

Toward a Theology of Compassionate Release: Orthodox Christianity and the Dilemma of Assisted Dying

Confronting End-of-Life Realities with Faith and Compassion



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ABSTRACT

This article examines the subtle interconnection between the sanctity of life and individual autonomy within the context of assisted dying, as seen through the lens of Orthodox Christianity. It seeks to unravel the complex theological, ethical, and pastoral considerations that inform the Orthodox stance on end-of-life issues, particularly the nuanced understanding of suffering, death, and the redemptive potential encapsulated within them. Orthodox theology, with its profound veneration for life as a divine gift, offers a counter-narrative to contemporary discourses that often prioritize personal autonomy and the alleviation of suffering above all. This tradition emphasizes the transformative power of suffering when united with Christ's own redemptive suffering, proposing a vision of end-of-life care that is rooted in compassion, dignity, and hope for resurrection. The exploration begins with a historical and theological examination of the Orthodox perspective on life's sanctity, engaging with the teachings of Church Fathers and contemporary theological and bioethical discussions. It highlights the foundational concepts of Orthodox anthropology, which perceives human beings as an indivisible unity of body and soul, reflecting the *imago Dei*. This anthropological understanding challenges reductionist views of human existence and informs the Orthodox approach to medical ethics, palliative care, and the spiritual accompaniment of the dying. By critically evaluating arguments for and against assisted dying, the article presents a balanced discourse that respects the depth of individual suffering while upholding the intrinsic value of life. It argues that Orthodox Christianity, through its rich theological heritage and pastoral practice, provides a compassionate and ethically nuanced framework for navigating the moral complexities of assisted dying. This framework advocates for an end-of-life care that honors the fullness of the human person, supports the spiritual journey toward eternal life, and fosters a communal embrace of life's sacred threshold, offering a dignified passage that aligns with the faith's deepest convictions about human destiny and divine grace.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the complex landscape of bioethics, few issues evoke as much debate and introspection as assisted dying. The discourse surrounding assisted dying has garnered significant attention across the globe, manifesting a spectrum of opinions that span ethical, legal, and medical landscapes. At the heart of this debate lies the tension between the autonomy of the individual facing terminal illness and the societal values that govern the sanctity of life. Within the Orthodox Christian tradition, this topic is approached with reverence for the sanctity of life, deep theological reflection, and pastoral sensitivity. This article explores the theological and ethical dimensions of assisted dying from an Orthodox perspective, drawing on centuries of theological wisdom, scriptural insights, and pastoral experience. By examining Orthodox teachings on suffering, death, salvation, the value of consciousness, and the soul, as well as liturgical practices and pastoral care, we aim to offer a holistic understanding that engages with contemporary bioethical challenges while remaining faithful to the tradition's rich theological heritage.

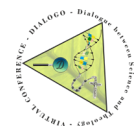
The debate over assisted dying reflects a profound and multifaceted ethical, medical, and spiritual conundrum that has captivated global discourse. This complex issue, which intersects the realms of personal autonomy, societal values, medical ethics, and religious beliefs, demands careful consideration and nuanced understanding. Amidst this debate, the perspective of Orthodox Christianity offers a unique and deeply rooted viewpoint that transcends simple dichotomies of right and wrong, instead offering a rich tapestry of theological, moral, and spiritual insights on life, suffering, death, and the hope of

resurrection - especially. The Orthodox Church regards human life as a gift from God, to be cherished and preserved, even in the face of suffering and terminal illness. Such a stance challenges the increasingly prevalent view that autonomy over one's death constitutes a final act of control in the face of incurable disease [1].

Taking on this topic - which is not necessarily my field of research [bioethics], I was aware that the content presented here is on the one hand delicate, and on the other, it will spark heated discussions - both with specialists theologians and with the organizers of this conference, whose reasons I know very well. Being caught in the middle of this Scilla & Charybda, all I could do was to list the possible arguments for supporting a certain casuistry of "assisted" death - which, in this theologically crafted context, cannot even be called "assisted" anymore, but at most "guilty" - as well as the presentation of strong arguments against such a gesture, even under the above-mentioned considerations.

I agreed to deal with this thorny subject only because last year I started research on this topic together with Mrs. Mariana Florica Călin[2], but also because, as a volunteer in a palliation center for the last 5 years, the practical case study did not allow the pastoral-human to perpetuate the doctrinal-liturgical indifference and intransigence of total refusal of 'medically assisted death', and I began to flirt with the idea - only under the influence of Christian mercy, compassion and the desire to sympathetically transpose myself into the multicolored picture of the patient and the relatives in these extreme cases. I crossed all these bipolar arguments emphasizing the importance of approaching conversations with empathy, openness, and a genuine desire to understand others' perspectives.

Orthodox Christianity, with its ancient



traditions and teachings, provides a holistic view of the human person, emphasizing the indissoluble unity of body and soul, the sanctity of life as a divine gift, and the transformative potential of suffering. This tradition holds that human life bears intrinsic value and purpose, divinely bestowed and sustained, from its beginning to its natural end. In this light, the phenomenon of assisted dying is approached not merely as a question of ethical legality or personal choice but as a deeply spiritual matter that touches upon the very essence of human existence and its eternal destiny.

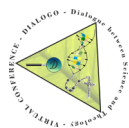
The purpose of this presentation is twofold. Firstly, it aims to explore the moral implications of assisted dying within the Orthodox Christian framework, engaging with both theological premises against voluntary assistance in death and arguments concerning the hastening of death. It seeks not to proclaim a definitive verdict against theological legacy or those contemplating the end of life in the face of grave suffering. Instead, it endeavors to serve as a spiritual guide, offering insights that might help individuals faced with such bioethical decisions find meaning and direction, whether in affirmation or in questioning assisted dying practices. Recognizing the nuanced reality of these decisions, this work is guided by a deep respect for the complexity of human experience and the varied paths individuals may take in their spiritual and ethical journeys. So, we come to the second purpose, that this exploration seeks to bridge the gap between secular ethical considerations, which often prioritize patient autonomy and the relief of suffering, and the moral teachings of Orthodox Christianity, which emphasize the intrinsic value and dignity of life until its natural end.

