

The Human Being and Euthanasia: Roman Catholic Perspective

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Abstract

This research delves into the highly controversial topic of euthanasia, focusing on the Catholic Church's perspective. The study addresses fundamental questions regarding what constitutes a human being according to the Catholic Church, how theology and philosophy are applied to understand the human nature, the historical development of the Church's stance on euthanasia and relevant doctrines guiding its views. Current knowledge shows the Catholic Church's firm stance on life preservation and dignity; however, the literature review lacks analysis of evolving ethical dilemmas' impact on this stance and is limited to the ones reviewed in this work. The research questions and objectives were explored, while contents analysis was used as a methodological approach. Additionally, the research examines the Catholic Church's arguments against euthanasia by emphasising the preservation of human life and violation of human dignity. Results indicate the Catholic Church is being challenged by modern viewpoints, but it still adheres to the principle that euthanasia is unethical since it violates human dignity. The study contributes to the understanding of this complex issue and its ethical, moral, and religious dimensions. The Catholic Church's role in healthcare and its impact on the broader discourse surrounding euthanasia are critically analysed, providing insights for future research and ethical debates in medical practices.

Keywords: Euthanasia, Catholic Church, Sanctity of life, human being, healthcare

Introduction

Numerous problems in the healthcare industry spark discussions across the globe, among them being euthanasia. The practice is a medical procedure involving taking a patient's life to relieve their suffering, usually with a fatal illness.¹ Essentially, it is categorised as either passive or aggressive, with the former entailing withholding all medical attention to hasten the dying

process, while the latter involves giving the patient a lethal injection of prescription medication.² Additionally, euthanasia is perceived as voluntary or involuntary, which can be done under a patient's directive or by someone with authority. Despite these categorisations, the practice remains highly controversial, sparking multiple legal, moral, ethical, and religious debates, with

¹ Soheil Sabriseilabi, and James Williams. "Dimensions of Religion and Attitudes toward Euthanasia." *Death Studies* 46, no. 5 (2020) 1150.

² Shraddha Korekar, and Bourasi Yashwini. "Euthanasia in Contemporary India: Whether against Right to Life under Article 21?" *Supremo Amicus* 20 (2020): 2.

most considering it an illegal act of ending one's life prematurely.

Nonetheless, most arguments on the issue are often drawn on whether intentionally killing a patient violates the right to life, or death is the first point of legal dispute, with moral disagreements also existing over the worth of human life and whether it is better or worse to kill a patient to relieve their suffering. In addition, concerns about the ethics of healthcare professionals are raised, especially considering that physicians take the Hippocratic Oath before beginning their careers, which obligates them to provide care that is beneficial to all patients and abstain from any actions that may jeopardise a patient's access to healthcare.³ Religious sects also draw perspectives on the issue based on their beliefs linked to the sanctity of life and whether people have the freedom to choose to live. This further extends to whether or not assisted suicide is a form of murder, as Christians believe that such a power can only be in God's hands and not that of other human beings.

However, with the progression of time and heightened regard for diversity, more people are warming up to the practice as they attempt to reduce the suffering of their loved ones and relieve the financial and emotional burden of caring for a dying patient. Even so, child euthanasia is one area in which people have remained consistently

conflicted. This is because many believe that at that age, they do not comprehend the implications of assisted death, with the decision often made on their behalf.⁴ This is why the cycle of disagreements is unlikely to stop, as the standards applied to different parties are different, either from a doctor's or a patient's perspective.⁵ However, respect for one's choice remains supreme regardless of age.⁶

With such growing diversities and continuous arguments on the issue, the church, particularly the Catholic Church, has not been left behind. This is primarily because, apart from being an advocate of God, it is a crucial stakeholder in the healthcare industry, owning medical clinics, schools for future doctors, volunteer facilities, and several more medical facilities worldwide. Therefore, its views on the issue are critical as they affect how people view the services offered while also reflecting their values concerning the provisions of the Bible. In particular, the church's position is based on the practice's effect on one's physical, emotional, and mental well-being.⁷ These encompass the value placed on

³ Helen Askitopoulou and Antonis N. Vgontzas. "The Relevance of the Hippocratic Oath to the Ethical and Moral Values of Contemporary Medicine. Part II: Interpretation of the Hippocratic Oath—Today's Perspective." *European Spine Journal* 27, no. 7 (2018): 1492.

