

Catholic ethics perspectives on euthanasia and the discontinuation of aggressive treatment

Głodowska KB.,^{1*} Krawczyk-Wasielewska A.²

1 Faculty of Health Sciences, Poznan University of Medical Sciences, Poland

2 Physiotherapy, Rheumatology and Rehabilitation Department, Faculty of Health Sciences, Poznan University of Medical Sciences, Poland

ABSTRACT

Defining euthanasia and aggressive treatment is of crucial importance from a researcher's point of view as any problems concerning the ethical consideration of the two issues stem from their faulty or ambiguous definitions. The Decalogue, with its fifth commandment: "you shall not kill" is the foundation of the Catholic ethics. It prohibits any form of euthanasia as it infringes upon God's power and is an act of usurping God's right to

decide on life and death. The authors present an overview of numerous documents on the value of life by the Catholic Hierarchy to point to the sources of euthanasia prohibition among the followers of this faith and their consent to the use of aggressive treatment.

Key words: euthanasia, Catholic church, ethics, aggressive treatment

***Corresponding author:**

Faculty of Health Sciences, Poznan University of Medical Sciences

Collegium Wrzoska

79 Dąbrowskiego str.

61-529 Poznań, Poland

Tel. 506-31-57-12, Fax.: 061 854 69 11

E-mail: kglodow@ump.edu.pl (Głodowska Katarzyna Beata)

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Definitions of euthanasia and discontinuation of aggressive treatment

Defining euthanasia and the discontinuation of aggressive treatment is of crucial importance as all the problems concerning the ethical considerations of the two issues stem from their faulty or ambiguous definition.

The Catholic Church has put forward its own definitions of euthanasia. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reads: "Whatever its motives or means, direct euthanasia consists in putting an end to the lives of handicapped, sick, or dying persons. It is morally unacceptable. Thus an act or an act of omission which, of itself or by intention, causes death in order to eliminate suffering constitutes a murder gravely contrary to the dignity of the human person and to the respect due to the living God, his Creator" [1]. In the 'Declaration on Euthanasia' of May the 5th, 1980 one can find a similar definition: "By euthanasia is understood an action or an omission which of itself or by intention causes' death, in order that all suffering may in this way be eliminated. Euthanasia's terms of reference, therefore, are to be found in the intention of the will and in the methods used" [2]. And finally, the *Evangelium Vitae* encyclical defines euthanasia as

- administering a drug that will intentionally kill the patient,
- gradually increasing the dose of anesthetics with the intention of causing patients death after some time,
- giving up therapy with the intention of causing patient's death;
- refusal to feed a terminally ill patient or a newborn with an incurable disability;
- refusing medication and treatment the patient needs to survive.

Pope John Paul II in his *Evangelium Vitae* Encyclical defines aggressive treatment as "medical procedures, which no longer correspond to the real situation of the patient, either because they are by now disproportionate to any expected results, or because they impose an excessive burden on the patient and his family. In such situations, when death is clearly imminent and inevitable, one can in conscience refuse forms of treatment that would only secure a precarious and burdensome prolongation of life, so long as the normal care due to the sick person in similar cases is not interrupted [3]. According to the *Evangelium Vitae* Encyclical the following instances may count as discontinuation of aggressive treatment:

- discontinuation of ineffective treatment on the patient's consent,
- discontinuation of artificial methods of sustaining life if this life can no longer be considered personal.

Equipped with the definitions of euthanasia and discontinuation of aggressive treatment as

accepted and used by the Catholic Church, we further discuss briefly the foundations of Catholic ethics which will serve as a basis for assessment and then move on to the main issues of the article.