By integrating scriptural references, patristic teachings, and contemporary

theological reflections, alongside an examination of Orthodox liturgical practices and pastoral care, the article will navigate the intricate interplay between the spiritual, ethical, and practical dimensions of assisted dying. In doing so, it aspires to provide a compassionate and informed perspective that supports individuals in making decisions that are aligned with their faith, values, and understanding of their purpose in this life and beyond.

As we embark on this exploration, it is imperative to acknowledge the diversity of views within the Orthodox Church itself, as well as the dynamic nature of bioethical discussions. By examining these perspectives in dialogue with one another, we aim to uncover deeper insights into the meaning of care, autonomy, and dignity at the end of life, ultimately contributing to a more compassionate and ethically robust approach to assisted dying.

In this exploration, we acknowledge the diversity within Orthodox thought and the broader Christian tradition, aiming to engage with these issues in a way that is both faithful to the Orthodox understanding and receptive to the challenges and questions posed by modernity. Through this dialogue, we hope to offer support for those grappling with the profound questions of life, suffering, and the threshold of death, illuminating the path with the enduring light of Orthodox Christian faith and wisdom. Our hypothesis posits that a nuanced understanding of Orthodox Christian ethics can contribute significantly to the broader conversation on assisted dying, offering perspectives that affirm the value of life while addressing the complexities of end-of-life care.



II. ORTHODOX CARE: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO HEALING

A. Medical Acts and Orthodox Ethics: Embracing Professional Care with Compassion

In Orthodox Christianity, care is understood as a concept of interconnectedness that extends beyond mere physical well-being to encompass spiritual, emotional, and communal dimensions of the human person. This approach is deeply rooted in the Orthodox understanding of the human being as a unity of body and soul, created in the image and likeness of God and called to communion with Him and one another. The Orthodox tradition emphasizes that true care seeks the healing and wholeness of the entire person, reflecting the incarnational reality of Christ's healing ministry, which addresses the needs of the whole person. [3]

Orthodox Christian pastoral care emphasizes the spiritual welfare of the individual, advocating for a holistic approach to end-of-life care that includes pain management, spiritual support, and preparation for death. The use of palliative care to relieve suffering without hastening death aligns with the Church's emphasis on compassion and dignity for the dying.

Orthodox pastoral care, therefore, integrates the sacramental life of the Church, prayer, and communal support as essential elements of caring for individuals, especially those facing illness, suffering, or the approach of death. The sacraments of Holy Unction and Communion are particularly significant in this regard, serving as means of grace that convey healing, comfort, and the presence of Christ to the sick and suffering. [4] Additionally, the practice of confession provides an opportunity for spiritual healing through

the acknowledgment of sin and the reception of God's forgiveness, fostering peace and reconciliation with God, oneself, and the community.

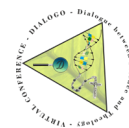
The role of the community is also central to the Orthodox understanding of care. The Church embodies the presence of Christ in the world and is called to manifest His love and compassion to all, especially the most vulnerable. This communal dimension of care is expressed through acts of charity, visitation of the sick, and support for those in need, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all members of the Body of Christ. [5]

The principle of "economy" (*οἰκονομία*), applied in pastoral care, allows for flexibility in applying canonical and ethical norms to address the unique circumstances of individuals. While this principle primarily relates to canonical discipline, its underlying pastoral intent—to seek the salvation and well-being of the person—may offer insights into how the Church navigates complex ethical dilemmas, including those at the end of life.

B. Challenges of Maintaining Dignity

Orthodox Christianity's holistic view of care presents unique challenges in maintaining the dignity and value of life, particularly in the face of terminal illnesses and severe conditions. The dignity of the human person, inherent and inviolable, is a fundamental principle that guides the Orthodox approach to end-of-life care. This dignity is not diminished by illness, disability, or dependence but is affirmed through compassionate care that respects the person's worth at every stage of life and in every condition. [6]

The challenge arises in navigating modern medical interventions that can prolong life but may also prolong suffering or compromise the quality of life. Orthodox



bioethics emphasizes the importance of discerning the appropriate use of medical technology, and advocating for treatments that offer genuine hope of benefit and are consistent with the patient's wishes and the family's well-being. This discernment involves a careful consideration of the moral implications of initiating or withholding life-sustaining treatments, always intending to uphold the person's dignity and the sanctity of life.[7]

Moreover, the Orthodox Church recognizes the spiritual dimensions of suffering and the end of life, offering pastoral care that addresses the fear, anxiety, and existential questions that often arise in these contexts. The pastoral presence, through prayer, sacramental ministry, and compassionate accompaniment, becomes a tangible expression of God's love and a source of comfort and hope for the dying and their families.[8]

The dignity of the person, from an Orthodox perspective, is ultimately rooted in the person's relationship with God and the eternal destiny to which every human being is called. This theological vision challenges the Church to provide care that not only alleviates physical suffering but also nurtures spiritual well-being, preparing the soul for its journey toward the Kingdom of God.[9]

Moreover, unlike other Christian cults [Jehova's Witnesses or Christian Science adherents], the Orthodox Church does not exclude the medical act applied with professionalism centered on the person. The goals of medicine encompass the relief of pain and suffering, the promotion of health and the prevention of disease, the forestalling of death and the promoting of a peaceful death, the cure of disease when possible, and the care of those who can not be cured. [10]

C. Differentiating Pain from Suffering

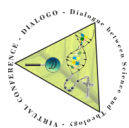
Pain, in its most general sense, is often associated with physical sensations related to injury, illness, or other medical conditions. It is quantifiable to some extent and can often be addressed through medical interventions. Suffering, however, is a broader, more subjective experience that includes psychological, emotional, and spiritual distress. Suffering can occur in the absence of physical pain and is profoundly influenced by personal, cultural, and spiritual factors.

