



## What the Catholic Church Teaches About the End of Life

**M**edical advances can help save lives. They also can present terminally-ill patients and their loved ones with difficult choices at the end of life.

Catholic teaching gives patients and their families' principles for making decisions about initiating or continuing medical treatments.

*"But normally one is held to use only ordinary means...according to the circumstances of persons, places, times, and culture – that is to say, means that do not involve any grave burden for oneself or another."*  
(Pope Pius XII)

### Ordinary and Extraordinary

Treatments that offer reasonable hope of benefit that may be obtained without excessive pain, expense or burden are considered ordinary means. Treatments that do not offer reasonable hope of benefit or cannot be obtained without excessive pain, expense or burden are considered extraordinary means.

Respecting the sacredness of life, each person decides the benefits and burdens of treatment according to their own physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health at the time of the decision.

When confronted with highly emotional life-and-death decisions, Catholics should gather all the facts, consult with their physician and family, reflect on Catholic teaching, and pray.

*"We are called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of our earthly existence"...because it consists in sharing the very life of God."* (Pope John Paul II. *Evangelium Vitae*)



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*Q. Does the Church require Catholics to pursue all efforts to preserve life?*

*A. No. Human life is a gift from God and we have a duty to preserve it. But we enter into eternal life through death, and the Church teaches that treatments or procedures may be refused if they offer little or no benefit or if they cause undue burden.*

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### Catholic Teaching on Assisted Suicide

Because all life is sacred, Catholic teaching holds that assisted suicide can never be permitted.

Euthanasia and assisted suicide stand in contradiction to the Catholic understanding that all life bears God's image and has inherent dignity.

*Allowing to Die vs. Killing* - Killing is an intentional act that causes death, while allowing to die is withholding or withdrawing futile or burdensome treatments.

## Making Good Decisions at the End of Life

*“Dying is one of the most important moments in our lives. Like all important moments, it deserves thoughtful preparation.”* (Father Lawrence Reilly, Ethicist and Theologian)

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*Q. What’s the difference between withholding treatment and assisted suicide?*

*A. Assisted suicide is the intentional taking of life and is never permissible. Withholding “extraordinary means” of medical treatment is morally permissible, allowing nature to take its course and death to occur naturally.*

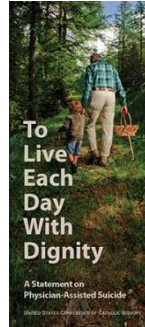
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The Church encourages all Catholics to prayerfully reflect on death and to prepare for it responsibly. This may include preparing a living will and durable power of attorney for health care to make their wishes known.

All Catholics are strongly encouraged to make their desires known to their family, friends and doctor regarding initiating or continuing life-sustaining procedures in the event of a terminal condition. Catholics also are encouraged to give power of attorney for health care to someone they trust who can make health care decisions for them, if they are unable to do so for themselves.

## Resources

Available from [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org):



*To live in a manner worthy of our human dignity, and to spend our final days on this earth in peace and comfort, surrounded by loved ones—that is the hope of each of us. In particular, Christian hope sees these final days as a time to prepare for our eternal destiny.*

Visit the California Catholic Conference, [www.cacatholic.org](http://www.cacatholic.org), or email [leginfo@cacatholic.org](mailto:leginfo@cacatholic.org), for more information.

*“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be.*

John 14:3