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The Use of Painkillers at the End of Life

by

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In *Evangelium Vitae*, number 65, Pope John Paul II deals with the morality of using painkillers in the final stages of illness, which could involve the risk of shortening life. His solution is one that is found in previous teaching of the Magisterium and in the writings of Catholic moralists generally. The shortening of life for the dying person, if it were to happen, would not be intended but would be the side-effect of the intended action, which is pain relief. There would be a proportionate reason for the shortening of life, again, the relief of pain. If serious pain can be relieved only through permanent loss of lucidity, then the person should have taken care of his or her religious, moral, family and social obligations prior to the administration of the medicine. This seems to us so clear and evidently correct that it needs no further commentary.¹

Within this same section, however, the Pope makes a statement which gives rise to two questions. He writes:

While praise may be due to the person who voluntarily accepts suffering by foregoing treatment with painkillers in order to remain fully lucid and, if a believer, to share

consciously in the Lord's Passion, such "heroic" behaviour cannot be considered the duty of everyone. (Quotation marks in the original)

The two questions are the following. First, if abstaining from painkillers is "heroic", in what sense is it not a duty of everyone? Martyrdom is heroic, after all, and this is considered a duty of everyone, should the circumstances arise. Second, in what sense is "voluntarily accepting suffering...to share consciously in the Lord's Passion" a virtue? Is pain, as such, valuable?

Duty Free Heroism

The encyclical has nine references to heroism, but this is the only occasion where there are quotation marks around the word "heroic". Why this is so remains open to conjecture. What we want to know is why exactly does the Pope not consider the foregoing of painkillers an achievable ideal. By achievable ideal we would mean something that is actually achieved by some people and is behavior expected of all people. An example would be perfect chastity within or without matrimony. This is, in fact, "a duty of everyone." Whether achieving perfect chastity is heroic behavior we leave for the moment. There is no question that embracing martyrdom is heroic and this, too, is an achievable ideal, with the added condition "should the occasion arise." If a person were not to achieve this ideal, then there may or may not be culpability involved, either in the non-achievement itself or because a previous lifetime had not responded to virtue sufficiently well to enable the choice here and now. What is clear is that the foregoing of painkillers, according to *Evangelium Vitae*, does not fall into the achievable ideal category.

Is it possible that the foregoing of painkillers is a "work of supererogation", and thereby "cannot be considered the duty of everyone?" A so-called work of supererogation would be one that is possible here and now for an individual and is morally better than available alternatives, but which is not required of a person. It echoes the "beyond the call of duty" evaluation by secular society of deeds of bravery of some sort or another. However, supererogation seems to clash with a Christian understanding of love. When is there a level of love of God or neighbor which, when attained, would leave people free of further obligation and above which people would enter the realm of free choice? Supererogation has a putative respectability in a moral understanding imprisoned by legalism and minimalism. Its fraudulent claims are exposed in a moral world of loving relationship where virtue displaces law as the dominant concept. It would

seem, then, that supererogation is not the answer to "cannot be considered the duty of everyone."

Pope Pius XII is enlightening on this point in two allocutions in 1957 and 1958.² He speaks about the possible heroism of those who eschew the use of painkillers at the end of life. But pain, he says, is not an indispensable condition for loving God fully.

The acceptance of physical suffering is only one way, among many others, of indicating what is the real essential: the will to love God and serve Him in all things. It is, above all, in the perfection of this voluntary disposition that the quality of the Christian life and its heroism consists.³

The relief of pain is conformed to the spirit of the Gospel, and doctors who use their skill in this regard participate in a divine work. (*Documentation Catholique*, 1958, column 1233) Indeed, the relief of pain often makes prayer possible and the gift of self to God more intentional. (*D.C.*, 1957, 338) The great strides that have been made in pain control in the forty years since the Pope spoke, which permit pain relief without interfering with lucidity, strengthen this last point made by Pius XII.

The teaching of both *Evangelium Vitae* and *Declaration on Euthanasia* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1980) does not state explicitly that there are ways other than the voluntary embracing of unnecessary pain which lead towards the perfection of love. However, this would seem to be the position of both documents. The *Declaration* says:

Nevertheless, it would be imprudent to impose a heroic way of acting as a general rule. On the contrary, human and Christian prudence suggest for the majority of sick people the use of medicines capable of alleviating or suppressing pain, even though these may cause as a secondary effect semi-consciousness and reduced lucidity. (section 111)

It would seem that prudence is the virtue which would determine which way towards perfect love is most appropriate for a particular individual. The way of voluntary, unnecessary suffering is not the way for most people. *Evangelium Vitae* makes most sense when it is interpreted in the same light.

Earlier we spoke about martyrdom as an heroic action which is demanded of people generally, if the circumstances were to arise. At this point we would deny any analogy to the choice of pain and suffering. There is no way of avoiding the choice between an affirmation of one's faith and its denial. Martyrs are not faced with other possible answers to

their dilemma. It is, in fact, a ratification or denial of their fundamental option for or against God. Since the action is heroic, there may be many people who, in the face of torture and death, lack the depth of virtue to choose the right way. There may, indeed, be no culpability in the wrong choice. The fact remains, though, that there is no third choice which comes between an affirmation of God and a denial of God.