The foundations of the Catholic Ethics

One simple definition of the Christian ethics could be values lived by those who follow the Christian religion; values derived from references to the life of Jesus Christ. In the past two thousand years, Christianity has spread across the globe and has taken many forms. The Roman Catholic Church is by far the largest denomination in terms of the number of followers. Catholics believe that the Church is God's vicar on earth and therefore, God expresses his will through the edicts of the Church, which treats the moral code as an objective, infallible and unquestionable indicator of moral conduct. The code is treated as an expression of God's will and therefore, those who breach God's commandments act in an immoral way. This moral code is at the heart of the Catholic ethics, which is inseparably linked to the Catholic faith. The Catholic ethics derive from the Christian ethics, the same way as the Catholic faith derives from the Christian faith.

According to the Catholic ethics, God expressed his will through Jesus Christ and therefore Christ's sermons on the right way of life are treated as an expression of God's will. Christ's sermons together with another moral imperatives such as the Decalogue and certain sections of the New Testament are the foundation of the Catholic ethics. In the ethics, a person acts morally when his actions follow the code, and act immorally when he has breached the commandments. In other words, the Catholic ethics can be considered to be a system in which a supreme being sets moral standards [4].

The foundation of the Catholic ethics is the Commandment to Love Jesus passed to his believers: "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself" [5]. Love of God consists in following his commandments and his will be passed on to the faithful by Jesus Christ. Love of God is not about feelings but about in fulfilling God's will as recognized by a person's conscience, written down in the Gospel and inferred from various life circumstances. The Catechism of the Catholic Church also reminds Catholics love to God should have certain qualities: first of all, this love should be supreme, true and fully effective, which means it cannot coexist with a deadly sin [6].

The Love of neighbor consists in giving those in need warmth, truth, presence, advice and sometimes financial support. According to the Catholic ethics, the love of neighbor is not based on the feeling itself but on a decision to serve the other

person regardless of what one feels. Catholic ethologists claim that what you give your neighbors and the way we serve them should contribute to their physical, spiritual, moral, intellectual, religious and social development but above all it should help them to achieve perfection in Heaven [7].

New Testament Commandment of Love goes back to the Decalogue. The Commandment to Love God refers to the first three of the Ten Commandments, whereas the remaining seven refer to our love to the neighbor. The Ten Commandments are the most widely known expression of God's will. We can find in the Bible in two different books of the Old Testament: (20: 2-17) and Deuteronomy (5: 6-21). Before the commandments are enumerated, God presents himself as the one who liberates. In the Bible, the Ten Commandments read as follows:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

- I. You shall have no other gods before me.
- II. Do not take the name of the Lord in vain.
- III. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.
- IV. Honor your father and mother.
- V. You shall not kill.
- VI. You shall not commit adultery.
- VII. You shall not steal.
- VIII. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
- IX. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.
- X. You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor [5].

The notions of interest here, i.e. euthanasia and discontinuation of aggressive treatment, are covered by the "you shall not kill" commandment. The fifth commandment protects all those who cannot protect themselves. Apart from a prohibition of killing, it includes a call for protecting the rights of all people and for creating more humane living conditions on earth. Both the sanctity of life and the right of every human being to life lie at the heart of the Catholic ethics. During his French pilgrimage John Paul II mentioned in his address that the first right of every human being is the right to live [6]. It is not the only right given to human beings, but it is the fundamental one: "There is no other right that so closely affects the very existence of the person! The right to life means the right to be born and then continue to live until one's natural end. As long as I live, I have the right to live" [7]. As early as in the Old Testament human life was seen as a gift from God and his property. So is it seen also in the New Testament: "For You are the source of life" [5]. According to the Catholic ethics, God is the only one who yields power over human life: "In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind" [5]. God takes special care of human life and prohibits other men from taking it away.