Phantom pain, resulting from injuries or surgeries, serves as a poignant example of how pain can persist even when direct physical causes are not present. This phenomenon underscores the complexity of pain and its management. However, the experience of suffering, particularly concerning phantom phenomena, highlights the need for a more holistic approach to care, one that addresses not only the physical but also the emotional and spiritual needs of the patient.

a) Understanding Through Palliative Care

Palliative care, with its focus on alleviating suffering and improving the quality of life for patients with serious illnesses, offers valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of suffering. Observations I made from palliative care centers indicate that suffering is modulated by various factors, including social support from family and friends, the opportunity for socialization, and, notably, the individual's religious or spiritual commitments. [11]

Positive religious commitments, in particular, have been observed to play a crucial role in how individuals experience and cope with suffering. For many patients, faith provides a framework for making sense of their suffering, offering hope, meaning, and a sense of peace even in the face of debilitating conditions. This aligns



with the Orthodox Christian understanding of suffering as potentially redemptive when united with Christ's own suffering and death.

b) Theology and the Distinction Between Pain and Suffering

The distinction between pain and suffering and the role of faith in modulating the experience of suffering has significant theological implications for discussions on assisted dying. Orthodox Christianity, with its emphasis on the redemptive potential of suffering and the hope of resurrection, offers a perspective that values the spiritual growth and deepening of faith that can occur through the experience of suffering.

This perspective challenges the notion, implicit in some arguments for assisted dying, that the elimination of pain—or the avoidance of suffering—is the highest good. Instead, it suggests that suffering, when faced with faith and supported by a loving community and appropriate palliative care, can lead to spiritual growth and a deeper union with God.

c) Resuming...

...The differentiation between pain and suffering, enriched by insights from palliative care and the personal experiences of patients, invites a broader understanding of human suffering that goes beyond physical pain. This understanding is crucial for Orthodox Christian bioethics and pastoral care, which seek to provide compassionate, holistic care that addresses the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of individuals facing the end of life. By emphasizing the potential for spiritual growth through suffering and the importance of faith and community support, Orthodox Christianity offers a hopeful, dignified approach to end-of-life care that upholds the sanctity of life and the possibility of redemption through suffering.

III. ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY'S VIEW ON LIFE'S SACREDNESS

Orthodox Christianity upholds the sanctity of life as a cornerstone of its ethical and theological teachings. This perspective is rooted in the belief that life is a divine gift, with each individual bearing the image of God (*imago Dei*). As such, human existence is intrinsically valuable, from conception until natural death[12]. The Orthodox Church's stance on the sanctity of life directly challenges contemporary arguments for assisted dying, which often prioritize autonomy and the alleviation of suffering over the inherent value of life itself.

A. The Unified View of Body and Soul in Orthodox Anthropology

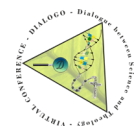
Orthodox Christian anthropology presents a holistic understanding of the human person, intricately connecting the body and soul in a unified existence. This view profoundly influences Orthodox perspectives on life, death, and the ethical considerations surrounding assisted dying.

a) Core Principles

The Orthodox Christian understanding of life's sanctity is deeply intertwined with its teachings on the creation of the world, the fall, and redemption through Christ. According to the Church Fathers, life's sacredness is not diminished by suffering or terminal illness. Instead, these conditions offer opportunities for spiritual growth and the deepening of one's relationship with God (John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty*). This view is at odds with the utilitarian ethics that underpin much of the support for assisted dying, where the quality of life is often measured in terms of physical health and autonomy.

b) The Sanctity of Life Through Scriptural Lens

Scripture is replete with affirmations



of life's sanctity. The sanctity of life, as articulated within Orthodox Christianity, finds its roots in the Genesis account, where humanity is created in the image unto the likeness of God (Gen. 1:27). This divine imprint bestows upon each person an inherent dignity and an inviolable worth that transcends physical health, capability, or societal utility. In the face of suffering and death, the Psalms often express a profound trust in God's sovereignty and care, exemplified in Psalm 139:16, where David acknowledges God's omniscience over his life's span. While Psalms 139:13-16 marvels at God's craftsmanship in forming human life, John 10:10 records Christ's declaration of His intention that we have life abundantly, laying the theological groundwork for understanding life as a divine gift.[13] The New Testament further enriches this perspective, with Christ's teachings and actions emphasizing the value of each individual and offering hope through His resurrection (John 11:25-26).

c) *Viewing the Body as the Holy Spirit's Temple*

The Apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, further emphasizes the body's sacredness, declaring it the "temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinth. 6:19). This scriptural assertion forms the cornerstone of the Orthodox understanding of human dignity and the sanctity of life, challenging contemporary narratives that might prioritize autonomy or subjective quality of life assessments over the intrinsic value endowed by the Creator.

On the other hand, this scriptural insight informs the Orthodox approach to issues of life and health, advocating for a respectful and caring attitude toward one's own body and the bodies of others.[14]

The designation of the body as the "temple of the Holy Spirit" not only affirms its sanctity but also its integral role in the spiritual life and the salvation of the

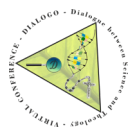
entire person. This concept challenges contemporary views that prioritize autonomy and cognitive function over the inherent value of life itself, suggesting that the body's worth is contingent upon its physical health or utility.

d) *Redemption Through Suffering and Death: A Salvific Perspective*

Orthodox Christianity does not shy away from the reality of suffering but its soteriology interprets suffering and death through the lens of Christ's redemptive work, i.e., His own suffering and death on the cross. This theological framework posits that suffering has redemptive potential [katharsis], enabling individuals to participate in Christ's passion and resurrection[15]. The Church teaches that enduring suffering with faith can lead to spiritual purification and eternal life, challenging the notion that escaping suffering through assisted dying is a desirable or necessary option. Suffering, while a consequence of the fall, is also seen as a means through which believers can participate in Christ's sufferings, transforming it into a pathway to salvation and deeper communion with God (Phil. 3:10-11).[16]

However, this stance is not coined by the Church; it has deep routes in many cultures before and simultaneously. Evdokimov reminds us of several examples of this assertion: Durrell about Eros[17] and Schopenhauer[18]. But the examples can go on in many directions starting with Aristotle[19] and moving forward in several philosophical currents, namely that suffering accumulates in the human soul, and it is necessary[20].

