do so — the wish simply comes to mind and is entertained, without the person ever asking: Is it wrong for me to wish this? Nevertheless, your question remains important, since wishing wrongly, like any other kind of objectively immoral act, is harmful at least to the one wishing and is morally perilous even when not sinful, since bad wishes may eventually tempt a person to make choices that he or she knows are wrong. Therefore, it is preferable that people reflect on the moral quality of their wishing and choose to set aside wishes that cannot be rightly entertained.

Thus, I entirely agree with you in holding that wishes have moral significance. Some wishes are conditional intentions of ends or conditional choices of means, and some bear on other people's moral acts. It is always morally wrong to wish to bring about anything that one should not bring about or to do anything that one should not do. To wish that anyone do moral evil always is wrong, and to wish anything with a morally unacceptable motive also is wrong. But intelligible goods for which we hope sometimes presuppose as conditions necessary for their realization states of affairs that can come about without our own action and that either are or involve intelligible human evils. In such a case, hoping for the good necessarily involves wishing for an intelligible evil insofar as it is an indispensable condition for the good, but such wishing need not involve conditionally intending the evil as an end or conditionally choosing it as a means. Thus, since it is only by dying that we are born again to eternal life, our hope for heaven necessarily involves a wish for death, not as if death need be regarded as good itself or conditionally chosen, but inasmuch as it is to be accepted as the only gateway to heaven.

Nevertheless, one also can wish wrongly for death. Life always includes various sorts of suffering: physical pain, boredom, frustration, fruitless anger, grief over various losses, and so on. Most people during most of their lives feel that various satisfactions and enjoyments more or less outweigh sufferings or at least balance them, so that life seems "worth living." However, for some people at each stage of life and for many elderly people, satisfactions are few and sufferings many, so that life as a whole may seem empty and meaningless. At this point, death begins to seem attractive as a way of escaping suffering.

This psychology is understandable, but it does not correspond to a sound evaluation of intelligible human goods. Just as feeling good is not the same thing as being well (much less the same as being a good person), suffering is not in itself an evil, but only the experience of evil. Generally, of course, we rightly try to

mitigate suffering, but accepting inevitable suffering in union with Jesus gives it a salvific meaning and efficacy. Moreover, as long one lives, one has some capacity for various human goods and for some enjoyment. Death, by contrast, is a great human evil; when compared by sound judgment with death, the smaller evils that can be escaped by dying always are less. Then too, faith teaches that suffering awaits those who die in sin, and even people without faith cannot reasonably presume that death is a sure escape from suffering. Therefore, the emotional desire for death as an escape from suffering is unreasonable, and nobody should consent to that desire and in that sense wish for death. If one does, one endorses the unreasonable motive and, having endorsed it, is likely to be tempted to follow it out by action, that is, by choosing to do or omit doing something in order to die, or, at least, deliberately wishing one could intentionally end one's life. In the former case, one actually commits suicide, while in the latter, one commits it in one's heart.

At the same time, as has been explained, one can rightly wish for death in the sense that one is willing to accept it as the gateway to eternal life. To understand this possibility of rightly wishing for death, a likely source of confusion must be noticed. When wishing rightly for death, one also is aware that it will in fact put an end to suffering, and one can regard that fact as an advantage and welcome that advantage without wrongly wishing for death. Thus, when people who rightly wish for death express what they have in mind, they often include the point that they will be glad to be freed of their suffering.

The preceding explanation makes clear the terrible ambiguity of elderly people's wish for death. Rooted in hope for heaven and accompanied by docility to God's providential plan, the wish is good and in no way at odds with reverence for life and determination to preserve it and make the most of it. Rooted in hostile feelings toward the poor quality of daily experience and accompanied by a will bent on dominating the course of events, the wish for death is bad and is the seed of the contralife will that uses death as a means to escape suffering. Doing that is suicide; freely chosen despite awareness of its gravity and unrepented, it leads to hell. In your relationships with the elderly, therefore, you should both encourage and support their uprightly wishing for death and avoid in any way fostering or cooperating with their wrongly wishing for it.

