
Austria, ongoing debate on assisted suicide. The firm opposition of the Church: "Death must not become a business"

Assisted suicide is the focus of heated debate in Austria in the light of a public hearing at the Austrian Constitutional Court (VfGH) on 24 September and the upcoming consultations in October, for a final decision by the end of 2020. The controversy was sparked off by four appeals lodged with the VfGH with the support of the Swiss euthanasia association Dignitas *requesting the revision and relaxation of the prohibitions enshrined in paragraphs 77 and 78 of the Penal Code regarding "death on demand" and "assisted suicide"*. The issue was tabled for discussion in Austria in June 2020 following a similar decision taken last February by the German Federal Constitutional Court that repealed the ban on "aiding and abetting suicide and when it is performed on a commercial scale", but was then postponed to September 24, also due to concerns related to the covid-19 pandemic. The Austrian bishops, amongst them the President of the Austrian Episcopal Conference (Öbk), Archbishop **Franz Lackner**, Cardinal **Christoph Schönborn**, and other Church dignitaries have repeatedly voiced their outright opposition to the easing of the regulations in force: *"Life is undoubtedly the most precious gift that everyone receives and it must be our care to ensure medical and pastoral support to the sick and dying."* The President of Öbk rejected altogether the possibility of granting requests for relaxation of criminal law regarding "death on demand and "assisted suicide." "The beginning and end of life require special care. Society has a major responsibility in this regard", Archbishop Lackner said in an interview with Austrian Catholic news agency Kathpress. The prelate pointed out that people should not be "left alone in their last, often arduous journey in life." What is truly needed is to foster "a culture of care, compassion and utmost availability to offer assistance" for *not giving up on people is of vital importance, "even if they have given up on themselves."* Cardinal Schönborn, who recently recovered from a long period of illness, gave his own contribution to the debate with personal words written for the website lebensende.at of the Institut für Ehe und Familie (IEF) - Institute for Marriage and the Family: "Disease makes us more vulnerable. I have experienced it myself," said the Archbishop of Vienna. His Eminence referred to *the desire to die as being part of an existential crisis resulting from illness and fatigue*. The sick person does not need help to commit suicide: that person needs continuing human closeness, relief from pain, emotional support and affection. Only in this way will everyone be sure that their dignity will be respected and protected even in the most vulnerable stages of life. Schönborn had expressed his thoughts in a recent contribution to the column he writes every Friday for the daily newspaper "Heute":

"Dying must not become a business".

For the cardinal, this would create a vicious circle in which the person in need of treatment would be put under pressure to request to die. Cardinal Schönborn said he looks on with favour to the Austrian decision and confirmed that "the Austrian way has proved to be admirable", with hospices in hospitals, continuous research in the development and use of palliative medicine and pain therapy, coupled by constant human presence offering compassionate assistance to the terminally ill and the dying. There are obvious implications for society, according to moral theologian Günter Virt: *"When a society allows doctors and designated individuals to kill on demand or to provide support for suicide, the sick, their relatives and the doctors are subjected to huge pressure"*. Virt's arguments, relayed in the latest issues of Austrian diocesan weeklies, maintain that the concept of assisted suicide "goes against international standards of medical ethics": not least in the light of increasing difficulty in defining the limits and distinctions that would allow a person to switch from assistance to guardianship with the power to decide when, if and how a sick person wishes to die or is subjected to coercive pressure from his or her immediate environment. *The Evangelical community equally voiced its firm rejection of a constitutional willingness to embrace assisted suicide: "It must not become*

normal to allow another person to die". said Bishop Michael Chalupka to Austrian Evangelical News Agency Evangelischen Pessendienst. Protestant theologian Dr. Ulrich Körtner remarked that the dying person needs solidarity, not a lethal injection, since legalized and regulated assisted suicide "means that extreme cases can be rendered legal by means of lawful actions."

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