Furthermore, the Orthodox tradition emphasizes the importance of preparing for death through prayer, repentance, and the reception of the sacraments, viewing the end of life as a passage to eternal



communion with God. This preparation is seen as an integral part of a Christian's life, underscoring the belief that how one dies matters spiritually (The Orthodox Church in America, Guidelines on the Sacrament of Unction).

e) Insights from the Fathers on the Body-Soul Connection

The Church Fathers elaborated on the Scriptural teachings, offering insights into the body and soul's interconnectedness, providing a rich tapestry of reflection on suffering, death, and the hope of resurrection. St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil the Great, among others, emphasized that while the soul may be the "driver" of the human person, the body is an indispensable "vehicle," participating fully in the human journey toward salvation. They refuted any dualistic tendencies that sought to diminish the body's role or value in the spiritual life of a Christian. St. John Chrysostom, in his Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans, eloquently speaks to the mutual care the soul and body owe to one another, advocating for a harmony that respects the body's role in the spiritual life of a believer. St. Basil the Great, in his work *On the Origin of Humanity*, articulates a vision of the human being as a microcosm of creation, wherein the body and soul's union serves as a living testament to divine wisdom and providence. These works provide a rich theological exploration of the human person's composite nature, arguing against a reductionist understanding of the body's value.

Numerous patristic writings expound on the salvific significance of suffering and death. For example, St. John Chrysostom, in his homilies on the Gospel of Matthew, reflects on the redemptive value of suffering, stating, "The death of the righteous is not death but a departure from life, a change into a higher state." Similarly, St. Gregory of Nyssa, in his treatise "On

the Soul and the Resurrection" and St. Maximus the Confessor explore the relationship between the soul and the body, emphasizing the significance of this union in the process of salvation and deification. Their teachings underscore the importance of respecting and caring for the body as integral to one's spiritual life and journey towards God.[21]

These patristic teachings reinforce the notion that the body, far from being a mere vessel or shell for the soul, is an integral partner in the human journey toward deification. The body's sanctity and its participation in the sacramental life of the Church—through the mysteries of Baptism, Chrismation, Eucharist, and Unction—underscore its value not only in this life but also in the hope of the resurrection.

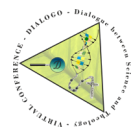
B. In-depth Examination of Orthodox Liturgical Traditions

a) The Intersection of Liturgical Practices and Pastoral Support

Through its liturgical practices, the Orthodox Church provides a framework for pastoral care that dignifies the dying process and offers hope to the bereaved. These practices underscore the communal aspect of care, reminding the faithful that no one is isolated in their suffering or dying. In this light, the push for assisted dying, framed as an act of individual autonomy, is seen as contrary to the communal and hopeful approach to end-of-life care advocated by the Church to uphold the sanctity of life. Through sacraments, prayers, and communal support, the Orthodox Church accompanies individuals from birth to death, affirming the value of every moment of life within the context of God's saving work.[22]

b) Praying for the Sick: Prioritizing Spiritual Wellness Over Physical Healing

The Orthodox Church's prayers for the



sick are imbued with themes of healing, comfort, and surrender to God's will. These prayers do not merely seek physical healing but also spiritual strength and peace, recognizing that ultimate healing may come in the form of union with God after death. The Akathist Hymn to the Sweetest Lord Jesus and the Prayers for the Sick found in the Orthodox service books are poignant examples of the Church's pastoral response to illness and suffering. As a remembering... all the prayers Eastern Church [and beyond] dedicated to aiding the sick uphold a profound need for God's mercy, which is the central focus for all events of the kind. [23] Even in the event a cure is not in God's saving plan, His mercy is still called upon to do "what is best for him/her according to Your mercy." [24]

Beyond that and the stoic assertion upon suffering's catharsis powers, there is a strong and important theme we can find in the liturgical practices addressing someone that is about to die [initially for those finding themselves 'on the dying bed', now, in extension, also for those 'on terminal ill']. In those cases, the purpose of the prayer is no longer targeting healing because it is logical and reasonable not to prolong a stage of life undesirable, or the life itself that lacks already its meaningfulness – the capacity to conduct acts for salvation any longer.

Another strong point in the liturgical practices, resulting from the Church's fundamental teachings and further enriches this perspective, is the analogy and invocation of Christ's own sufferings. The relationship between Christ's Paschal mystery and the Christian understanding of suffering and death draws on the teachings of the early Church Fathers and contemporary Orthodox theologians. The analogy and recollection [punctual even of] the events of Christ's passions, each of which is invoked to cure a certain

symptom; this reminder [made even to the Savior!] certainly has primarily a didactic role, to build our confidence that the One who endured all this did it precisely for this purpose. "...May Your wounds heal the wounds of his/her sins. May Your precious Blood wash away the stains of his/her sins... For You have suffered that we might be healed, and have died that we might live." [25]

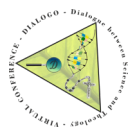
These prayers reflect a holistic understanding of care, emphasizing the Church's role in supporting individuals in their time of vulnerability. [26]

c) *The Traditions Surrounding Funeral Rites*

The Orthodox funeral rites—comprising prayers, hymns, and readings—affirm the Church's belief in the resurrection and the continuation of life beyond death. The Kontakion for the departed, "With the saints give rest, O Christ, to the soul of Thy servant where there is neither sickness, nor sorrow, nor sighing, but life everlasting," encapsulates the hope of eternal life. These rites offer a profound witness to the value of each person, challenging the notion that a life marked by suffering or diminished capacity is unworthy of continuation. Through these rites, the Church articulates a message of hope and consolation, affirming that death does not have the final word and that life in Christ transcends physical death. [27]

IV. THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL REFLECTIONS ON ASSISTED DYING

In the discourse of Orthodox Christianity on life's sanctity and end-of-life care, the conversation navigates through deep waters of theology, pastoral care, and bioethics. This chapter aims to reconcile the apparent paradox between the Church's veneration for life's sanctity and its compassionate approach toward those at life's threshold, integrating the rich



theological discourse with the poignant realities of human suffering and the quest for a dignified departure from this life.

Orthodox Christianity views suffering and death within the context of salvation history, emphasizing Christ's redemptive work and the transformative power of suffering when united with His sacrifice. The Orthodox faith teaches that suffering, when embraced in union with Christ, becomes a participation in His redemptive suffering, leading to spiritual growth and eventual resurrection. This theological perspective provides a framework for understanding the meaning and purpose of human suffering, including the experience of terminal illness and the prospect of death. However, looking further into the depths of theological discussions, we will be able to gain more insights by accumulating other aspects, more tolerant and closer to understanding human suffering than a stoic assumption of any physical pain.

