



# CHURCH CALLS FOR FAITH, COURAGE AND COMPASSION AT LIFE'S END

OPPOSED BY THE CHURCH AND MUCH OF THE MEDICAL ESTABLISHMENT, NEW ASSISTED SUICIDE LAW TAKES EFFECT JUNE 9

BY CATHI DOUGLAS

**C**alifornia's End of Life Option Act – the controversial law opposed by the Catholic Church but signed by Gov. Jerry Brown in October – goes into effect June 9 and Catholic physicians and health care organizations remain staunchly opposed, continuing to pray and speak against it.

While terminal illnesses or serious disease challenge us, opponents say, they also prompt crucial discussions among patients, families, caregivers and physicians. The resulting end-of-life and palliative care provide patients with comfort, support and spiritual meaning.

“We all know that this law was passed despite significant bipartisan opposition,” writes Californians Against Assisted Suicide in a recent statement. “Patients with serious or terminal diseases, doctors and disability organizations remain very concerned about the message the new

## NOVENA FOR LIFE

**L**os Angeles Archbishop Jose H. Gomez and Bishop Kevin Vann of the Diocese of Orange urge people of faith throughout California to join in a nine-day novena of Prayer and Fasting before the implementation of assisted suicide on June 9.

The Archdiocese has created a St. John Paul II Novena Prayer Card to lift up in prayer our brothers and sisters who are elderly, disabled, and nearing the end of life and commit ourselves to their loving care.

Interested Catholics can print the prayer cards at [https://gallery.mailchimp.com/f24a5116abb85c9500252467e/files/Novena\\_Prayer\\_Card\\_to\\_St.\\_John\\_Paul\\_II.pdf](https://gallery.mailchimp.com/f24a5116abb85c9500252467e/files/Novena_Prayer_Card_to_St._John_Paul_II.pdf).

For more information about caring for loved ones near the end of life, please visit [archla.org/end-of-life](http://archla.org/end-of-life). ❖

law sends to people newly or currently diagnosed.”

The Catholic Church for centuries has maintained that human life in all its forms is sacred. According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “the dignity of the human person is a moral vision for society” and is the foundation of the Church’s principles of social teaching. “We believe that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person,” the USCCB says.

From a Catholic standpoint it is our responsibility to keep ourselves aware and available to fight the law once it is implemented – and to accompany the dying by supporting and encouraging them in their challenges, notes Ned Dolejsi of the California Catholic Conference, the public advocacy office of the Bishops of California.

“We’ve always turned to prayer when society makes challenging decisions,” Dolejsi says. “We must pray and recognize that we have the responsibility to

get out into the community and serve the vulnerable in a responsible way.”

The Archdiocese of Los Angeles and the Diocese of Orange have urged parishes statewide to join together in a nine-day novena of prayer and fasting for the elderly, disabled and dying before implementation of the new law. (See sidebar.)

Dolejsi notes that “most doctors concur that if you are in pain, you’re getting bad medical care,” and that good palliative care so that the dying have their symptoms treated and are helped through the difficult task of completing their lives. “We want to empower individuals to live as well as they can while dying, and to spend time doing things that give meaning to their lives.”

Catholic physicians say that the Hippocratic Oath prohibits doctors from hastening patients’ deaths and Catholic beliefs in the sanctity of all life does the same; while society communicates to the disabled, elderly and dying that they are a burden, the medical profession and the Church do not agree.

“We say to these people, ‘You are not a burden; in fact, we are privileged to accompany you on this journey,’” notes Dr. Aaron Kheriaty, an Irvine psychiatrist who has spoken out against assisted suicide.

Kheriaty relies on his Catholic beliefs as well as his psychiatric training to approach patients who are suffering, dying or believe that suicide is their best option.

“Because I believe that people’s lives aren’t worthless accidents but purposeful and meaningful, I help my patients understand that no matter their circumstances, their lives are not hopeless and suicide is not a reasonable action.”

As a society, he says, we should strive for better options to address the fear and uncertainty of patients like Brittany Maynard, the celebrated young California woman who chose to end her life rather than suffer a certain decline and death from brain cancer.

Any benefits from assisted suicide are simply not worth the real and significant risks of this dangerous public policy, Catholic physicians say. The reality, they add, is that legalizing assisted suicide is a deadly mix with the troubled U.S. profit-driven health care system operating today.

The Alliance of Catholic Health Care,

## WHOLE PERSON CARE

### CATHOLIC ALTERNATIVES TO PHYSICIAN-ASSISTED SUICIDE

**I**t’s usual for patients and their loved ones to focus on medical issues and care. But a person is much more than their diagnosis.

Whole Person Care is the collaborative work of professional health care providers and members of an individual’s community to minister to the physical, psychological and spiritual needs of the individual and his or her family. Whole Person Care allows the individual to be fully engaged in his/her own care.

### PALLIATIVE CARE

One significant discussion with your loved one can center on the great gifts palliative care can offer. Palliative care is health care that makes patients as comfortable as possible and which prevents and relieves suffering. Emotional, physical, and spiritual care seeks to improve the patient’s quality of life. In some locations, palliative care services can be offered to the patient’s loved ones as well, including

- Family psychosocial support and intervention
- Support groups for siblings or children
- Respite care allowing the family to rest

### PRAYER AND ACCOMPANIMENT

Your loved one or friend is looking for reasons to continue forward with their life. Words of prayer and accompaniment are important to assist you in the tough dialogue with someone considering assisted suicide.

Consider using phrases such as these:

“I am here to be with you.”

“You are not alone in this dark time of your life.”

“I am lifting you in prayer and I am willing to join you in your prayer.”

“Hope says you have a choice.”

### HUMAN DIGNITY

Remind your loved one or friend of the sacredness of life. Remind them they are loved, wanted, worthy and dignified. We are each made in the image and likeness of God. Born with dignity, we are called to die with dignity.

The love of a community can allow someone to die with such dignity. Each of us plays a special role in another’s life. Only God decides when our work is finished.

Natural death permits one to experience a holy time, a rite of passage. It allows time for forgiveness and mercy. One can experience healing in the relationships when the natural time of death is permitted.

Some resources for individuals, their loved ones and families include: **Institute for Human Caring** <http://www.providence.org/institute-for-human-caring/about-us/our-vision>

#### Stephanie’s Story

<http://stephaniesjourney.org/>

#### USCCB testimony videos

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/assisted-suicide/to-live-each-day/index.cfm>  
<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/assisted-suicide/to-live-each-day/assisted-suicide-videos.cfm> ❖

which includes 48 Catholic and Catholic-affiliated health systems and hospitals statewide, will continue to oppose assisted suicide because it is not consistent with the Church’s beliefs about the dignity of the human person and the sacredness of life.

“We’re continuing to be committed to providing quality health care to everyone,” says Lori Dangberg, vice president

of the Alliance of Catholic Health Care, which includes 48 Catholic and Catholic-affiliated health systems and hospitals statewide.

“The law won’t interrupt that,” Dangberg adds. “We won’t provide, deliver or assist with obtaining lethal medications and no Catholic physicians will be present” in hospice settings or in hospitals where patients request the procedure. ❖