

End-of-Life Palliative Care Issues: an Overview

By Dr. Paul Fiacco and Father Charles Vavonese Special to the Catholic Sun

Editor note: This is the first in a series of articles that will explain and explore the Church's teachings on end-of-life and palliative care issues.

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Over the past few decades, the Vatican has emphasized the need to educate the faithful regarding end-of-life moral teachings and palliative care. Recently, Pope Francis has gone further and has published a white paper on the topic: "Global Palliative Care." In response to this initiative, a series of articles will be presented in future editions of the Catholic Sun to provide guidance for Roman Catholics on these issues.

The goal of this series is to educate the reader about the interaction of spiritual and medical care, which will provide a holistic approach to the end-of-life decision-making process. Communicating this information in "sound bite" segments will make it possible for Catholics to not only deepen their own understanding of the relationship between Catholic end-of-life moral teaching and palliative care interactions, but also help them to become comfortable sharing this information with others in their communities. This willingness to share information will empower Catholics to undertake a ministry of conversation which may enable others to avoid the

choice of physician-assisted suicide.

Background

One hundred years ago, most people died of infectious diseases; today, most people die of chronic diseases. While medical technology has extended our lives, it has also presented us with several moral and medical dilemmas. This series will guide readers through these dilemmas.

Why is this important?

This ministry is critical because many Catholics do not know - or fully comprehend - the end-of-life moral teachings of the Church. This lack of understanding extends to the areas (and concepts) of ordinary and extraordinary medical care, as well as to the use of pain controls.

Also, any discussion of end-of-life moral issues would be incomplete without the inclusion of information about palliative care, the care that people should receive after they are diagnosed with a terminal illness.

Palliative care improves the quality of the patient's life by lessening the severity of impact of terminal conditions by preventing, treating, and/ or relieving the symptoms of illness. In addition to supporting the patient, palliative care may also provide support to the patient's family during this critical time. Sadly, many people are

unaware of the medical care and comfort available to them after they receive a life-threatening diagnosis.

Guidance from the Vatican

As we contemplate the many complexities of Catholic end-of-life moral theology, it is imperative that we consult the definitive resource for Catholic health care institutions, titled "The Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care in the United States." A new edition of this document was approved by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2018. When referencing this document, this series of articles will use the abbreviation ERD, followed by a number which will denote a specific section of the document (e.g., ERD #25). This document is available for download from the United State Catholic Conference website, www.usccb.org.

Future articles

Some of the topics for future articles will include: ordinary vs. extraordinary care and their moral implications; the appropriate use of pain medication; instances when food and hydration must be provided; the treatment that palliative care uses to improve the quality of the life for patients and their families; and documents that are useful at the end-of-life.