

Bishops approve first major statement on physician-assisted suicide

BELLEVUE, Wash. – Taking on the issue of physician-assisted suicide in the state where voters most recently approved it, the U.S. bishops declared suicide “a terrible tragedy, one that a compassionate society should work to prevent.”

Approved 191-1 June 16 at the bishops’ spring general assembly near Seattle, the policy statement called “To Live Each Day With Dignity” is the first document on assisted suicide by the bishops as a body.

Introducing the statement June 15, Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Pro-Life Activities, said he hoped it would counter the recent “strong resurgence” in activity by the assisted suicide movement.

“With expanded funding from wealthy donors, assisted suicide proponents have renewed their aggressive nationwide campaign through legislation, litigation and public advertising, targeting states they see as most susceptible to their message,” the document says. “If they succeed, society will undergo a radical change.”

It specifically criticizes the former Hemlock Society, “whose very name reminded people of the harsh reality of death by poison,” for changing its name to Compassion & Choices.

“Plain speaking is needed to strip away this veneer and uncover what is at stake, for this agenda promotes neither free choice nor compassion,” the policy statement says.

Physician-assisted suicide was approved by voters in Washington state in November 2008. It is also legal in Oregon, where voters approved it in 1994, and Montana, where a state court has ruled it is not against public policy.

As Cardinal DiNardo was making his preliminary presentation of the document, representatives of Compassion & Choices held a news conference in the same hotel where the bishops were meeting.

Barbara Coombs Lee, president of the organization, said the bishops' document represented an attempt to impose Catholic beliefs on the entire U.S. population.

"While we respect religious instruction to those of the Catholic faith, we find it unacceptable to impose the teachings of one religion on everyone in a pluralistic society," she said. "We believe end-of-life care should follow the patient's values and beliefs, and good medical practice, but not be restricted against the patient's will by Catholic Church doctrine."

Responding to that charge at a later news conference, Cardinal DiNardo said the bishops were making a contribution to a "fundamental public debate" based on "our moral tradition and sense of solidarity with people."

"The compassionate way is to bring assistance to people," not to encourage their deaths, he said. It is part of the American tradition that "when someone is in need, we come to their rescue," as when Americans responded recently with massive aid to those affected by the tornado in Joplin, Mo., he added.

"Compassion isn't to say, 'Here's a pill,'" the cardinal added. "It's to show people the ways we can assist you, up until the time the Lord calls you."

In the document, the bishops say the assisted suicide movement "actually risks adding to the suffering of seriously ill people."

"Their worst suffering is often not physical pain, which can be alleviated with competent medical care, but feelings of isolation and hopelessness," the statement says. "The realization that others - or society as a whole - see their death as an acceptable or even desirable solution to their problems can only magnify this kind of suffering."

In addition, the document says, "one cannot uphold human freedom and dignity by devaluing human life."

“A choice to take one’s life is a supreme contradiction of freedom, a choice to eliminate all choices,” it says. “And a society that devalues some people’s lives, by hastening and facilitating their deaths, will ultimately lose respect for their other rights and freedoms.”

The document also criticizes the idea of involving physicians in helping their patients commit suicide, calling it “a corruption of the healing arts.”

“Catholics should be leaders in the effort to defend and uphold the principle that each of us has the right to live with dignity through every day of our lives,” the document says. “The claim that the ‘quick fix’ of an overdose of drugs can substitute for these efforts is an affront to patients, caregivers and the ideals of medicine.”

The statement is paired on a USCCB website (www.usccb.org/toliveeachday) with a variety of fact sheets on such issues as the role of depression, views of medical experts, assisted suicide as a threat to good palliative care, lessons from Oregon and Washington state, lessons from the Netherlands and other topics.

The document drew immediate praise from representatives of Catholic disabilities and bioethical groups.

“Physician-assisted suicide is a clear threat to the lives of people with disabilities, as well as those with terminal illness,” said Janice L. Benton, executive director of the National Catholic Partnership on Disabilities. “We applaud the U.S. Catholic bishops for their statement which defends the dignity of every human life, and offers a true understanding of compassion and choice.”

The National Catholic Bioethics Center issued a statement calling the bishops’ document “truly compassionate” and praising it for confronting “the myth that lives are diminished in value when faced with significant health challenges.”

The center “welcomes this prophetic and timely document, which exposes the untruths perpetrated against the most vulnerable of suffering persons, those who believe their life is not worth living,” the statement added.