⁴ Thomas Pirog, "Child Euthanasia and the Church." *Ethics & Medics* 46, no. 11 (2021): 1.

⁵ Pirog, "Child Euthanasia and Church," 1.

⁶ Yana Fileva, "Relationship between Religion and Health on the Topic of Euthanasia." *Postmodernism Problems* 13, no. 2 (2023): 265.

⁷ Grove, Graham, Melanie Lovell, and Best Megan "Perspectives of Major World Religions

preserving life, the importance of compassion, and the ethical significance of human suffering.⁸This is why the Catholic Church's role on this issue cannot be downplayed. Therefore, this study reviews relevant literature on euthanasia from the Catholic Church's perspective, guided by the following questions:

- (i) Who is a human being, according to the Catholic Church?
- (ii) What is theological/ philosophical and historical understanding of the human being?
- (iii) What is the Catholic Church's arguments on doctrine / end-of-life care and Sacraments?

By answering these questions, the review widens the reader's understanding of the topic and enables him to make solid interpretations and conclusions on euthanasia and whether or not he should support the Catholic Church's position.

Literature review

Primarily, the Catholic Church interprets people based on scripture and religious precepts. The most valuable item in the universe is the human being. The dignity of the human person is seen from his great superiority over the rest of creatures. As stated in Genesis (1:27), So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them. Therefore, from the beginning, human beings were superior to

other creatures as they resembled the Creator. Moreover, to enhance this uniqueness, God put man in charge of every other animal in the world, with Genesis (1:26) stating, "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds in the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'" This is why the church continuously believes that humans are material and immaterial in nature, as apart from the body they possess, they also have a spirit form entrenched in the human soul.

Considering the creation dynamics, the Catholic Church often holds a moral and ethical view of what a human is, as this is believed to align closely with the purpose that God made man like to Him. Furthermore, this perspective of the individual is guided by the Ten Commandments, which explicate the moral values that people should prioritise as they conduct themselves in their daily lives. The Catholic Church's comprehension further includes dimensions of natural law, the foundational principles for the inherent values that make people sensitive and aware of their thought processes and behaviours. This brings the interpretation of right and wrong often gauged from the purpose that the church believes human beings should serve, which is to know, love, and serve God, in addition to upholding the critical ethical standards, including the sanctity of life, marriage, and social justice. To the Catholic Church, this is what makes a

Regarding Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide: A Comparative Analysis." *Journal of Religion*

and Health 61, no. 6 (2022): 4759.

⁸ Grove et al., "Euthanasia Religions Perspectives," 4762.

human being so without which they are no different from other animals on land.

Theological and philosophical understanding of the human being

Apart from the Catholic Church's simplistic interpretation of the human being, there are multiple other theological and philosophical doctrines to broaden this understanding. According to Thomas, the church found that each individual was unique in some way related to their humanity, hence the term "human dignity."⁹ Liégeois further established that the Catholic Church's stance on the sanctity of life was based on the priceless nature of human beings who, as a result, deserved special treatment, with none having the right to take the life of another.¹⁰ Similarly, Saygi furthered this interpretation from a philosophical point of view guided by the arguments of Augustine Hippo and Thomas Aquinas. On the one hand, Hippo emphasized that a predisposition toward evil was innate in man due to what he called the "original sin." He believed that divine grace and the sacraments were the sole means of salvation and redemption and that people were likelier to disobey God's will than to do good deeds

because of their fallen nature.¹¹ He remarked that people are usually tense because they want to do God's will, which they find difficult because of their weakness.¹² His approach was the central driving force behind the belief that people are imperfect.

On the other hand, Aquinas's claims were built on Aristotelian philosophy, as he believed that people were naturally good because God had created them and given them the ability to reason. He essentially sought to reconcile faith and reason by identifying critical cardinal and theological virtues, including prudence, justice, temperance, courage, faith, hope, and charity, which he believed were the drivers of what the church considered human nature.¹³ Aquinas further held that people were necessary for establishing a happy relationship with God, which was the ultimate goal of life. Modern theologians continually developed these two views and served as critical teachings, especially on controversial issues such as euthanasia, which is linked to human nature. As such, the combination of philosophy and theology enhances the understanding of the human being and provides a sound approach to issues related directly or indirectly to human dignity and their values and nature.