A. Engaging with Historical and Modern Theological Perspectives

While the Church Fathers consistently uphold the sanctity of life, their writings also express profound compassion for the suffering. For example, St. Basil the Great, in his Letters,[28] discusses the importance of caring for the sick and the dying with compassion, emphasizing the need to alleviate suffering where possible. Though not directly addressing assisted dying as understood today, his teachings underscore the importance of mercy.

In the modern context, Orthodox theologians and bioethicists grapple with these issues, seeking to balance the Church's traditional teachings with the realities of contemporary medical practice. H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr., a prominent Orthodox Christian bioethicist, discusses the moral complexities of end-of-life care in his works, suggesting that while direct

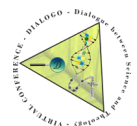
actions to end life are not permissible, there can be moral and pastoral considerations for withholding or withdrawing extraordinary means of prolonging life when death is imminent and inevitable. This distinction between allowing natural death to occur and actively ending life is crucial in Orthodox Christian ethics.

On the other hand, Helga Kuhse, another important figure of contemporary bioethics, challenges[29] the traditional view of the sanctity of life and argues that intentional acts or omissions which shorten life must be justified or rejected based on the quality of life concerned. She disputes the moral difference between intentionally discontinuing ordinary and extraordinary medical treatment and advocates for a quality-of-life ethic instead. Kuhse aims to show that the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary means does not allow for a morally relevant differentiation between the intentional and non-intentional termination of life.

B. Foundational Concepts in Orthodox Anthropology

Contemporary Orthodox theologians continue to engage with these themes, applying them to contemporary bioethical dilemmas such as assisted dying. Professor John Zizioulas, in his work "Being as Communion," emphasizes the relational nature of human existence and the significance of suffering in deepening communion with God and others. He argues that while suffering may be a consequence of the fall, it can also serve as a means of restoration and renewal through Christ's redemptive work.

In light of Orthodox soteriology, assisted dying raises profound ethical questions regarding the value of suffering, the sanctity of life, and the hope of resurrection. While Orthodox Christians affirm the importance of alleviating



suffering through compassionate care and palliative interventions, they also recognize the redemptive potential of suffering when embraced in union with Christ. Thus, the Orthodox theological perspective offers a nuanced framework for approaching end-of-life decisions with reverence, compassion, and hope.

a) Appreciating Consciousness and the Essence of the Soul

Orthodox Christian anthropology profoundly acknowledges the soul's significance as the essence of personhood and consciousness. The soul, in its union with the body, reflects the *imago Dei*, the image of God, inherent in every human being. This understanding compels a recognition of each person's intrinsic worth, beyond physical capabilities or cognitive functions. The soul's value is not contingent upon its temporal condition but is eternal, rooted in its creation by and relationship with God. Deeply anchored in the spiritual essence—the soul, this understanding challenges the notion that life's value diminishes with the decline in bodily functions or cognitive abilities, instead asserting that every moment of existence is imbued with purpose and meaning, whether in the clarity of consciousness or the silent whispers of the soul nearing its earthly journey's end.[30] On the other hand, the same understanding compels us not to emphasize the importance of this life to the extent that we have to use all means necessary to prolong this life – regardless of its quality – as much as it is possible! An important question raised here is what are we referring to when we say “all means possible”? Should they be technological? - doesn't the theological discourse discredit precisely the technological entanglement in the ‘natural’ process of becoming human?

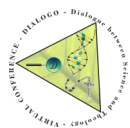
b) The Body's Value: Interlinked with Spirit and Consciousness

The Orthodox tradition holds that the body is sanctified through its association with the soul, making it a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corin. 6:19). This view challenges reductionist perspectives that equate the body's value with its physical health or utility. In the context of assisted dying, this underscores the importance of holistic care that honors the person as an integrated unity of body and soul, advocating for treatments that respect both the physical and spiritual dimensions of human life.

This perspective is crucial in end-of-life considerations, where the temptation to prioritize the alleviation of physical suffering above all can overshadow the holistic care of the person. The Church's stance, informed by a theology that sees the body as the “temple of the Holy Spirit,” advocates for care that respects both the physical and spiritual dimensions of the individual, ensuring that end-of-life care is not merely about easing physical pain but about nurturing the soul's passage to the beyond.[31]

c) Differentiating Between Pain and Suffering

Orthodox theology distinguishes between physical pain and existential suffering, recognizing that while pain might be alleviated through medical intervention, suffering often has deeper spiritual roots. The Church teaches that suffering can be transformative, offering opportunities for spiritual growth and deeper communion with Christ through participation in His sufferings. This perspective informs the Orthodox approach to palliative care, emphasizing the alleviation of pain while also addressing the spiritual and existential dimensions of suffering.[32]



C. Evaluating the Arguments Against Assisted Dying

The Orthodox Christian tradition, deeply rooted in a theological understanding that sees suffering and death through the lens of salvation (soteriology), the sacramental life of the Church (mysteryology), and the ultimate destiny of humanity (eschatology), provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the human condition. The synodal documents and teachings, as highlighted by Kraiopoulos (2007)[33], suggest that modern society's detachment from the "value of suffering" reflects a profound spiritual crisis. This crisis is exacerbated by a postmodern mentality that fails to recognize suffering's potential for spiritual growth and transformation. In Orthodox thought, suffering, even when it appears senseless, holds a mysterious and salvific purpose not only for the sufferer but also for the community at large. This perspective challenges the increasing trend towards medical interventions, such as cesarean births in non-compulsory scenarios, as examples of avoiding necessary suffering, which could have implications for the mother-child relationship and the individual's spiritual journey.

a) *The 'Holy' Nature of Suffering and Its Salvific Power*

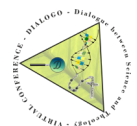
The Orthodox Church views suffering through a redemptive lens, echoing the Apostle Paul's sentiment that suffering produces endurance, character, and hope (Romans 5:3-5). This view does not romanticize suffering but recognizes its potential to contribute to one's spiritual maturation and ultimate salvation. Assisted dying, by seeking to eliminate suffering at the expense of life, can be seen as circumventing the profound spiritual work that suffering can accomplish in the soul's journey toward God.[34]The Church

Fathers, including St. John Chrysostom and St. Isaac the Syrian, speak extensively on the redemptive potential of suffering, emphasizing its role in purifying the soul and fostering a deeper reliance upon God's grace.

