USCCB Resource on Palliative Care & Hospice

As Catholics we are called to respect, defend, love and serve life, every human life. The Church reminds us of our obligation to "readily accompany those in the critical and terminal stages of life, for all are called to give witness at the side of the sick person."

Palliative care is specialized medical care for people with serious illness, focusing on relief from symptoms and stress while they are still seeking curative treatment. While palliative care cannot entirely eradicate suffering from people's lives, it provides an authentic expression of human and Christian care—allowing us to "remain" at the side of a suffering person, as the Blessed Mother and the beloved disciple remained at the foot of the Cross.

It is morally permissible to decide against disproportionate treatments that would provide only a precarious or painful extension of life. The refusal of extraordinary means of care expresses acceptance of the human condition, but it does not seek to hasten death.

Therefore, the suspension of disproportionate therapies must never entail the withdrawal of basic care—including pain relief, hydration, nutrition, thermoregulation, etc. Such refusal of ethically required care is equivalent to a direct action or omission to bring about death and is therefore never morally permissible.

Hospice care is a type of palliative care but with a particular acknowledgement of, and focus on, the patient's approaching end of life—when the goal of care is no longer the cure of the disease but rather comfort and relief from it.

The mystery of the redemption of the human person is rooted in the loving involvement of God with human suffering. The sick and dying should be provided with proper pastoral care (including Anointing of the Sick) so they may persevere in sanctifying grace and die in the love of God.

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