Augustine Hippo and Thomas Aquinas significantly shaped theological and

⁹ Columba Thomas, "Christ the Physician: A Theological Framework for Healing in Catholic Health Care." *The Linacre Quarterly*, 2023.

¹⁰ Axel Liégeois, "Euthanasia in Mental Suffering—Overview and Discussion of the Arguments of the Roman Catholic Church." *Religions* 13, no. 8 (2022): 684.

¹¹ Muhammet Saygi, "The Predominant Christian Interpretation of Religious Faith in the Middle

Ages: Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas." *darulfunun ilahiyat* 0, no. 0 (2023): 221.

¹² Saygi, "Religious Faith Interpretation," 222.

¹³ Saygi, 226.

philosophical understanding of the human nature; however, their perspectives diverge sharply. Augustine posits that original sin marks human nature with a propensity towards evil, which underscores the need for divine salvation; this view is inherently pessimistic, suggesting human capacity for goodness without grace. On the contrary, Aquinas presents an optimistic view, emphasising human goodness and capacity for reason; he believes in the inherent ability of the human being to make moral judgements and pursuance of virtue. The evaluation reveals that one can agree with Augustine's view that human nature is fundamentally flawed due to original sin and the necessity of grace for redemption; however, this perspective is too pessimistic since it overlooks the potentials for human goodness and ethical decision -making without divine intervention. One can also appreciate Aquinas' optimism about human nature and reason by acknowledging our capacity for moral judgment and the pursuit of good. The problem is that it underestimates the complexity of ethical dilemmas where the right course of action is not solely dictated by reason or innate goodness

Historical developments of Catholic perspectives on euthanasia

The main text in the bible which the Catholic Church uses to condemn the practice of Euthanasia is (Exodus 20:13) "You shall not kill" The fifth Commandment forbids direct and intentional killing as gravely sinful. The killer and anyone who conjoins voluntarily in murder commits sinful act. The Catholic Catechism

commenting on the fifth commandment prohibits performing any action that directly or indirectly brings about a person's death as well as denial to a person in danger. The Catholic Church, similar to other sectors of society, has observed shifts in attitudes and recommendations concerning physician-assisted suicide.

Abramov's article offers a comprehensive overview of this development, starting with its recognition as a concern within the Catholic context during the 20th century as medical and ethical standards progressed.¹⁴ This work explored the significance of Pope Pius XII in establishing the church's strong stance against euthanasia.¹⁵ The opposition to euthanasia was supported by the Second Vatican Council, which examined various ethical concerns of the time, rather than focusing solely on this particular practise.¹⁶ The council restated its dedication to upholding every individual's value and cherishing life's sacredness.¹⁷ The church's affirmations were strengthened by successive popes, exemplified by the issuance of magisterial documents like "Evangelium Vitae" by Pope John Paul II. This document highlights the significance of safeguarding human life from conception until its natural end.

Abramov also highlighted the significance of Pope Francis in upholding the church's position against euthanasia, as he promotes

¹⁴ Alexander Abramov, "Catholic Magisterium on Euthanasia: From Pope Pius XII to Pope Francis." *Философская мысль*, no. 7 (2021): 31.

¹⁵ Abramov, "Catholic Euthanasia Magisterium," 32.

¹⁶ Abramov, 35.

¹⁷ Abramov, 35.

compassion and appropriate end-of-life care.¹⁸ He observed that the Catholic Church was increasingly receptive to participating in dialogues aimed at finding positive resolutions for humanity as the world experienced progress in medical technology and the dissemination of varied perspectives.¹⁹ Pope Francis is known for his progressive views, addressing topics that were not traditionally discussed in the Catholic Church.

