

Power of Attorney; Catholic Health Ethics Guide; Euthanasia-Assisted Suicide

Q *I hold an Enduring Power of Attorney for an elderly Ukrainian Catholic who is 90+ years of age & suffers from dementia. What is the position of the Church on "end of life" care for someone in these circumstances? Are CPR & intubation considered "extraordinary measures"? My research indicates that resuscitation would result in further suffering & diminished quality of life; there is also a risk of further injury such as broken ribs, lung damage, internal bleeding, etc.. I want to "do right" by this person but I'm conflicted by their religious beliefs. Thank you.*

Trying to "do right"

A Dear Trying,

To be clear the real question is if there is a conflict between your beliefs and theirs? Ideally you would have discussed this with the person for whom you speak as Power of Attorney. However, if all you know is that he or she would want you to follow the teachings of the Catholic Church, please understand that those teachings do not require that extraordinary measures be taken to preserve life in every circumstance, particularly in the type of circumstances that you outline. An excellent resource that you might refer to is the Catholic Health Ethics Guide (Ottawa: Catholic Health Alliance, 2012; available through the Catholic Health Association of Saskatchewan <https://chassk.ca/publications/>). It is easy to read and an accurate statement of Catholic health ethics. I would refer you in particular to Chapter 4 on end of life care. For instance, on p. 65, para. 86 it talks about CPR and says the following:

Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) is an aggressive treatment used in situations of unexpected cardiac arrest. When deciding about CPR or about orders not to attempt resuscitation, both the potential benefits and burdens should be duly considered and patients should be encouraged to discuss this treatment with their health care providers. However, it is not ordinarily indicated for persons who have reached the ends stages of a progressive fatal condition. (See articles 74, 89)

So, what we know is that this "aggressive" treatment, can do more harm than good in some situations, as you indicate and what the Health Guide assures us of

is that refusing this treatment in certain instances, after a careful weighing of the pros and cons, is not the same thing as “Assisted suicide or Euthanasia”.

I hope that a careful reading of this document and perhaps even some discussion with the folks from the Catholic Health Association of Sask. can set your mind and heart at ease about your ability to make the best decisions for the person in your charge. God Bless you for caring enough to ask this question and acting the most respectful manner possible in this challenging situation.