

PONTIFICIA ACADEMIA PRO VITA

5th General Assembly

February 24-27, 1999

FINAL DECLARATION

On February 24-27, 1999, the 5th General Assembly of the "Pontificia Academia pro Vita" was held in the Vatican. During this session, we have reflected on the theme of the "Dignity of the Dying Person." We were aided in this task by a group of experts from various nations who represented diverse disciplines (biology, psychology, medicine, philosophy, theology, jurisprudence, and others). They presented the results of their studies, carried out during a year of research, through a special "task force" instituted for this purpose.

At the conclusion of the work of the Assembly, we would like to communicate the following convictions:

1. Above all we wish to reaffirm that human life is sacred and inviolable in all of its phases and in every situation. A human being never loses his dignity in any circumstance in which he finds himself, whether physical or psychological, or with regard to human relations. Therefore, every dying person merits and demands the unconditional respect due to *every* human person.

2. "We never celebrate and exalt life as much as we do in the nearness of death and in death itself. Life must be full respected, protected and assisted in those who are experiencing its natural conclusion as well." (*John Paul II*, August 25, 1990). When the doctor is aware that it is no longer possible to impede the death of the patient, and that the only result of intensive therapeutic treatment will be that of adding suffering to suffering, he must recognize the limits of medical science and of his personal intervention, and accept the inevitability and ineluctability of death. At this point, the respect due to the dying person demands more than ever that one avoid any sort of "therapeutic obstinacy" and that one encourage the acceptance of death.

The work of the doctor and of other health care workers must continue, however, in the attentive and efficacious application of so-called "proportionate therapies and palliative treatments."

3. The control of pain, and the human, psychological, and spiritual care

of patients, are the task of the doctor and of health care personnel, and they are as noble and essential as therapeutic interventions.

Therefore, a greater effort is necessary in the preparation and formation of health care workers, especially in those who are young, so that they may learn how to carry out these grave tasks with the necessary human and professional competence.

Thus we earnestly invite health care workers to deepen the true sense of their vocation and mission in giving support to human life and in the fight against illness and pain.

The age-old practice of the Hippocratic Oath can still serve as an inspiration and guide in their personal life and in the exercise of their noble profession.

4. The dying person should never be deprived of the *comforting presence* of family members and of those who *lovingly* assist him, with their precious and diversified *human* aid. This remains true independently of the degree to which he can understand their joint participation and their fraternal *relief* of his own pain.

5. In today's culture, especially in that of more developed countries, together with the authentic values of solidarity and love for life, currents of thought and practical attitudes are also present - the fruit and symptom of ideological and practical secularization - which tend to influence society in a hedonistic, pragmatist, and technocratic direction. Death, perceived without transcendent hope, is experienced as an event deprived of sense, with the result that it is excluded from consciousness and hidden in public life.

In this context, it is necessary to promote and encourage an authentic culture of life, which includes also the reality of the finiteness and natural limitation of human life. Only in this way will it be possible for death not to be reduced to a merely clinical event, nor be deprived of its personal and social dimension.

6. *We reject forcefully and with absolute conviction any type of euthanasia, understood as a recourse to actions or omissions with which one intends to procure the death of a person for the purpose of sparing him suffering and pain.*

At the same time we wish to express our human and Christian closeness to all the sick, and especially to those who see approaching the end of

their earthly existence and are preparing for their *encounter with God, our Beatitude*. For these our brothers and sisters, we ask that “therapeutic abandonment” be avoided, which consists in the withholding of treatments and therapies which alleviate their sufferings. Furthermore, one must also see to it that such treatments and therapies are not lacking on account of considerations of a purely economic order.

In the distribution of financial resources, the therapies and treatments due to gravely ill and dying patients must find an attentive and jointly responsible consideration.

7. We invite legislators and those who hold positions of responsibility in governments and international institutions to exclude the legalization or depenalization of the practice of euthanasia and of assisted suicide. The legal acceptance of the voluntary killing of one member of society on the part of another member would radically undermine one of the fundamental principles of civil society.

8. It can easily be foreseen that a legal approbation of that kind would lead to the loss of a patient’s necessary trust in his doctor, and would open the way to all sorts of abuse and injustice, especially in regard to those who are weakest.

Every citizen must be able to count on medical behavior which is inspired not only by scientific knowledge (which is always improving) but also by *natural law*, which Christian revelation confirms and illuminates.

9. In all societies, whether primitive or evolved, the celebration of death is understood as a sign of respect for the memory of someone who has died, and as an implicit affirmation of life after death.

Those who believe in God and in eternal life well know that death, the consequence of the sin of man, despite its human drama, must also be the door to their *definitive and eternal union with God, Creator and Father*. In this regard, let us call to mind what the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council proposed to Christians in December, 1965, in their Message to the Sick and to all those who suffer: “Christ did not eliminate suffering, nor did He wish to completely unveil its mystery. He took it on Himself, and this is enough for us to understand its value”. Therefore, the Christian understands suffering, and death itself, as *the possibility of uniting himself intimately to the sufferings and death of Christ, Who died and rose for us*.

We desire therefore that funeral ceremonies preserve their public and religious character, so that they might fittingly instruct those who are pilgrims in this world.

10. Finally, as Members of the Pontifical Academy for Life, we would like to renew our full and filial adherence to the Person of His Holiness, John Paul II, and to his Magisterial Teaching. We would also like to express our sincere gratitude for his constant work on behalf of human life.

May the expression of our gratitude be a renewed effort for the promotion and defense of the dignity of the dying person.

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