



The Catholic
Archdiocese
of Edmonton

Every Life Matters Easter Series

Session 3

"My Body, My Choice"

The Understanding of Freedom in the Christian Tradition

One of my greatest joys is spending time with family in Halifax. The kids usually bring their toys, gadgets, cellphones, or video games. They are entirely distracted by them until my father starts telling stories. It is fascinating to watch them when this happens. As their grandfather begins to recount episodes of past family adventures or tales about growing up, all the gadgets are set aside and they become absolutely riveted. They miss nothing of what is said, drinking it all in. They really light up when we begin to tell stories about them. The joy that they feel, it seems to me, is twofold: it is the joy of discovering roots, of belonging, of being a part of something bigger than themselves, part of a network of relationships; at the same time the joy of being noticed, of having a part, of mattering. In the midst of the family, they are discovering that they are not just a member of the group; they are, within that group, a someone whose very existence is celebrated and who matters not for anything they are able to do but just for who they are. One's personal identity is unique, yet at the same time inseparably connected to the relationships that forge it. The relationships are reciprocal and interdependent, providing love and meaning and engendering responsibilities and obligations.

This normal human experience reminds us that identity and meaning are forged in the give and take of loving relationship. As Christians we understand that our deepest identity and the real purpose of our lives are discovered in our primary relationship with God. By the death and resurrection of Jesus and the subsequent outpouring of his Holy Spirit, we have been made the sons and daughters of God, members of his family, and heirs to an eternal destiny. In this family, every life finds meaning, every life is given a purpose, every life is connected, every life matters. We bear a responsibility for one another. This belonging to God and to the family he fashions provides the necessary framework for understanding what the Christian tradition teaches about freedom and two related concepts that need to be considered with it, namely, choice and autonomy. These are key ideas at play in the issue of assisted suicide and euthanasia.

Let's begin with choice. Our relationship with God begins with a choice; not our choice, but His. Out of love God chose to create us in the first place; moved by that same love he chose to fashion us as His people. God has called humanity to respond by choosing Him in return, a choice by which we pledge ourselves to Him who first pledged Himself to us - a covenant of binding love, lived in mutual fidelity.

We express our choice to be faithful to God in the act of faith. "I believe in God." When we say this in the Creed, we announce in English what in Latin is *Credo in Deum*, which means, literally, "I believe into God" or "I believe towards God." What is expressed here is something alive, dynamic. It expresses movement towards God. The act of faith is the complete surrender of one's entire life into the hands of God and his saving plan.

When the Christian states "I believe in God," he or she is saying "I give my life over to God without qualification and without condition". It is complete surrender, freely and lovingly given in response to God's loving initiative and intervention in history and in our personal lives. This self-surrender to God necessarily includes the body. God has fashioned us body and soul, the two so inseparably united that it is through the body that I give visible expression to the faith within my heart.

Recently, on Easter Sunday, we engaged in a particularly beautiful profession of this faith by solemnly renewing our baptismal promises. Do you reject Satan? Do you believe in God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit? In this act we affirm that we put our faith into practice daily by always choosing the good and rejecting what is evil. The foundational choice of God and our pledge of fidelity to him is the standard against which we measure all other choices we make.

Now, reflection on our foundational choice of God leads us necessarily to the second of the key concepts I mentioned: freedom. The response of love, the act of faith, must be truly free. A relationship made by force is no relationship at all, certainly not one of mutual and abiding love. Therefore, God has endowed us with freedom. In the very act of so doing he reveals freedom's purpose. Freedom is given that we might freely choose Him, and to choose always the good as consistent with that first and fundamental choice. It is important to distinguish carefully here between freedom and license. License is refusal of all limit and constraint in order to do what I want. Freedom is liberty within limit to do what I must. This "ought" flows from my pledge of fidelity to the love of God. The limit within which we exercise freedom is truth: the truth of our creaturely dependence upon God, the truth of our relationship of interdependence with others, and the truth that I am not my own.

Here we arrive at the concept most often put forward to justify assisted suicide or euthanasia: autonomy. When used as justification for these practices, it has the sense of self-governance and moral independence that is absolute. Yet is clear that on the grounds of both reason and faith this is false. Rationally we know that, as human beings, we are interdependent and therefore have responsibilities and obligations towards one another and the common good. Furthermore, by definition assisted suicide and euthanasia are not individual but social acts. They necessarily involve other persons and, what is more, those persons draw into the act the societal institutions they represent, namely, the family, law and medicine. From the perspective of faith, autonomy is limited by what our Christian faith teaches about the human person. As people in covenant relationship with God through Christ, we speak not of who we are but of whose we are. St. Paul says it beautifully: "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living." (Romans 14: 7-9)

In life and in death, we are not our own; we belong to the Lord. For the follower of Christ, then, it is this awareness of belonging that shapes our life and death choices. We make them in the freedom that God's grace makes possible, and choose to do only that which is consistent with the truth of our belonging and of our covenant love for the Lord.

Let me conclude by bringing this to bear now on a particular matter of choice that confronts those who are terminally ill. This has to do with the question of refusal of treatment or the ending of treatment that is keeping someone alive. I raise this particular point because it is here that I have found the most puzzlement. Often I will hear it asked: Is not the refusal of treatment a form of suicide? Or is not the ending of treatment an instance of euthanasia? The answer to each is no. St. John Paul II put it this way: "To forego extraordinary or disproportionate means is not the equivalent of suicide or euthanasia; it rather expresses acceptance of the human condition in the face of death." (*Evangelium Vitae*, n. 65)

"Acceptance of the human condition in the face of death." We are creatures, limited and mortal, who have been created by God and endowed with an eternal destiny. This life on earth leads through death to the next. So if treatment is futile, or its burdens outweigh any possible benefits, there is no moral obligation to prolong our earthly life at all costs. In such a moment, the choice we make as Catholics is to prepare ourselves for what our tradition calls a "good death" or a "happy death". The decision to forego treatment is just that - a decision to let go of treatment, not of the patient, and allow life to unfold to its natural end. This choice, made in both faith and freedom, flows beautifully and mysteriously from our first and fundamental choice of fidelity to our covenant with God, from our foundational stance of faith. It is the final act of trust in God, the ultimate decision to choose good and not evil, and the definitive surrender of the entirety of one's life into the hands of God.

✠Richard W. Smith
Archbishop of Edmonton
April 10, 2016
St. Mary Parish, Red Deer