Annotation: When linking suffering with [enduring and forbearance] patience, St. John Chrysostom views it as a cure for the soul "for his cure has stimulated the souls of the hearers to speak the praise of the Lord, and his sickness and infirmity has encouraged you to patience, and urged you to match his zeal"[35]. For that matter, it is necessary to address this assertion for this purpose alone, to have a "necessary suffering", when the soul can profit out of it [e.g., mourning, fasting, penance, abstention, and almost any kind of asceticism], thus it should be endured [for this purpose alone!]. This form of suffering is seen as necessary for spiritual purification and a deeper communion with the divine. In all OTHER circumstances, when suffering is harmful to the soul, nobody [medicine, nor religion – with few exceptions], we do not leave humans [and beyond] to the 'mercy of' suffering! To clarify why we made this splitting of meaning we already explained the difference between [medical and philosophical] meanings of pain and suffering.

b) *The Eschatological Vision and Embracing Life's Natural Conclusion*

Orthodox Christianity's eschatological vision affirms life as a journey toward the Kingdom of God, with death marking the transition to eternal life. This hope in the resurrection informs the Orthodox stance on assisted dying, emphasizing the importance of awaiting God's timing in the natural conclusion of one's earthly life. Assisted dying, in this view, represents a premature termination of the soul's pilgrimage through this world, potentially foregoing the spiritual preparation deemed



necessary for a peaceful and salvific transition to life hereafter. [36]

D. Assessing the Arguments in Favor of Assisted Dying

While the Orthodox Church traditionally opposes assisted dying, engaging with the broader ethical discourse requires an acknowledgment of the arguments that proponents put forth. These are considered not to advocate but to understand the complexity of the issue fully.

a) *The Principle of Autonomy and Easing Suffering*

A primary argument for assisted dying centers on the autonomy of the individual and the desire to alleviate unbearable suffering. Advocates for assisted dying often cite personal autonomy and the relief of intractable suffering as paramount. Advocates argue that individuals facing terminal illness should have the right to choose the timing and manner of their death, especially when modern medicine can prolong life without necessarily preserving quality of life. While the Orthodox Church respects human freedom, it places autonomy within the context of one's relationship with God and the community, advocating for a freedom that seeks the good of all and is aligned with divine will. Engelhardt [37] examines the role of autonomy in bioethical decision-making from a Christian perspective, critiquing the secular emphasis on autonomy and advocating for a relational understanding of autonomy within the Christian moral tradition. On the other hand, the technological prolongation of "life" – not living – shouldn't also be considered from a theological perspective a viable solution to what it supposed to be 'natural' determination. In fact, anything that intervenes against the natural order is a flagrant violation of divine laws, right?! ... and miracles are supposed to be done

by divine intervention, not by regular technological implication.

b) *Compassionate Approaches to End-of-Life Care*

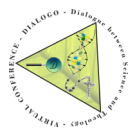
The call for assisted dying as a compassionate response to terminal illness challenges the Church to articulate a vision of compassion that encompasses both the alleviation of physical pain and the provision of spiritual support. The Orthodox tradition responds with an emphasis on palliative care, sacramental ministry, and communal prayer, aiming to surround the dying with love, dignity, and hope in Christ's saving work. John Breck addresses how the Orthodox tradition approaches terminal illness, focusing on the balance between alleviating suffering and providing spiritual support. [38]

c) *The Singular Event of Christ's Death and Its Implications*

Christ's voluntary death is often cited in discussions on assisted dying. However, the Orthodox Church understands Christ's death as a unique, salvific act that cannot be directly paralleled with human decisions to end life. Christ's death and resurrection offer the promise of eternal life and the defeat of death, guiding the faithful to view their own death within the hope of resurrection, rather than as an escape from suffering.[39] While not exclusively on Christ's death, Bishop Alexander (Golitzin) offers deep insights into the sacrificial nature of Christ's actions and their unique salvific significance[40], providing a theological foundation for understanding Christ's death in the context of discussions on assisted dying.

d) *The Integration of Orthodox Bioethics*

Orthodox bioethics, informed by the Church's theological and moral teachings, navigates the complexities of modern medical decisions, including assisted dying. It advocates for an approach that respects



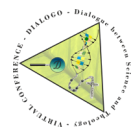
the sanctity of life, addresses suffering with compassion, and guides the faithful in making ethical decisions that reflect a commitment to the Gospel and the well-being of the whole person.

e) *Christian Living and the Concept of a 'Good Death'*

Where can we derive this bold assumption from - compared to the rest of cathartic and apparently uncompromising theology? From the search in such situations - on the verge of leaving this life and stepping into what is beyond - for what is "comfortable and gracious" centered on the soul of the dying. Even the fiercest fighters with temptations that aimed at the redemption of their souls through a bitter struggle with the sufferings God gave for this purpose, at some point became aware that every struggle at a given moment stops; it cannot continue indefinitely. The departure to 'the beyond' must be done "Painless, Blameless, Peaceful" - this is the desire of a 'Christian death' [according to the Orthodox Most Important Petition of the Divine Liturgy] [41]. In the wake of this request, a different ending would not be 'Christian'!? This deeply Christian request is also a generally human one since every man naturally wishes to reach the end of his life reconciled, to have a "good death", worthy of a human being, not subject to degradation and shame, in tranquility and peace. Saint Nephron, in the Prayer for Someone Dying, after listing various examples in which the divine help managed to successfully solve the difficulty of the disease and remove the suffering (e.g., Jonah out of the belly of the whale or Daniel from the mouths of lions) invokes the same divine help for the imminence of death and agony, "deliver me at the time of death from the dreadful darkness"[42]. But, after these examples are exhausted - as if the divine providence did not have the same plan as in those cases - and death is

the only viable and assumed perspective, then the dying person's prayer acquires other perspectives. "O my Master, God of Heaven and earth, may my eyes never see his hideous and darksome face (i.e., the demons of agonization)... At that time, O my Lord Jesus Christ, my delight, my Resurrection, send the merciful and philanthropic Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, to receive my own spirit in His incomparable sweetness and immortal holiness... I will be able without pain to cross the ethereal spheres to come close to Thee, the Triune Sun, to fall before Thy compassion, to kiss Thy immaculate feet, to be filled with the Deity, with Thy Holy Spirit, and confess the countless wonders Thou didst for my sake". Thus, the intervention of any KIND implored from God will have to be "a double-edged sword, divine, heavenly, deadly to the demons and vengeful against the spirits of wickedness; yet filled with sympathy, forgiveness, compassion, and goodness".