Further in the Old Testament we read: "I kill, and I make alive" [5]. There are many texts in the New Testament that refer to human life: about its value, about the right to life, about bodily integrity and about God as the master of life. "No man can decide on his own about life and death. The Lord is the only one to decide, for in Him we live and move and have our being" [5]. A man is a lord of neither life nor death. If a man wants to decide on when to put an end to one's life, he places himself in the position of God. The human life and body value doctrine has been mirrored in St. Paul's teaching about God who dwells in the temple of the human body: "You must know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is within the Spirit you have received from God. You are not your own" [5]. If God dwells in the temple of the human body, he is its owner and Lord. Therefore, a man has no ownership of his body. Therefore, an attack on human body, an attack on human life should be treated as an attack on God himself, because a man is an image of God.

Pope John XXIII stressed the importance of human life: "Human life is sacred all men must recognize that fact. From its very inception, it reveals the creating hand of God" [8]. John Paul II also reminds Catholics that "[e]very human life, from the moment of conception until death, is sacred because the human person has been willed for its own sake in the image and likeness of the living and holy God" [9]. Human life is something more than just our existence on earth. It is just a stage on the way to achieve the fullness of life. However, physical fitness and mental capability are not enough for reaching eternity. What is really required is fulfilling the tasks entrusted to us by God. In the *Evangelium Vitae* Encyclical John Paul II also mentions the origin of human life: "Man's life comes from God; it is his gift, his image and imprint, a sharing in his breath of life. God, therefore, is the sole Lord of this life: man cannot do with it as he wills" [3]. John Paul II treats life as a gift from God, a sacred and inviolable gift. He also claims that God is the creator of human life and therefore only God should be entitled to take this life away. He gave life as a gift to human beings and requires man to use it according to God's will. In the *Evangelium Vitae* Encyclical the Pope defends the human being, dignity and fundamental human rights, in particular the right to live:

- "Life is entrusted to man as a treasure which must not be squandered, as a talent who must be used well. Man must render an account of it to his Master.
- The life which God gives man is quite different from the life of all other living creatures, inasmuch as man, although formed from the dust of the earth, is a

manifestation of God in the world, a sign of his presence, a trace of his glory.

- God orders us to love and value life. The gift becomes a commandment and the commandment itself is a gift" [3].

When teaching about the value of life, its sanctity and inviolability, the Pope often refers to the Bible. From the Bible, he infers the great value and sanctity attributed to life. A man is not the master of life and has no right to decide about life and death. An assault on one's own or neighbor's life is equivalent to attacking the power the Creator has to rule over human life. John Paul II stresses the basic elements of Christian teachings on life. The words, actions and the person of Jesus Christ constitute the source of these teachings. Setting Jesus as an example, John Paul II elaborates on the teachings on life.

In conclusion, it can be said that being human entails the rights to live to bodily integrity. These rights were given to people by God, and no one can deprive them of the rights. Those are unchangeable, universal rights, which should be respected by and with respect to each human being and each social group. They derive from the fifth commandment "you shall not kill" and therefore, any violation of the commandment is tantamount to breaching the Catholic ethics.

Catholic ethical perspective on euthanasia

At the end of one's life, when the suffering becomes unbearable and death desirable, euthanasia might seem to tempt. From the Catholic perspective, however, such a solution is unacceptable, as life is a value in itself and any attempts on the life of innocent humans bear resemblance to the crime of murder. Moreover, "[e]ach murder of a human being is gravely contrary to the dignity of the person and the holiness of the Creator" [1].

In the fifth commandment, God voices strong opposition to euthanasia. This constitutes an absolute prohibition, but at the same time it affirms every human being's the right to live from the beginning to natural death. This right protects the innocent and the defenseless in a particular way. During one of his pilgrimages to Poland, Pope John Paul II reminded the believers that human life is saint and inviolable and that God is the only one to decide on life and death from beginning to end. The gift of life is not only biological but it also contains the soul, a supernatural element. The value of life cannot be assessed through the lens of the value of its worldly element. What actually determines the value and sense of life are the spiritual elements in it i.e. the eternal life. According to the Catholic Church euthanasia damages the divine plan. It negates the value of life in itself, it negates God who is the Creator of life and by presenting us with

life he grants himself the exclusive right to take this life away.