Beyond the Catholic Church, various societies have a historical record of euthanasia. It was utilised by the Greeks and Romans to emphasise the importance of life by putting an end to avoidable pain and distress.²⁰ Although the Catholic Church has traditionally been against euthanasia, with the principle of “double effect.” This principle permits actions that may indirectly result in death under specific circumstances, such as alleviating excruciating pain. He examined the application of this principle in situations involving mental distress and euthanasia.²¹ This implementation has impacted the church’s history and stance on

this procedure, particularly in recent times, as the church has adopted a more progressive approach. By delving into the historical context of the Catholic Church regarding euthanasia, we can uncover the shifts that have taken place over time and explore the factors that have influenced these changes. In the future, there will be an increase in articles discussing the Catholic Church’s involvement in modern medicine.

Doctrinal interpretation of euthanasia

Various religions, such as the Catholic Church, have established specific guidelines regarding euthanasia. These guidelines outline the expectations for multiple religions’ clergy, institutions, and followers. Religion plays a crucial role in influencing ethical and moral viewpoints regarding euthanasia.²² Liégeois recognised the immense suffering experienced by individuals with severe mental conditions that could be fatal. As a result, he emphasised the importance of church members, particularly the clergy, providing emotional, social, and spiritual support to those nearing the end of their lives. This call was backed by a study conducted by Grove et al., which examined the responsibility of religious leaders and authorities in assisting their followers in their last stages of life.²³ The religious leaders were responsible for ensuring that the patients made informed decisions for themselves and their families and lived their final days to the fullest.

¹⁸ Abramov, 40.

¹⁹ Abramov, 41.

²⁰ Picón-Jaimes, Yelson Alejandro, Ivan David Lozada-Martinez, Javier Esteban Orozco-Chinome, Lina María Montaña-Gómez, María Paz Bolaño-Romero, Luis Rafael Moscote-Salazar, Tariq Janjua, and Sabrina Rahman. “Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide: An in-Depth Review of Relevant Historical Aspects.” *Annals of Medicine & Surgery* 75 (2022).

²¹ Liégeois, “Mental Suffering Euthanasia,” 684.

²² Theodoor A. Boer “Why Using Religious Arguments in the Euthanasia Discussion Is Problematic.” *Revista Latinoamericana de Bioética* 21, no. 1 (2021): 129.

²³ Grove et al., 4776.

Religious doctrines and teachings can also influence people's perceptions. Fileva noted that religion affected opinions on health, well-being, and suffering, potentially impacting end-of-life care decisions.²⁴ She mentioned that various religious beliefs, including concepts like the afterlife, the sanctity of life, and the role of suffering in Christian lives, influenced many of these choices.²⁵ In addition, Sabriseilabi and Williams further discussed these concerns. Their study examined the perspectives of Christians regarding life after death and how these perspectives influenced their choices in their last moments.²⁶ A common belief among Christians is that death is seen as part of God's plan; therefore, it should not be a decision made by individuals or forced upon them by others.²⁷ Religious perspectives on euthanasia also revolved around spiritual considerations, as those against it argued against the notion that intentionally ending the life of a sick individual or allowing them to pass away would reduce suffering.²⁸ On the contrary, they believed that ending a life, even one's own, went against the principles

of God and tarnished one's spiritual integrity. It is seen as a type of homicide.

Academics utilised religious texts to present their case against the practise of physician-assisted suicide. This aligned with Pirog's quoted scriptures, which emphasised respecting human life and not taking it away.²⁹ The church stressed that healing is attributed to a higher power, with Christ being recognised as the ultimate source of healing.³⁰ It was also observed that these religious teachings led to conflicts between the divine will and human agency.³¹ Various religious doctrines are deeply rooted within the Catholic Church, allowing individuals to form interpretations. They blend their convictions, structures, and instructions from religious leaders, who are seen as intermediaries between humanity and the divine. Researchers and scholars need to stay up-to-date with the ever-changing role of the church in healthcare.

End-of-life care and sacraments

The Catholic Church offers guidance on how individuals can enhance their lives and transition peacefully to the next stage. Various approaches can be taken to support individuals in their final moments, encompassing spiritual, medical, emotional, and social aspects. Each of these facets plays a crucial role in ensuring that those nearing the end of their lives find solace and

²⁴ Fileva, "Religion and Health," 249.

²⁵ Fileva, 264.

²⁶ Sabriseilabi and Williams, "Religion Euthanasia Dimensions," 1149.