This is the reason why death in cruel and agonizing suffering is not so much desired by the Christian, as it is incompatible with the Christian's passage to the world beyond, the one 'with greenery, rest, without pain': because the 'torments of death' are in fact "the foul demons, the insatiable dragon of Hades who gnashes his teeth and wants to snatch and devour anyone living piously"[43]. And Christ, who "gave His life as a ransom for all" (1 Timothy 2:6), could not leave the souls of those redeemed exclusively by Him (Matthew 20:28), who await 'adoption, the redemption of our body' (Romans 8:23) prey to the impure spirits, and ask them [poor souls] to redefine their own redemption by copying Christ's sufferings because the biblical creed is clear and definitive: our redemption is done exclusively by grace, not by our deeds [Titus 3:5, Efes. 2:8] (whatever they may be: personal sufferings, good deeds, etc.),



and was accomplished “through His blood and the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace” (Ephesians 1:7).

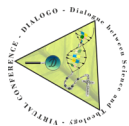
f) Salvation through Christ Alone: The Role of Suffering

In addition to all this, we should also argue for those who seek with inversion to prolong the agony of those who are targeted by our discussion and who, after exhausting all other theological arguments, claim that these sufferings “sent by God for the salvation of the sufferer” flagrantly contravene the very principle fundamentally soteriological “so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many/all, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Heb. 9:28). More than that, even the great Paul said that “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I go on living in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. And I don’t know which one I will choose. I am caught between the two. I long to depart this life and be with Christ, [for] that is far better.” (Philippians 1. 21-23). What is very interesting in the argument of those who find themselves ostentatiously against any intervention, active or passive, on the urgency of someone irreparably torn apart by the claws of death is the saving example of the martyrs who endured all the sufferings to meet, beyond them, Christ; they did not evade them, they did not dodge the most cruel sufferings, but on the contrary they asked for them, being convinced of the cathartic capacity of martyr’s sufferings, “And it will happen to you that you will confess (through suffering)” (Luke 21:12-13). The overlooked detail that makes the difference here - between what happens with the act of martyrdom and what the bioethicists want to prove from it - is precisely ‘the help received (from God) in situations on the edge of death’. From Daniel and the three young men (Daniel 3) thrown into a cruel,

agonizing death in the fiery furnace, to Archdeacon Stephen and all subsequent Christian martyrs - they all invoked divine help for the relief of suffering and were comforted so that the miracle from the event of their death he found that where agonizing suffering was (desired, pursued by those who condemned them) evident, this was missing being replaced (by the divine ‘help’) with bliss (Acts 7:55-60). We must clearly mention here that this ‘bliss’ is not just a simple ‘inner peace’ the result of meditation, a mind-set, inner speech and self-clarification that, regardless of external conditions, our mind is peaceful if it is not disturbed by hatred, an uncontrolled desire known as desiring attachment that brings sorrow and suffering. Except that all this applies to spiritual things, not to physical things.

g) Re-replacing Medical Care with Spiritual Practices?!

You simply cannot go into a surgery replacing the anesthesia injection (interruption of the state of consciousness in order not to be aware of the unbearable pain during operation) with a simple positive mindset; no one is capable of this! It is interesting here that precisely this is imputed to some confessions which, from an impractical assimilation of physical suffering with the spiritual, productive one, ended up forbidding their members the use of fundamental medical tools, such as anesthesia. Let’s not forget that the most ‘preferred’ argument, i.e. ‘necessary suffering’ endurance vs cesarean births – was long-awaited and desired in the medical domain to become an official mode of delivery especially to ease childbirth pain and reduce the rate of maternal death during childbirth. Its primary outcome targeted perinatal and neonatal death, maternal death along a whole long-term benefits associated with cesarean delivery for mother, baby, and



subsequent pregnancies, and the pain they are accompanied with.[44] Cesarean section is a benefit no matter how you look at it – regardless of the particular use of it for personal comfort or financial preferences occurrence.

This approach of replacing medical care with any spiritual/religious practice is as impractical and useless regardless the circumstances are we talking about; as if someone suffers an accident (drowning, is seriously hit, cuts a limb, etc.) and the only “acceptable” alternative according to religion that we would offer them would be a prayer instead of appropriate, specialized medical intervention!

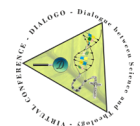
E. *Synthesizing the Discussion and drawing theological conclusions*

The increasing trend towards medical interventions like elective cesarean sections, often chosen to avoid the pain of natural childbirth, serves as a secular analogy for the avoidance of ‘necessary suffering’. Such choices may have unintended consequences on the natural processes of life and the profound mother-child bond established through childbirth. Research[45] indicates that circumventing this “necessary suffering” can lead to long-term psychological and relational impacts[46] [among those are enumerated more self-oriented mothers, less confident about their abilities to care for their babies, disturbance in mother-infant interaction, and more], suggesting that even in the medical realm, suffering and pain have roles that we may not fully understand or appreciate.

This confusion certainly stems from the indiscriminate application of Christian philosophy that “Happiness and suffering are in opposition, and the persistent pursuit of all that is worldly leads to suffering, while the renouncing of all and seeking (exclusively) the kingdom of heaven brings

happiness.” While this philosophy can be applied for the sum of all moments in life - when the *via salutis* is determined by proactive acts, for the *moment of agonizing dissipation of life* (MADoL) this philosophy is no longer applicable because no pro action can be taken anymore by the dying person, and the presence of any state of consciousness or collaboration no longer accompanies this final moment. It is simply no longer possible to apply the salvific determination ‘I accept this trial because God will save me from it, it will stop and I will continue where I left off’; the event of death, like that of birth, is not identical to any moment of life, no philosophy applicable to the whole life can be applied to it!

