

Brothers of Charity and euthanasia

30 March 2020

Letter to the superior general of the Congregation of the “Brothers of Charity”, regarding the accompaniment of patients in psychiatric hospitals of the congregation’s Belgian branch

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 30 March 2020

Most Reverend Br René, Superior General,

In March 2017, on the website of the Belgian branch of the Congregation of the “Brothers of Charity”, a document was published which permits — under certain conditions — the practice of euthanasia in a Catholic hospital. This practice, supported by the Association Provincialat des Frères de la Charité asbl, is fundamentally based on three criteria: the inviolability of life, the autonomy of the patient and the relationship of care. Such a document, however, makes no reference either to God, or to Sacred Scripture, or to the Christian vision of humanity.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith wrote to the Superior General, who had already disapproved of this document, asking for clarifications, and the then-prefect of the Dicastery informed the Holy Father about the gravity of the case in an audience on 20 May 2017.

From 27 June 2017 until now, contacts and meetings have taken place between the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the Secretariat of State, Representatives of the Frères and of the Association Provincialat des Frères, as well as representatives of the Episcopal Conference of Belgium, in order to offer opportunities and spaces for dialogue on an extremely delicate subject and thus to find, in a spirit of sincere ecclesiality, a convergence on Catholic doctrine on the subject.

The numerous interdicasterial meetings of 31 August and 7 November 2017, of 1 February, 15 March, 20 June and 12 October 2018, and of 20 July 2019, this Dicastery’s letter to the Superior General of the Frères dated 30 June 2017, the document Principles to be observed on the accompaniment of patients in psychiatric hospitals, and the meeting which took place in Rome on 21 March 2018 should all be recalled.

In this context, the Secretary of State and the Prefects of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life asked the Representatives of the Frères and of the Association Provincialat des Frères to unequivocally affirm in writing their adherence to the principles of the sacredness of human life and the unacceptability of euthanasia, and, as a result, their absolute refusal to carry it out in the institutions dependent on them. Unfortunately, the replies received gave no assurances on these points.

Euthanasia remains an inadmissible act, even in extreme cases, inasmuch as it “is a grave violation of the law of God, since it is the deliberate and morally unacceptable killing of a human person. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written word of God, is transmitted by the Church’s Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium” (John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, n. 65).

For his part, Pope Francis has affirmed that “the current socio-cultural context is progressively eroding the awareness of what makes human life precious. Indeed, it is increasingly valued in terms of its efficiency and utility, to the point of considering lives that do not correspond to this criterion as ‘rejected’ or ‘unworthy’. In this situation of the loss of authentic values, the inalienable duties of human and Christian solidarity and fraternity also fail. In reality, a society deserves to be recognized as ‘civil’ if it develops antibodies against the throwaway culture; if it recognizes the intangible value of human life; if solidarity is actively practiced and safeguarded as the foundation of coexistence” (Pope Francis, Address to participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 30 January 2020).

Furthermore, he reiterated that “the relational — and not merely clinical — approach to the patient, considered in the uniqueness and integrality of his person, imposes the duty never to abandon anyone in the presence of incurable diseases. Human life, because of its eternal aim, preserves all its value and all its dignity in any condition, even of precariousness and fragility, and as such is always worthy of the highest consideration” (ibid.).

In these latter words, Pope Francis touches on the theme of “compassion”, which is increasingly invoked by public opinion as a justification for euthanasia.

John Paul II had already made it unequivocally clear that euthanasia is “a false mercy, and indeed a disturbing

‘perversion’ of mercy. True ‘compassion’ leads to sharing another’s pain; it does not kill the person whose suffering we cannot bear. Moreover, the act of euthanasia appears all the more perverse if it is carried out by those, like relatives, who are supposed to treat a family member with patience and love, or by those, such as doctors, who by virtue of their specific profession are supposed to care for the sick person even in their most painful terminal stages” (Evangelium Vitae, n. 66).

In short, therefore, Catholic teaching affirms the sacred value of human life; the importance of caring for and accompanying the sick and disabled; the Christian value of suffering; the moral unacceptability of euthanasia; the impossibility of introducing this practice into Catholic hospitals, even in extreme cases, and of collaborating in this regard with civil institutions.

It seems clear that the position of the Brothers of Charity group in Belgium does not conform to such principles. Indeed: 1.) it rejects the absolute nature of respect for life, or rather, it calls into doubt that the life of an innocent human being must be respected “always”, leaving open the possibility of exceptions; 2.) with regard to the importance of the care and accompaniment of psychiatric patients, it refers to the Belgian law on euthanasia, clearly opening the possibility for non-terminal psychiatric patients; 3.) it leaves the responsibility and the right to accept or reject the request for euthanasia (“medical act”) to the doctor, thereby excluding the hospital’s choice; 4.) it maintains the possibility of euthanasia within the Institute with the justification of enabling family members to avoid the effort of having to find another solution.

The report of the Apostolic Visitor, H.E. Bishop Jan Hendriks, also demonstrated no progress, since it shows the profound difficulty in maintaining the link between the works and the Congregation of the Brothers of Charity, since those responsible do not accept the commitment to finding a viable solution that avoids any form of responsibility for euthanasia on the part of the institution.

Therefore, at the end of this long and painful journey, and noting the lack of willingness to accept the Catholic Doctrine on euthanasia, it is announced, albeit with deep sadness, that the psychiatric hospitals run by the Association Provincialat des Frères de la Charité asbl in Belgium, henceforth, can no longer be considered Catholic institutions.

I gladly take this opportunity to confirm my feelings of religious respect.

Cardinal Luis F. Ladaria,
sj Prefect

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