

## Workshop on Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide

promoting a culture of life as *companions on the journey*  
(a 1 3/4-hour workshop for parish councils and their parish communities)

One or more leaders can lead the workshop. Two others may be chosen to say the opening and closing prayers. The workshop could begin or end with the song, “Companions on the Journey,” or a verse(s) could be sung at the beginning and end.

Materials/resources: copies of “Definitions” and “Small Group Discussions,” flip chart and paper, pencils/pens, markers, *Choose Life!* (available from Catholic Organization for Life and Family, 90 Parent Avenue, Ottawa, ON K1N 7B1 Tel: (613) 241-9461 ext. 230, E-mail: ocvfcolf@ccc.ca), *Evangelium Vitae*, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, *The Catholic Women’s League of Canada Position Paper on Euthanasia*, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops Statement on Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia (1993)

**Opening Prayer:** God of all life, as we begin this workshop today, we ask for the grace to open our minds and hearts. Help us to be aware of the dangers of a culture of death and teach us how to promote a culture of life in our world today. Teach us to be compassionate listeners, knowledgeable advisors, and caring sisters and brothers to our *companions on the journey* of life. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Ten years ago, Pope John Paul II issued the encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life)*. It proclaimed that the heart of Jesus’ message is the Gospel of Life: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10) *Evangelium Vitae* is a “vigorous reaffirmation of the value of human life.” It is an appeal to work together for justice and solidarity so that a new culture of human life will be affirmed for the building of an authentic civilization of truth and love. (*Choose Life!*)

Today, we will look at euthanasia and assisted suicide and discuss how they are part of what Pope John Paul II called “the culture of death.” We will also look at some things we can do to counter what he referred to as “a war of the powerful against the weak” by promoting a “culture of life.”

The *Criminal Code* prohibits euthanasia and doctor-assisted suicide. Section 222 prohibits euthanasia and Section 241 prohibits assisted suicide. The Code can be changed by legislation.

On November 17, 2004, the justice minister stated that, “It is time to go back to the drawing board in light of recent high-profile assisted suicides in Quebec and British Columbia.” He further stated, “Among the population, there is this division. People believe this is a matter of the right of personal choice and the right to die in dignity. Others feel we’ve got to protect the rights of the disabled, and this may be prejudicial.”

On June 15, 2005, Bloc Québécois member of parliament Francine Lalonde introduced Bill C-407 *An Act to amend the Criminal Code (right to die with dignity)*. Although it is a private member’s bill, it gives cause for great concern.

Bill C-407 seeks to amend sections 222 and 241 of the *Criminal Code* by adding a new subsection to each of these sections. The effect of these amendments is the legalization of euthanasia and assisted suicide for people suffering chronic physical and mental pain.

We will now take some time to discuss what the church teaches about euthanasia.

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(Divide into small groups. Pass out copies of “Definitions” and “Small Group Discussion #1.” Have copies of *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and *Choose Life* for each group. Participants could be asked to bring a copy of the Catechism.) Allow 20 minutes for small group discussion.

Return to the large group and have 10-15 minutes of feedback from the small group discussions.

#### BREAK (10 MINUTES)

We will now look at a few events which have led to a renewed interest in the debate for the legalization of euthanasia and assisted suicide.

In April 2002, the Netherlands became the first nation to permit euthanasia. At that time, physicians were given the legal right to put to death patients who were incurably ill and desperately wanted to die.

Belgium partially legalized euthanasia on May 16, 2002. Doctors are allowed to kill patients if they are terminally ill and suffering “constant and unbearable pain” and if they request to die. The doctor has to be satisfied that the patient is “of age and conscious” and has not been coerced into making the decision to die.

In Canada, 74-year-old Evelyn Martens was charged with aiding and counseling Monique Charest, 64, to commit suicide on January 7, 2002. She was also charged with aiding and counseling Leyanne Burchell, 52, to end her life on June 26, 2002. Both women were from British Columbia and were believed to be terminally ill. Ms. Martens’ trial began in September 2004 and she was subsequently acquitted.