What about the living out of perfect chastity? We suggest here that this is not heroic in the strict sense, if we mean by this the avoidance of sexual immorality. With the help of grace and in prayer, it is perfectly possible for people to embrace a chaste way of life. The living out of this virtue may be heroic in particular circumstances, of course, and those circumstances may be quite widespread in the Western world. Again, it is not a question of culpability. It is a question of obeying a negative absolute. It is immoral to kill innocent human persons (negative absolute), but this says little about the myriad ways the dignity of each person can be upheld and furthered. Likewise, the avoidance of sexual immorality involves a negative absolute, but this says little about the ways of chastity. Face to face with a negative absolute, there is no third way between choosing immoral behavior or rejecting the temptation.

Finding the Virtue

The *Document* has this to say about suffering:

According to Christian teaching, however, suffering especially suffering during the last moments of life, has a special place in God's saving plan; it is in fact a sharing in Christ's passion and a union with the redeeming sacrifice which He offered in obedience to the Father's will. Therefore, one must not be surprised if some Christians prefer to moderate their use of painkillers, in order to accept voluntarily at least part of their sufferings and thus associate themselves in a conscious way with the sufferings of Christ crucified (cf. Mt. 27:34). (Section 111)

As we have seen above, *Evangelium Vitae* also has praise for those who voluntarily accept suffering by foregoing painkilling treatment in order to remain fully lucid and, if a believer, to share consciously in the Lord's Passion. Pius XII is equally explicit about the heroic nature of choosing pain (i.e., not avoiding it when this is simple) in order to be united with the suffering of Christ. Is God appeased by suffering as such, either the suffering of Christ, the Son of God, or the freely chosen suffering of dying

Christians who want to be united with Christ's suffering? That seems quite blasphemous.

What is at stake in Christ's case is the at-oneness with the Father, His total obedience to the Father's will and His self-emptying love for human persons. If His life and teaching spent in total love of the Father were to lead to His own suffering and death, so be it, if this is the price of perfect love. The Christian who suffers at the end of life despite all attempts to alleviate pain can follow Christ intimately in submitting himself or herself to the love of the Father amid the mystery of evil. He or she knows that the Savior, too, suffered, not for an instant cut adrift from perfect love, but without the consolation of perfect understanding. When it is a case of choosing to suffer, then it makes sense to think that suffering may be the price to be paid for the lucidity to love God and people. At this time, the suffering can be consciously associated with the suffering of Christ, Who Himself paid a price for love. It is also understandable that some of our Christian brothers and sisters who have a deep spirituality might want to experience suffering in order to have a privileged insight into the cost of our redemption and the depth of divine love which achieved it. And finally some who have a deep sense of solidarity with the poor may want to experience only what is available to the least of our brothers and sisters, many of whom have no access to painkillers. What is not at stake, however, is the value of suffering as such; God is no sadist.

Conclusion

The Popes refer to the practice of voluntary, unnecessary suffering in union with Christ as having traditional value. We have seen some of the ways in which that tradition makes perfect sense to the Christian of deep faith. It remains true, however, that not all are called to such sacrifice. In light of the papal and congregational teachings, each person should judge whether the use of painkillers is the better choice in his or her case, the choice which draws him or her into deeper love of God. What is proposed as "heroic" in *Evangelium Vitae* is not the better moral way for all. For some, the best way will be in refusing all kinds of pain relief, if their motives are clear and if they are strong enough in themselves. For others, who could not function (even spiritually) without painkillers, the prudent response will be to accept the offer of painkillers in order that they might better respond in love to God and family and friends.

References

1. It is not clear to some philosophers that the distinction between killing and allowing to die is valid. See James Rachels, "Active and Passive Euthanasia", *New England Journal of Medicine* 292 (1975) 878-80; Tom L. Beauchamp, "Physician-Assisted Suicide: A Response to Edmund Pellegrino" in *Choosing Life, A Dialogue on Evangelium Vitae*, Kevin Wm. Wildes, S.J., and Alan C. Mitchell, Eds, Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1997, pp. 254-258; Jeff McMahon, "A Challenge to Common Sense Morality", *Ethics* 108 (1998) 394-418. Further, some writers, for political reasons, deliberately confuse the issue. See Margaret Somerville, "Euthanasia by Confusion", *Policy Options* 18 (December, 1997), 21-24.
2. Allocution to Italian Society of Anaesthesiology, *AAS*, 1957, 129-147, *The Pope Speaks* 4(1957) 33-49.
Allocution to the International College for Neuro-Psycho-Pharmacology, *AAS* 1958, 687-696; *Documentation Catholique* 1958, 1227-1235.
3. *The Pope Speaks* 4 (1957) 39-40.