²⁷ Nelu Gheorghita, "Euthanasia - Between Good Death and Christian Death." *Legal Sciences in the New Millennium* 16, no. 1 (2021).

²⁸ Christopher Lockhart, Carol H. Lee, Chris G. Sibley, and Danny Osborne. "The Sanctity of Life: The Role of Purity in Attitudes towards Abortion and Euthanasia." *International Journal of Psychology* 58, no. 1 (2022): 16.

²⁹ Pirog, 1.

³⁰ Thomas, "Christ the Physician."

³¹ Ana V. Čović, "Euthanasia: The Right to Die between God's Will and the Will of a Man."

Strani pravni život 67, no. 2 (2023), 230.

tranquilly.³²The church emphasises the interconnectedness of the body, mind, and soul. As per the church's teachings, it is expected that medical care providers prioritise the well-being of patients, irrespective of their chances of recovery. According to Meany, prioritizing high-quality healthcare for everyone is essential.³³Religious leaders and clergy members played a crucial part in nurturing the spiritual well-being of dying patients. They supported patients and their families through prayers, visits, and counseling, ensuring their emotional and spiritual needs were met.

In addition, the Catholic Church has established sacraments to be administered to those nearing the end of their lives. These sacred rituals were intended to enhance their spiritual well-being as they journeyed to the realm beyond and served as conduits of divine blessings and restoration, thus fostering spiritual and emotional well-being.³⁴The Catholic Church operates numerous healthcare facilities worldwide, providing exceptional medical care to patients until their last moments.³⁵Catholic-run age-based care organisations adhere to the teachings and requirements of the

church, which means they do not engage in euthanasia.³⁶According to literature materials, the Catholic Church supports the idea that individuals should have access to high-quality healthcare throughout their lives. Although there may be differing opinions on euthanasia, the primary objective is to prioritise the well-being of patients and strive for optimal outcomes.

The Importance of preserving life

Historically, discussions surrounding physician-assisted suicide have centred on various aspects, including ethics, morality, religion, and medicine. One of the main arguments put forth by the Catholic Church revolves around the importance of preserving human life. Those who oppose euthanasia argue that it contradicts the belief in the sacredness and value of life. Studies have indicated that individuals with strong religious affiliations regularly attend religious services and believe in the afterlife tend to be less supportive of euthanasia.³⁷Individuals who firmly hold these convictions prioritise spiritual teachings and vehemently oppose the act, advocating instead for providing compassionate and comprehensive healthcare to those in their final stages rather than assisting them with ending their lives.³⁸There is a strong focus on the importance of enduring suffering and protecting human life despite overwhelming psychological challenges.³⁹Discussions

³² Thomas.

³³ Joseph Meaney, "A Catholic Perspective on End-of-Life Care." *Ethics & Medics* 48, no. 3 (2023).

³⁴ Thomas.

³⁵ Seumas Miller and Virginia Miller. "Euthanasia and Faith-Based Aged-Care Organisations: The Right Not to Kill?" *Church, Communication and Culture* 8, no. 2

(2023): 250.

³⁶ Miller and Miller, "Euthanasia and Care," 249.

³⁷ Sabriseilabi and Williams, 1154.

³⁸ Liégeois, 684.

³⁹ Liégeois, 684.

within the Catholic Church regarding euthanasia have become more prevalent in today's increasingly open society.

Nevertheless, the church maintains that euthanasia violates human dignity and is unethical. The church considers the practise immoral, as indicated by its definition. The updated Catholic dictionary provides a new meaning for euthanasia, where Euthanasia, whether passive or active, involves the intentional withholding of life-saving measures, resulting in the death of another individual.⁴⁰ Taking someone's life is inherently wrong, regardless of any attempts to justify it as an act of compassion. The Catholic catechism emphasises the importance of showing kindness and respect to those who are sick and weak to assist them in living everyday life. The catechism also addresses the topic of euthanasia and categorises it as the act of ending the lives of individuals who are disabled and suffering from illness. As a result, it is deemed unethical and cannot be morally justified. This statement disregards the respect that should be given to God and the inherent worth of every individual.

