

Euthanasia with the Brothers of Charity?

Bro. René Stockman

During the last months there was a lot to do about the question whether or not euthanasia should be permitted in the mental health care services of the Brothers of Charity in Belgium. Until now they had applied the strict rule to take every request about euthanasia seriously, to do everything to accompany well the ill person who demands for it and to try to offer him or her new perspectives of life. But in case the request for euthanasia should remain present and all the legal conditions in this regard should be fulfilled, no euthanasia should be executed inside the walls of the institution, but together with the patient and the family should be looked for another environment, where euthanasia could be executed. With this procedure they were not acting against the law and at the same time they remained in line with the vision of the Catholic Church which rejects euthanasia because life has to be respected absolutely in all conditions.

Some called this procedure ambiguous and hypocrite, because the patients were taken out of their familiar environment at the end of their life to undergo euthanasia outside of the institutions of the Brothers of Charity. We didn't find this at all ambiguous or hypocrite, because from the beginning it was clearly communicated to the patient and the family that inside the institutions of the Brothers of Charity no euthanasia would be executed, but with this way of acting we would not judge in this regard the possible decision of the patient. In other words, we asked that also the patient and the family should respect our vision as Catholic institution. Thus, it was an act of mutual respect.

We know that from outside this vision and practice were criticized, surely by those who fervently advocate euthanasia, but also by the umbrella-organization of Christian hospitals which, in principle, rejected euthanasia but allowed it in some exceptional cases. At the same time we know that some so-called Catholic hospitals connive at euthanasia without giving much publicity to it, while in other hospitals clear procedures have been developed how to deal with the request for euthanasia, without excluding radically euthanasia. But also within the own organization Brothers of Charity we were not always spared of criticism, although the vast majority of the psychiatrists shared the vision that euthanasia for patients who are in a non-terminal situation and in a so-called situation of unbearable suffering was not appropriate. That some politicians didn't conceal their criticisms, but openly and often in an arrogant manner went on the offensive is very well known.

Therefore, did we come as institutions of the Brothers of Charity to stand on a lonely height? Perhaps yes. But was this then a good reason to modify our vision and to develop

a procedure that emphasizes careful handling of the request for euthanasia, yet the door is being opened for the execution of euthanasia inside the walls of the institution? I don't think so. Maybe it is rightly good that in a pluralist society diversity is present and remains present whereby organizations as ours within the legal framework that is created around euthanasia and in conformity with the Christian vision on man that they apply as a Catholic institution just like individual caregivers deal with this law in a conscientious manner: open for the request, open for the accompaniment but not open to apply euthanasia also effectively nor to execute it. Or to quote from an interview with professor Wim Lemmens: "Remarkably, I found that Othman El Hammouchi, a young Islamic philosopher, remarked that the Church should not have to adapt to "social" evolutions" but should be a source of stability amid continual changes. That could also the Brothers of Charity have done: to grasp the momentum to explain their refusal."

"To grasp the momentum to explain their refusal". With that, one would be more prophetic as institutions of the Brothers of Charity in Belgium than with what one is now threatened to realize. Now, one makes oneself probably unwillingly ally of those who want to extend the law always further and with that one becomes partially responsible for a trend by which euthanasia is being trivialized, by which euthanasia finally will be elevated as a patient right, by which in the worst case euthanasia will be seen as a duty that can be imposed by third parties in certain situations. When one slightly opens the door, one knows out of experience that not much is needed to push the door further open. With the new vision, the door in the institutions of the Brothers of Charity in Belgium is opened and we ask ourselves anxiously how long it will take before the door goes further open and the due care requirements one is very proud of will disintegrate in practice and become a banality and a formality.

But also on the content of the vision text as such we as General Administration of the Brothers of Charity have expressed a number of fundamental objections, which make all the nice considerations on the due care waver more than ever.

First of all, there is the starting point by which the inviolability of life, the patient autonomy and the care relationship are put on the same level as fundamental values in the care. For us, the inviolability of life is more than fundamental because this inviolability results from the respect of life that is always absolute. We consider the inviolability of life as an overarching value that precedes all other values and which cannot be touched. The inviolability of life cannot be subject to the intention of an act, it precedes every intention. Therefore, we maintain, totally in line with the doctrine of the Catholic Church, that life, every life, deserves our absolute respect and, because of that, we can never participate in the execution of euthanasia that we consider as the killing of a fellow human being. This is also the reason why we from the beginning have clearly

stated that euthanasia inside the walls of an institution of the Brothers of Charity is out of the question.

