

## Euthanasia and Morality Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ

Euthanasia is a current topic which is being discussed around the world. Euthanasia mean literally “the painless killing of a patient suffering from an incurable disease or in an irreversible coma” according to Oxford dictionary. In other words euthanasia is a step taken to assist a patient to embrace death in order to save him/her from intolerable pain and suffering. Plainly speaking, euthanasia is a help given to a suffering person to commit suicide. Most people will accept that in euthanasia the help given to a sick person even to relieve the pain is really a killing, a murder. Killing or murder is not justified in any situation. There is no morality in it. But the objection and opposition of most people are against killing and murder and not against euthanasia.

The people supporting euthanasia will say that euthanasia is just a help given to a terminal patient to embrace death. They say that it is a help for a dignified death. If a person’s life is put to an end with the help of a specialist like a doctor/medical practitioner or a relative, such death is not a natural way of dying; but it is certainly killing, it is certainly murder.

In the context of euthanasia, people are divided into two categories. First, those who oppose the euthanasia and second, those who support and advocate euthanasia. In which category are you? According to you, which of the two categories of people uphold morality? Before taking the one or the side, let us examine the arguments and examples of both the sides.

In some countries there are organizations supporting euthanasia as well as organizations opposing it. The organization opposing euthanasia in France is called the Association for the Right to Life (L’Alliance pour les Droits de le Via – A D V) In the same way, the people supporting euthanasia are organized as an Association for the Right to Die with Dgnity (L’ Association pour le Driot-de Mourir dans la Dignite – ADMD)

In France there is legally no permission to commit euthanasia even though there are people and organizations both supporting and opposing euthanasia.

The first country in the world to enact a law favouring euthanasia is Netherland. The country passed in April 2001 a law of euthanasia called voluntary and medically assisted law or Physician Assisted Suicide (PAS) to justify as lawful the voluntary death or mercy-killing. But not only the people of Netherland but of the whole world protested against the law.

Reading the articles of the law, one feels that the law is meant to control the unchecked voluntary or assisted suicide. Dr. Karel Gunning of Netherland in an interview given to an Italian daily newspaper ‘Avenire’ said that according to a study done in 1991 in Netherland there were 2000 cases of euthanasia every year. But that figure has increased by 2000 to about 3200 cases every year. So Dr. Gunning believes that the law of euthanasia in Netherland gives as if legal recognition to the secret and private mercy killing.

But many people in Netherland are now afraid that the medical practioners will kill them since mercy killing has received the legal sanction! So sick persons and poor people are now keeping a

printed piece of paper in their pockets which says, "I do not wish that any Doctor put an end to my life." Even if people are not afraid to die, the people of Netherland are afraid that someone else will kill him/her under the protection of the euthanasia law!

Dr. Gunning gave the example of a documented case. According to the Roman news agency Zenit, Dr. Gunning said, "I know a cancer specialist doctor. He was treating a woman with lung cancer. The patient had great difficulty in breathing. So she needed hospitalization. But the woman refused to go to a hospital. The patient pleaded with the cancer specialist, 'I do not want to die under euthanasia'. The doctor assured her that nothing of the sort will take place in the hospital.

"Then, the cancer specialist himself took the woman to the hospital and started giving her the right treatment. The patient began to breath normally within 36 hours. Her health was improving in every way. One night the cancer specialist went home to sleep. When he came back to the hospital on the next day, the patient was not on her hospital bed. Another doctor of the hospital has done the mercy killing of her, because there was a shortage of beds in that hospital!"

After Netherland, Belgium was the second country in the world giving lawful recognition to euthanasia. According to the Belgian law of euthanasia, a doctor in concrete circumstances can do mercy killing for reason like incurable disease.

In India there is no law about euthanasia. But there are requests and demands for mercy killing. People suffering from terminal sickness and bed-ridden people with no end to their pain in sight have approached the courts in India for getting permission to medically assisted mercy killing. But the courts have refused such permission on the basis of the article 21 of our Indian constitution.

The Punjab Government's case against Gian Kaur in 1996 has raised one question. According to the article 21 of our Constitution everyone has the right to life. So the question was if there is right to life, then, does it not include the right to die? The supreme court has said that according to the article 21 a person has right to life. In the right to life includes the right for a person to live a dignified life and protect the life till it comes to a natural end. That is to say, every person has the right to live his/her life till natural death and the right for a dignified death. But if a person takes initiative and take one's life, then such death cannot be compared with dignified natural death. People should not confuse between both the types of death. In the name of painless death one cannot put an end to natural life. Putting an end to natural life is killing. It is murder.

The 'Indian Currents' published from New Delhi has brought out three other cases along with the case of Gian Kaur. Some years back an agricultural labourer from the Amravadi District of Maharashtra by name Shobha Ganesh wrote a letter to the Agricultural Court of Nagapur. In the letter Shobha Ganesh has said that his 10 year daughter is suffering from some unknown cancer. So he requested the court for granding him permission for mercy killing of his daughter. The judges of the court considered the letter as criminal writ petition and the court gave the verdict that mercy killing is against the Indian Constitution. Besides the court directed the government of Maharashtra that the government gives all help and facilities for the free treatment of the girl.

The third case given by the 'Indian Currents' is that of Kerala Government against B. K. Pillai. In the case the 74 year old petitioner Pillai requested the court that the state government provide him the assistance to embrace death without any pain. He informed the court that in the very difficult situation of his health he did not wish to live any longer. In the case the high court of Kerala noted that the constitution has protected the right to live. Life is precious and no one can take away one's life according to his/her fancies and whims.

The people who really understand the value of life will never think of euthanasia and mercy killing. Still some people fear that due to the progress made in the medical field some people will try to uselessly prolong life. Such prolonging of life is not only useless but also painful and shamefully undignified. Such people believe that only euthanasia or mercy killing can save them from such situation. But that is not true.

The people who oppose mercy killing and euthanasia say that, if a person cannot create life then he/she has no right to destroy or put an end to life. Looking from all angles euthanasia or mercy killing is a question of a person's feeling and individual thinking. What is needed is an understanding and appreciation of life in all its manifestation and a commitment to protect it.