In another case, a Montreal woman, Marielle Houle, was charged with aiding and abetting in the suicide of her son, Charles Fariala, 36. He had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis the previous year.

A recent poll concerning euthanasia and assisted suicide, produced by the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition, showed that 45% of the 1,122 participants believed that euthanasia should be legalized, 39% were opposed, and 16% were undecided. “The poll shows that Canadians are clearly divided on the issues of euthanasia and assisted suicide. We used an online survey because it allowed us to ask more questions and the person being surveyed has more options. The poll results are encouraging because they confirm that there is no consensus to change the law and Canadians want good care provided for people who are vulnerable or dying.” (Newsletter #54, May 2005, Euthanasia Prevention Coalition)

Divide into small groups and have each group look at “Small Group Discussion #2.” Allow 10 minutes for discussion.

Continue in small groups and have each group look at “Small Group Discussion #3.” Provide paper and markers for each group to propose a course of action. Allow 15 minutes for discussion before convening as a total group.

Have one person report from each small group. Outline a plan of action on flip chart paper. (15 minutes)

**Closing prayer:** (ALL) Gracious God, You have created us in Your image and likeness. Help us to be advocates for our brothers and sisters whose lives are endangered. Give us the courage and strength to be diligent in our efforts to protect life at all stages. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Definitions

**Euthanasia** is generally understood as an action or an omission, which of itself or by intention causes death in order that all suffering be eliminated.

**Voluntary euthanasia** occurs when a competent adult requests or gives consent for a medical treatment or non-treatment. This choice must be made voluntarily with the adult understanding what he or she is agreeing to.

**Non-voluntary euthanasia** occurs when the person who is killed makes no request.

**Assisted suicide** “is counseling, abetting or an act of aiding someone to kill himself or herself.”  
([www.epcc.ca](http://www.epcc.ca))

**Hospice/palliative care** is the active total care of patients whose prognosis is limited due to progressive, far-advanced disease; its purpose is to alleviate pain and other distressing symptoms and to enhance the quality of life, not to postpone or hasten death. (World Health Organization)

## Small Group Discussion #1

Read sections 2276-2279 (Euthanasia) in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Read the section on euthanasia in *Choose Life!*.

Discuss the following questions.

1. Why is direct euthanasia morally unacceptable?
  2. a. When can discontinuing medical procedures be legitimate?  
b. Who makes the decision?  
c. What is meant by extraordinary or disproportionate means?
  3. Discuss section 2279 of the Catechism.
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## Small Group Discussion #2

Read sections 2280-2283 (Suicide) in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Read the section on suicide in *Choose Life!*.

Discuss the following questions.

1. How would the legalization of assisted suicide lead to a diminishment of respect for human life?
  2. What could happen to the trust between doctors and patients?
  3. What abuses could result?
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## Small Group Discussion #3

What actions should be taken?

What are the possibilities for action?

Write letters to: members of parliament, prime minister, senators, minister of justice

Read:

- *The Catholic Women's League of Canada Position Paper on Euthanasia* (1992)
- *Statement on Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia* by Archbishop Marcel Gervais, President of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (1993)
- *Choose Life!*
- *Evangelium Vitae*
- learn about the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition, Box 25033, London, ON N6C 6A8; Telephone: (519) 439-7053; E-mail: [info@epcc.ca](mailto:info@epcc.ca); website: [www.epcc.ca](http://www.epcc.ca)
- visit Priests for Life website at [www.priestsforlife.org](http://www.priestsforlife.org) and read *Brief Reflections on Euthanasia* by Fr. Frank Pavone, National Director, Priests for Life
- Check out Senator Sharon Carstairs' recommendations in her progress report on palliative and end-of-life care which was endorsed by the Catholic Health Association of Canada