Secondly, euthanasia is described in the vision text as a medical act, being part of the therapeutic freedom of the medical doctor. This is a very reprehensible thesis, by which we give to euthanasia a qualification that is not even given in the legislation and by which the killing of a fellow man is considered as a medical act. The act is entrusted by law to a medical doctor, but is therefore not a medical act. And when one is even claiming that it is a medical act, then the whole due care procedure has no sense, as it is the medical doctor and the medical doctor alone who finally decides whether or not euthanasia can be executed. Also on the international level this vision has been criticized a lot, and we expressly ask that this aspect is kept out of the text. Even if one claims that this vision text is in the first place an ethical text, one doesn't seem to realize that this vision text has also juridical and far-reaching concrete and societal consequences.

Thirdly, we cannot accept that unbearable suffering of a psychiatric patient and the so-called no reasonable treatment perspective are considered as criteria to proceed to euthanasia. Everyone who is familiar with psychiatry knows that the feeling of unbearable suffering is just typical of a psychiatric disorder, and it is just the task of the caregivers to do everything what is possible to bring a spark of light and to arouse hope. It is a great challenge to give shape to the quality of our therapeutic acting in these extremely difficult situations.

As General Administration we have therefore asked the organization Brothers of Charity in Belgium to review their vision text on these points, thus aligning with the vision of the congregation as expressed in its charism and in accordance with the doctrine of the Catholic Church.

To accuse the General Administration of unworldly thinking in this issue where it comes to the care for psychiatric patients is totally unfounded and completely out of place.

During about two years, there was a dialogue about the content of this vision text between the responsables of the organization and the General Administration. However without any result.

The recent declaration of the Belgian Bishops, reaffirming the Church's point of view that euthanasia in general and for mental suffering in a non-terminal situation is inadmissible, was totally neglected by the organization Brothers of Charity. An attempt of mediation with a neutral mediator failed.

As pontifical congregation we were asked by the competent authorities of the Vatican to do our utmost to bring the vision text of the organization Brothers of Charity in Belgium in conformity with the doctrine of the Church. The Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith wrote in a clear letter what can be expected of Christians when it is about the absolute respect for all life, from the natural beginning until its natural end. The Secretary of State,

in the person of Cardinal Parolin, expressed his great anxiety about the evolution in the organization Brothers of Charity in Belgium.

The Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life, under which the congregation of the Brothers of Charity has to be situated hierarchically in the Church, presented an ultimatum to the organization with the question to the Superior General of the Brothers of Charity to announce this ultimatum. In order to try to find yet a solution for the problem, this ultimatum was temporarily suspended and at short notice a meeting is planned between the three mentioned dicasteries, the General Administration and the organization Brothers of Charity in Belgium. Always in the hope of modifying the vision text and of bringing it in conformity with the doctrine of the Catholic Church and the charism of the congregation of the Brothers of Charity.

Now it is awaiting what will be the result of this ultimate meeting. As congregation we remain hoping that – as before – also in Belgium a prophetic voice should be sounding, a voice that is sometimes contrary to the public opinion, but that incites people to reflect on the way our society is dealing with the fragile man and the suffering man in particular. Our society has to invest urgently more in the care of these people and to stimulate new therapies.

Pope John Paul II spoke about a shift from a “culture of life” to a “culture of death”. Some claim that refusing euthanasia to someone who suffers seriously and with no reasonable treatment perspective is a merciless act. Is the word “mercy” not abused here and bend to the opposite of what it originally means: an act by which one gives a better and fuller life to fellow people. Can killing become an act of mercy? Don’t we have to learn rather to give suffering, that befalls us all, a place in life, to do everything to heal and before all to ease it by the presence of the fellow men who know what compassion is. And this has nothing to do with a kind of misplaced glorification of suffering nor with a therapeutic obstinacy.

We don’t condemn by no means people who choose for euthanasia, even though we cannot approve this as act. Mercy in the Christian meaning of the word doesn’t allow euthanasia. Therefore there is no place for euthanasia in the institutes of the Brothers of Charity. This has to be clearly communicated to patients and their family before every admission.

Is this a sign of being merciless and lovelessness? On the contrary. The charism of the Brothers of Charity sounds as follows: the measure of love, is love without measure, not at least for the heavily afflicted fragile fellow man.

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