John Paul II's *Evangelium Vitae* counts among the fundamental texts on the Catholic perspective on euthanasia. What he condemns most vigorously is involuntary euthanasia: "The choice of euthanasia becomes more serious when it takes the form of a murder committed by others on a person who has in no way requested it and who has never consented to it. The height of arbitrariness and injustice is reached when certain people, such as physicians or legislators, arrogate to themselves the power to decide who ought to live and who ought to die. Once again, we find ourselves before the temptation of Eden: to become like God, who >>knows good and evil<<. God alone has the power over life and death" [3]. According to the Pope, the proponents of euthanasia are God imposters as they want to decide on what is good and what is wrong. John Paul II condemns voluntary euthanasia as well as an act aimed at upsetting the hierarchy established by God, a hierarchy in which life is the supreme value. Voluntary euthanasia violates this hierarchy in that it values freedom over life. Freedom is a great privilege of humanity and a great moral value in itself. The Pope writes, however, that we often tend to misinterpret freedom, which results from our limited understanding of what human dignity is. This misunderstanding translates into a love for the individual; a situation in which only the strong ones deserve freedom and the right to live. In this way, we miss the true dimension of human freedom. This approach to "freedom which exalts the isolated individual in an absolute way, (...) gives no place to solidarity, to openness to others and service of them" [3]. Through euthanasia a man deprives himself of both life and freedom, as this is the death of true freedom. A dead man cannot be free.

According to the Catholic ethics euthanasia denies the absolute power God has over life and death, defined by an Israeli sage as follows: "You have power over life and death; you lead men down to the gates of Hades and back again" [5]. In supporting euthanasia one becomes an accomplice in injustice which cannot be justified even when it is done on demand. One important contribution to the Catholic position on euthanasia was made by St. Augustin: "It is never licit to kill another: even if he should wish it, indeed if he request it because, hanging between life and death, he begs for help in freeing the soul struggling against the bonds of the body and longing to be released; nor is it licit even when a sick person is no longer able to live" [10]. If the main rationale behind euthanasia is not an egoistic refusal to bear all the difficulties involved in the existence of the sufferer, we should also call euthanasia a false pity or even consider it an unnerving "deviation", as true "compassion" consists in solidarity with the sufferer and not in

killing the person whose suffering one cannot stand [3].

In its Declaration on Euthanasia, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith declared that: "nothing and no one can in any way permit the killing of an innocent human being, whether a fetus or an embryo, an infant or an adult, an old person, or one suffering from an incurable disease, or a person who is dying. Furthermore, no one is permitted to ask for this act of killing, either for himself or herself or for another person entrusted to his or her care, nor can he or she consent to it, either explicitly or implicitly" [2]. In their Declaration of 5 May 1980, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith called euthanasia a crime and a breach of a norm which all humans should obey: "No one can make an attempt on the life of an innocent person without opposing God's love for that person, without violating a fundamental right, and therefore, without committing a crime of the utmost gravity" [2].

According to the Catholic ethics, the Creator made man responsible for his life. A man should not dispose over this life on his own, he should protect it and manage with all diligence, care and love due. God also made any person responsible for the life of another. "For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's" (St. Paul) [5]. To die for the Lord means to experience one's death as the ultimate act of obedience to the Lord and to accept the death in a moment chosen by Him. To live for the Lord means to accept that suffering, which in itself will always remain an evil and a trial, can also become a source of good. According to St. Paul, the Lord loves those whom He puts on trial.

An illness which requires other people to take care of the patient can become an incentive for euthanasia to free oneself from this burden, especially if the patient himself considers himself a burden to the care-givers. Some will consider this state an ultimate degradation of a human being and will think of euthanasia as the only right method to set oneself free. From the perspective of the Catholic ethics, we should, however, reject the view that a disease is a degradation of a human being. On the contrary, all suffering constitutes an opportunity for development and can be a factor leading to spiritual growth of both the patient and others. Thus, the Catholic Church cannot agree that it is justifiable to put an end to life in order to prevent the degradation and to restore dignity.

