



**ROMAN CATHOLIC
DIOCESE of ORANGE**

PASTORAL CENTER: COMMUNICATIONS DEPARTMENT
13280 CHAPMAN AVENUE, GARDEN GROVE, CA 92840

Assisted Suicide: Frequently Asked Questions

What is assisted suicide?

Assisted suicide occurs when one person helps another to take his or her life. For example, a doctor assists in a suicide when he prescribes lethal drugs to a terminally ill patient who then takes them to end her life.

What is aid in dying, and death with dignity?

These are euphemisms for assisted suicide. Both terms are used to obscure the fact that one or more people are legally empowered to assist in a person's suicide.

What does California's assisted suicide law do?

The new physician assisted suicide law changes the law to say that in certain circumstances, a person such as a doctor can assist in another person's suicide without being prosecuted for a crime.

This change applies to persons who are diagnosed with a terminal illness (projected to live six months or less), and are judged by two doctors to be able to make medical decisions. To receive lethal drugs a person must make two oral requests 15 days apart, and one witnessed written request. All involved are exempt from liability if they are in "good faith compliance," which is the weakest legal standard.

Are there any safeguards in California's assisted suicide proposal?

The safeguards within the law only protect the doctor or other people who assist in a suicide from being prosecuted for a crime.

For example:

- There is no requirement that the person requesting assisted suicide or the doctor receiving the request notify the person's next of kin.
- There is no requirement that the doctor refer a person requesting assisted suicide for a psychiatric or psychological evaluation, even though research on suicide demonstrates that most suicidal think-



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ing arises from treatable clinical depression or other psychiatric disorders.

- Two witnesses are required to witness a person's request for assisted suicide, but they are allowed to have a personal or financial motive for hastening the person's death, such as being (1) a relative or heir, or (2) an employee of the health care facility taking care of the person.
- Prohibits prosecution for elder abuse against the doctor or others who dispense or provide the lethal drugs.
- The person's death certificate must be falsified to say that the person died of the underlying terminal illness instead of the lethal drugs.

Are those committing suicide through physician assisted suicide entitled to the sacrament of *Anointing of the Sick*?

According Canon 1007 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law, "the anointing of the sick is not to be conferred upon those who persevere obstinately in manifest grave sin." Ideally, the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick should be preceded by the Sacrament of Penance and followed by the reception of the Eucharist as viaticum or "food for the journey" (CCC, No. 1525). The Sacrament of Penance, however, requires the penitent to be properly disposed, which means "rejecting sins committed and having a purpose of amendment" (Canon 987).

In a similar way, a person requesting the anointing of the sick must not "persevere obstinately in manifest grave sin." If a priest cannot persuade a person against physician-assisted suicide, then the Sacrament of Anointing should not be administered. This would be a most painful decision on the part of the priest, but such an individual would seem to be persisting in the manifest grave sin of suicide.

If a person commits suicide in this manner, can they receive the Catholic funeral rite?

Some Catholics might wonder why someone should be denied the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick before committing suicide when those who commit suicide are usually not denied Catholic funerals and Catholic burials. This is because the Church recognizes that "grave psychological



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disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering or torture can diminish the responsibility of one committing suicide" (CCC, No. 2282).

The 1983 Code of Canon Law provides this instruction regarding those who are to be denied Church funerals:

- Can. 1184 §1. Unless they gave some signs of repentance before death, the following must be deprived of ecclesiastical funerals:
 - 1/ notorious apostates, heretics, and schismatics;
 - 2/ those who chose the cremation of their bodies for reasons contrary to Christian faith;
 - 3/ other manifest sinners who cannot be granted ecclesiastical funerals without public scandal of the faithful.
- §2. If any doubt occurs, the local ordinary is to be consulted, and his judgment must be followed.

A person who ends his or her life by suicide could be granted a Catholic funeral and burial because the various factors mentioned in the Catechism might have taken away culpability for the sin committed.

Can assisted suicide be made safe?

No. The point of assisted suicide is to make it legally permissible to kill certain people.

Where is assisted suicide legal?

In the United States, assisted suicide is legal only in Oregon, Washington, Vermont and now in California. Judges in Montana and New Mexico have created limited legal immunities for assisting in a suicide.

Is opposition to assisted suicide mainly by religious and conservative people?

No. While faith-based and pro-life groups do oppose assisted suicide, so do a diverse array of people from disability and elder rights, medical, hospice, civil rights, and patient advocacy groups.

The debate over assisted suicide is about focusing end-of-life policy on care, not killing.