Someone might object that the alternatives mentioned in the preceding paragraph are not exhaustive, since a person's wish for death, though rooted in hostile feelings toward the poor quality of his or her daily experience, can be accompanied by docility to God's law forbidding suicide. The answer: Such a wish is confused. It is objectively bad inasmuch as it is not rooted in hope for heaven, but subjectively blameless inasmuch as it is limited by an upright will to avoid sin. With such a confused wish, a person will be vulnerable to the temptation to choose suicide, perhaps rationalizing the choice as a legitimate refusal of futile treatment.

The appropriate response to your elderly friends' expressions of a wish for death will vary in particular situations, depending on precisely what a person says, his or her beliefs and problems, and how you think that you can help. In general, however, the message you need to convey is: God is a loving Father who

always knows what is best for us, and so you would not remain alive if there were no good reason for you to be here. Up to now and at this moment, God wants you to continue to live for some purpose. You must try to see what that purpose is and do your best to cooperate in realizing it. At the same time, you rightly long to be happy with God in heaven, and so you are looking forward to death. But since heaven is His to give, not ours to take, you must not even think of doing anything to hasten death. Rather you must pray for it, asking God to take you home, and this prayer, like all others, must be made in a spirit of submission to God. So, you should ask that God's will be done, that is, that His gift to you of birth into eternal life come when and as it will be best for you, and so in God's good time.

In encouraging your elderly friends to pray, you also should assure them that God loves them and understands their feelings. Try to help them express themselves freely to God; many of the Psalms are serviceable for this purpose or provide starting points for personal prayer. Tell them too that, when we pray from our hearts, God does respond, but we must listen carefully. Rather than shouting, he usually whispers.

Your friend's explanation of signing advance directives excluding life-sustaining treatment — "We are just waiting to die here and don't want to be kept alive longer than necessary" — perhaps expresses a feeling of uselessness. Just waiting suggests that nothing of value remains to be done. That certainly is a mistake. Those who can help care for themselves and one another, exercise their creative gifts, and so on should do so. No matter how severely handicapped and debilitated, anyone able to communicate with others can share in intrinsically valuable communion with them, and even when the ability to communicate is lost, a person may be able to pray and offer up his or her suffering. However, *just waiting* also might express not only negative feelings but a wrongful wish for death and even an immoral choice to forgo treatment as a means of hastening death. In the latter case, your friend, though probably without sufficient reflection and the guilt of mortal sin, has chosen suicide.

Confronted with ambiguity of this sort, your first responsibility as a friend is to be a good and sympathetic listener, to show interest proportionate to the great importance of what has been said, and then very gently to draw out the thinking and feelings behind the remark. If these turn out to be morally acceptable, you should try to reinforce and perfect them by supplying thoughts and fostering feelings that will round out readiness to live and die according to God's will. If they reflect only lack of appreciation of the individual's present vocation, you should point out the valuable things he or she still can do, the meaningful life still to be lived. But if the thoughts and feelings behind that remark point to a morally unacceptable conditional intention or choice, you should admonish the apparent sinner, kindly leading him or her to see the wrongness of that wishing, to repent it, and to replace it with hope for heaven and determination to make the most of his or her remaining life.

Your goal should be to get your friends eventually to say sincerely: "We remain here in order to finish the work God has given us; we are living out the

life of good deeds he prepared for us in advance; still, we don't want our heavenly reward to be delayed a moment longer than God's plan requires." Given that outlook and attitude, an elderly person may forgo medical treatment because of its costliness or other serious disadvantages, not arrogantly willing to defeat suffering by escaping it but humbly willing to defeat suffering by accepting its consummation in death: "Now, O Lord, dismiss your servant, according to your will in peace . . ."