The full, salutary sense of suffering can be found in the life, suffering and death of Jesus Christ. The Christian sense of suffering has its sources in the suffering and death of the Son of God who died to save mankind. Therefore, we need to *bear our cross* the way Christ did. According to

John Paul II, it is to the sufferer that Christ says "Follow me! Come! Take part through your suffering in this work of saving the world, a salvation achieved through my suffering! Through my Cross" [11]. In this context, suffering is no longer "useless and senseless", but it receives great value. The meaning of suffering is "truly supernatural and at the same time human. It is supernatural because it is rooted in the divine mystery of the Redemption of the world, and it is likewise deeply human, because in it the person discovers himself, his own humanity, his own dignity, his own mission" [11]. The Catholic Church looks at people who in the face of death can keep their dignity with genuine admiration. It is exactly there where we can see the touch of God. According to John Paul II, "Gradually, as the individual takes up his cross, spiritually uniting himself to the Cross of Christ, the salvific meaning of suffering is revealed before him. He does not discover this meaning at his own human level, but at the level of the suffering of Christ. (...) At the same time, however, from this level of Christ the salvific meaning of suffering descends to man's level and becomes, in a sense, the individual's personal response. It is then that man finds in his suffering interior peace and even spiritual joy" [11]. The proponents of the Catholic ethics claim that Jesus topped the chalice of suffering, he accepted the most horrible suffering without making it any shorter. In the same way, Christians should follow him and drink from their chalice of suffering till the end without terminating their lives. Nobody can cut patient's suffering short through death, but one has the right to alleviate the pain. The Catholics Church claims that even if someone considers death to be a better solution because, of his suffering, this erroneous judgment of his conscience will not alter the criminal nature of this deed, which remains unacceptable. One should not take the begging for death of the terminally ill at face value as they usually are asking for help and compassion [12]. Complicity in euthanasia "cannot be morally justified even if performed upon patient's request" [3]. Euthanasia is just an escape from suffering, it amounts to negating the very meaning of suffering, discredits it and humiliates the sufferer and his family.

The Catholic Church the any laws permitting euthanasia is against the good of the the individual and against the public interest. In the *Evangelium Vitae* Encyclical, John Paul II reminds us that civil law has a completely different purpose than the moral code and a much more restricted scope. In no area of life can civil law replace our conscience and impose norms which exceed its competence. Civil law ensures that certain fundamental rights of all citizens be respected, those rights that stem from the very nature of the human being and should be protected by any man-made laws. Among those, the

first and most important one is the unalienable right to life [3]. The Pope writes that a conscious and voluntary decision to deprive an innocent person of his life is always evil and should be permitted neither as a goal in itself nor as a means of achieving another goal. Any such deeds are a manifestation of disregard for the moral code and for the God himself and violate the fundamental virtues of justice and love. No one can demand a murder to be committed with regard to him- or herself or to a person entrusted to them. No one can directly or indirectly agree to this. No authority can compel or allow people to do this [2]. According to the Catholic Church, any man-made law is only effective to the extent it derives from the natural law. If it contradicts the natural law in any way, it is no longer a law but a caricature of law. This refers, above all, to legislation which does not acknowledge the fundamental right of every human being to life. Therefore, the Catholic Church claims that any legislation allowing for the killing of the innocent through abortion or euthanasia, remain completely contradictory to the undeniable right to life that all human beings possess. What follows, it denies the fact that all humans are equal before the law. A legislation that allows for euthanasia and abortion is therefore in dire opposition to the individual and common good. It follows that if a law allows for abortion or euthanasia, this very fact makes this legislation morally wrong. Abortion and euthanasia are crimes that no legislation can deem acceptable. A piece of legislation that does so is therefore in no way binding for the conscience. Moreover, people are required to defy them in the name of conscience. So if we are dealing with an unjust piece of legislation, which is one that allows for abortion and euthanasia, we can never abide by it or shape public opinion in a way that would support such legislation. Voting in favour of such legislation is also unacceptable [3].