Let’s not forget that all the miracles performed by Christ addressing human suffering were grounded on mercy and were accompanied by the desire to end the pain. In all those solved cases He did not answer that those should endure their respective sufferings because simply these are what will bring them the salvation of their souls. On the one hand, Christ had the ability to instantly heal diseases (Matthew 4.24) and solve the circumstances that cause human suffering [diseases, cripples, griff, etc.]. On the other hand, He never believed that someone else’s suffering other than His own could bring people the salvation of souls, otherwise He would have professed it with fervor, as a religiously qualified alternative. And then, since it is impossible for anyone other than Him to instantly solve the suffering situations by removing it using healing as a method, getting out of these situations is always a gesture of compassion, starting from mercy and pity. In different circumstances whoever confronts himself with similar situations needs to deal with it with the means at hand. In the latter position we find many examples when compassion and



mercy result in ending one's life for those to whom medical intervention is not a viable option.[47]

Animal Welfare: In veterinary practice and wildlife management, euthanizing animals ["putting it out of its misery"] that are severely injured (found in agony), terminally ill, or otherwise in significant distress is widely regarded as a humane action to prevent unnecessary suffering. This is often seen as an act of mercy, under the principle of minimizing animal suffering when no viable treatment options exist.

Warfare Scenarios: Historical and contemporary accounts from wars sometimes include soldiers making the grave decision to end the life of a grievously wounded comrade to spare them from prolonged agony, especially when medical help is not available, and capture by the enemy is imminent. Such actions, taken in extreme circumstances, are subject to intense moral and ethical debate, reflecting the complex interplay of duty, compassion, and the harsh realities of combat.

Not everyone passes by an individual, human or animal, who is dying after a disaster/accident and is capable of miraculous acts like the Good Samaritan; in these circumstances, it is generally considered inhumane to carelessly move on without proactively intervening.

A final aspect that should be brought about - without a developed discussion because it is not the subject of religious or orthodox bioethics in particular - is the respect for cultural diversity and the particularity of certain cultural practices that are deeply embedded in the cultural and ethical frameworks of the societies in which they occur. In some cultures for example, practices surrounding death and dying may include decisions made to end suffering, influenced by beliefs about honor, dignity, and the afterlife such as seppuku and kamikaze for Japanese

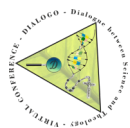
culture, Self-Immolation (autocremation) for Buddhists or *sallekhanā* (starvation in fasting until death) for Jainism. Suffering, in these circumstances, creates a crisis, a rupture, which cannot be righted, but only witnessed, by another.

DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

Modern Orthodox theologians continue to explore the implications of this anthropological vision, particularly in the face of bioethical challenges posed by advancements in medical technology and shifting societal values. The dialogue between Orthodox bioethics and contemporary moral dilemmas, such as assisted dying, reflects a deep engagement with the tradition's foundational beliefs while responding to the needs and questions of the modern world.

The Orthodox Church, through its synodal statements and the pastoral letters of its hierarchs, consistently advocates for a compassionate approach to end-of-life care. This approach seeks to alleviate suffering and provide spiritual support while firmly upholding the belief in the sanctity of life from conception to natural death. The Church's stance on assisted dying, rooted in an anthropology that values the body-soul union, calls for a care that honors the entire person, recognizing in each moment of life and every breath a gift from God to be cherished.

The Orthodox Christian tradition—through its scriptural foundations, the teachings of the Church Fathers, and its rich liturgical practices—offers a profound and cohesive understanding of the sanctity of life, the meaning of suffering, and the hope of resurrection. This tradition challenges the premises underlying assisted dying, advocating instead for a compassionate approach to end-of-life care that upholds the dignity of every person and fosters

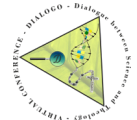


a communal support system. As society grapples with the ethical complexities of assisted dying, the Orthodox Church's teachings remind us of the enduring value of every life and the potential for hope and redemption, even in the face of death.

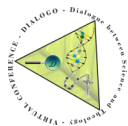
The question of whether there is room within Orthodox Christian morality for assisted dying, even in cases of severe pain or terminal illness, touches on complex theological, ethical, and pastoral considerations. The traditional stance of the Orthodox Church, grounded in the teachings of the Church Fathers and contemporary theologians, strongly emphasizes the sanctity of life, the redemptive value of suffering, and the hope of resurrection, generally opposing actions that intentionally end life. However, the Church also prioritizes compassion, pastoral care, and the alleviation of suffering within the bounds of its ethical teachings; for that matter, arguments can justifiably be found in its teachings supporting each side of the coin. But let's not forget that prayers and religious liturgical practices never replace the direct and professional approach of the medical act, but only accompany it in order to be blessed by God with the fulfillment of the goal for which it was implemented!

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- [43] *Ibidem.*
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BIOGRAPHY

Tudor-Cosmin CIOCAN, born in Constanta/ Romania in 1977, attended several theological and psychological faculties (BA, MB, Ph.D.), and obtained his Ph.D. in Missiology and Doctrinal Theology in 2010. He was ordained as an Orthodox priest in 2002. As a profession: he was a High school teacher since 1998, then a Professor Assistant, and afterward, a Lecturer since 2012. By now has written over 90 articles on theology, anthropology of religion, and psychology, along with 4 single-author books in the past two decades. In 2013 he started a multidisciplinary program

aiming to engage scholars from different fields in friendly and academic debates with theology. The same year, a Research Center was founded at Ovidius University with several researchers from 11 fields of science. In less than a year, he managed to gather people from around the globe around this idea, and thus the "Dialogo" Conferences project started. In 2014 he received a Fulbright scholarship and spent the Summer in California along with four other States in the USA, gathering data and understanding how religious pluralism is possible at a high level of involvement. In the meanwhile, he made friends from many different countries and religions that are now involved in this project or another, helping in his endeavor. Now he researches and teaches in this direction, towards building bridges between science and theology on the one side, and interfaith dialogue on the other. 'Dialogo' endeavor, biannual conferences & Journal, is his most remarkable, international achievement ever since the US-CA experience. For the moment, since 2021, he has played the role of spiritual/religious chaplain for 'Victoria Palliative Care Center' in Cumpana [Ro] adding specific 'flavor' to this research in an applied direction.