The church's role in public health is crucial and essential. It is important to acknowledge the wide range of perspectives on euthanasia across various groups. This recognition can significantly enhance our understanding of healthcare practises, public policy, and ethical debates.⁴¹ This work has pointed out some of the main components of the Catholic Church's position on the human being, euthanasia and End-of-life care. Nevertheless, additional research is

necessary to explore the Catholic Church's perspective and its potential to impact improving healthcare for the population positively.

Critical Analysis of the position of the Catholic Church on euthanasia

The researcher argues that the position of the Catholic Church on euthanasia guides the actions of the people and medical professionals especially in the Catholic owned health settings. The preservation of the dignity of life is the key strength of the Church's argument, though it is weakened by the discussion on the importance of high-quality life. While this dignity is vital, it is also critical to ensure that all human beings lead the best life possible. Though, in today's medical practice in which many such as Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) are usually used in some patients including dying patients, the free choice of the patients and their families in collaboration with the medical professionals should inform and guide the dying process. Also, the Catholic Church also collides with the English interpretation of the practice as it focuses mainly on the aspect of taking a life, while the English language focuses on the act of mercy to the dying patient. It is therefore significant to ensure that we interpret the position of the Church holistically to ensure an appropriate conclusion.

Conclusion

The Catholic Church stresses the sanctity of life and claims that life always has value, irrespective of its quality. What makes

⁴⁰ Liégeois, 684.

⁴¹ Sabriseilabi and Williams, 1154.

euthanasia appear so ambiguous is the cultural climate in which we find ourselves. Once one has been declared terminally ill, no one wants to have anything to do with the person especially in the Western Culture. It is pertinent to state that some gravely ill persons who request for the withdrawal of life support or physician assisted suicide by their loved ones is almost always a case of an anguish appeal for what I would call a “throw away culture” The symptoms of a “throw away culture” that more easily discards vulnerable persons when the most care for them is needed. What terminally ill person needs besides medical care is love, from family, friends and medical professionals. I stand with the Catholic Church’s position that the value of the dignity of the human person arises from the belief that life has intrinsic worth because human beings are made in the image and likeness of God and respect for the human person results from this belief. However, any approach that attempts to address end-of-life in the developing countries especially Africa, must include the sensitivity of their ethnic and medical systems.

Our society is one that eliminates those who do not measure up to the standard or carry out useful roles. It must be clearly stated that the terminally ill is one of us, a share in the same humanity like us. Since death is inevitable, it is necessary we accept it with full responsibility and dignity without hastening it in any way. It is true that death brings an end to our earthly Journey and loss of relationships especially families and loved ones; let us not forget that it also opens the door to immortality.

The families and friends of the terminally ill should not forget their sincere commitments to offer the best care due to them in their dying process so that they can die with dignity. For those in the medical profession, it is their task to give the dying the treatment that will aid them to bear their suffering with dignity. No matter how fragile they may be, appropriate care, in the spirit of empathy and devotion should be provided for them until their last moment in the spirit of love.

Through a thorough examination of euthanasia and the significant impact of the Catholic Church in this ongoing debate, it becomes clear that euthanasia continues to be a highly debated topic involving various aspects such as morality, ethics, legality, and religion. The Catholic Church has always maintained a steadfast opposition to euthanasia, a position deeply rooted in its solid religious doctrine and extensive involvement in healthcare. The work thoroughly analysed various vital aspects of the Church’s perspective. It delved into the interpretation of human nature, the theological and philosophical understandings of the human being, the historical evolution of the philosophy, the Church’s present stance, relevant doctrines and references and end-of-life care and sacraments.

These elements have been thoroughly analysed based on recently published articles, which have been used as a reference to draw accurate inferences and conclusions. The study delves into the Catholic Church’s longstanding commitment to upholding the value of human life, which forms the foundation of its unwavering stance against

euthanasia. While ongoing debates and shifting perspectives exist within the Church, it is clear that the Church is committed to upholding human dignity and protecting life. Understanding the Church's position on euthanasia is crucial when considering the broader discussions surrounding medical practises, government regulations, and ethical debates. A critical analysis of the position of the Catholic Church on euthanasia and the researcher's contribution to study were precisely provided. Given this issue's development, conducting more research and engaging in meaningful conversations is crucial.

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