What could best summarize the Catholic stance on euthanasia in a quote from John Paul II's *Evangelium Vitae*: " [I]n harmony with the Magisterium of my Predecessors 81 and in communion with the Bishops of the Catholic Church, I confirm that euthanasia is a grave violation of the law of God, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written word of God, is transmitted by the Church's Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium" [3].

A look at the discontinuation of aggressive treatment from the perspective of the Catholic ethics

The technology used in today's medicine enables us to artificially prolong human life for weeks or even months. Surprisingly, those opportunities can sometimes prove to be

burdensome to both the patients and their families as well as for medical staff. In such situation, the Catholic Church allows for giving up such exceptional measures, which constitute aggressive treatment. In order to correctly assess the measure used, one needs to compare the type of treatment and the difficulties and risks it entails, the necessary expenses and possibilities of implementation and the results one may expect when taking into the consideration patient's physical and mental condition [2].

In the *Evangelium Vitae* Encyclical, Pope John Paul II writes about permission to discontinue aggressive treatment, and he refers to the Charter for Health Care Workers, which reads: "Where there is a danger of death that is unavoidable when using the currently available measures, one can, with clear conscience, decide to discontinue treatment, which would only result in dubious and painful life prolongation. One cannot, however, discontinue the provision of care which the patient would normally deserve. This shall not be seen as a reason for a physician to feel uneasy, as if she refused to provide help to somebody in danger" (original quotation unavailable, translation from Polish mine) [13]. The Catholic Church supports the discontinuation of aggressive treatment or giving up resuscitation and other procedures, which would prolong life in suffering. In such case, a physician that gives up resuscitation does not commit murder. It is not the physician that causes the death. Death is only natural for the patient and the physician is not able to change this. The discontinuation of aggressive treatment allows for a process to end, a process that does not depend on the physician. In cases where the patient does not hold promise, it is morally right for the physician to discontinue aggressive treatment and let the patient die in peace. The *Iura et bona* Declaration on Euthanasia of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith confirms that it is allowable to discontinue the application of ineffective measures [2]. Another fragment of this Declaration reads: "It is a decent thing, to confine oneself to regular means that medicine offers. One cannot impose on anybody that s/he undergoes a treatment that is available but yet not free from risks and, which incurs disproportionate costs. In such case, a patient's refusal is not equivalent to suicide. It is rather a sign of reconciliation and the will to avoid setting in motion a complicated medical mechanism which would not be proportionate to the results expected or unwillingness to become a burden to one's family and the community. (original quotation unavailable, translation from Polish mine)" [2]. The Declaration on Euthanasia explains why it is permissible to let a person die and give up aggressive treatment. A decision against taking up or continuing treatment made by a physician is only morally acceptable when justified by patient's welfare. The physician is

thus allowed to discontinue aggressive treatment if it becomes a source of the patient's suffering and constitutes a prolongation of his or her dying. In such case, a physician has the right to discontinue treatment, as according to the Catholic ethics one cannot further torment a dying person [14]. The Catechism of the Catholic Church perfectly mirrors Catholic ethics stand on the discontinuation of aggressive treatment: "Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate; it is the refusal of "over-zealous" treatment. Here one does not will have to cause death; one's inability to impede it is merely accepted. The decisions should be made by the patient if he is competent and able or if not, by those legally entitled to act for the patient, whose reasonable will and legitimate interests must always be respected" [1].

When discussing the Catholic ethical stance on the discontinuation of aggressive treatment we cannot forget about patient autonomy, one of the elements of which is his or her consent (or supposed consent). Patient's will should be taken into account by medical staff and the family. The physician is only allowed to act if authorized by the patient, either directly or indirectly, or if the family does so on behalf of an unconscious patient. A Pontifical Council Cor Unum document entitled "Ethical Questions concerning the seriously ill and the dying" 1981 stressed the importance of a patient's will for physician decision to discontinue disproportionately burdensome treatment. "A physician shall obey patient's will if s/he opposes burdensome treatment and shall always give priority to patient's will and welfare" [15]. Pope Pius XII reminds us that there is no independent or separate right, other than the patient's one, granted to a physician. In general, the physician can only act when authorized by the patient. In 1982, Pope John Paul II addressed the participants of the World Congress of Catholic Doctors and added the patient is a responsible person who should have the possibility to make a personal choice and should not be dependent on the decisions and choices made by others [16].

Even if death is perceived as unavoidable, regular care should still be provided to the patient. The use of painkillers is morally acceptable, even if they ease the pain while simultaneously shortening the patient's life, if death is not deliberating for both as a goal or as a means. The Catholic Church claims that a death resulting from the intensive use of painkillers should not be considered euthanasia and is morally acceptable. "Is the suppression of pain and consciousness by the use of narcotics ... permitted by religion and morality to the doctor and the patient (even at the approach of death and if one foresees that the use of narcotics will shorten life) (...) If no other means exist, and if, in the given

circumstances, this does not prevent the carrying out of other religious and moral duties: Yes. In this case, of course, death is in no way intended or sought, even if the risk of it is reasonably taken; the intention is simply to relieve pain effectively, using for these purpose painkillers available to medicine" [2]. In the *Evangelium Vitae* Encyclical, John Paul II talks about the dignity in the use of painkillers and tranquilizers in order to alleviate patient's pain when there is a risk of shortening the patient's life. "While praise may be due to the person who voluntarily accepts suffering by forgoing treatment with pain-killers in order to remain fully lucid and if a believer, to share consciously in the Lord's Passion, such as *heroic* behavior cannot be considered the duty of everyone. Pius XII affirmed that it is licit to relieve pain by narcotics, even when the result is decreased consciousness and a shortening of life, if no other means exist, and if, in the given circumstances, this does not prevent the carrying out of other religious and moral duties. In such a case, death is not willed or sought, even though for reasonable motives one runs the risk of it: there is simply a desire to ease pain effectively by using the analgesics which medicine provides. All the same, it is not right to deprive the dying person of consciousness without a serious reason: as they approach death people ought to be able to satisfy their moral and family duties, and above all they ought to be able to prepare in a fully conscious way for their definitive meeting with God" [3]. Thus, the Catholic ethics does not oppose the use of painkillers in potentially lethal doses.

According to the Catholic Church, by giving up aggressive treatment, which constitutes an extraordinary measure, one cannot give up ordinary measures. The Pontifical Council Cor Unum claims that there is always a duty of using ordinary measures, i.e. those measures that are usually used to sustain life functions. Proper nutrition is listed as the most important measure. Apart from some rare cases when medically enhanced nutrition is the source of extra pain (especially just before death), it is morally necessary to provide this type of care. A similar position is expressed in the Charter for Health Care Workers: "Food and drinks, even if provided in an artificial manner, count as regular care that each patient needs to receive, unless in themselves, they constitute a real burden on the patient; a refusal for food and drink may constitute euthanasia proper" [17].

The Catholic ethics allow for the discontinuation of aggressive treatment as it does not infringe upon God's right, but is a manifestation of the acceptance of human weakness in the face of death. Discontinuation of aggressive treatment is not to be understood as a sin against the fifth commandment, as a patient's death is not the intention but only a foreseeable result of alleviating disease symptoms. Therefore, in such case death is

a result of the disease itself. At the same time, the Catholic ethics remind us that one cannot forget about regular symptomatic treatment. The decision to discontinue aggressive treatment should depend solely on patient's will.

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