

DISCONCERTING WORDS

Assisted suicide: Paglia's OK destroys Magisterium

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"Bishop Paglia is open to the assisted suicide law" read the front page of *Il Riformista* [*The Reformist*] recently, referring to the ongoing debate in Italy on the subject. The leftist daily newspaper, which recently nominated ex-premier Matteo Renzi its editorial

director, reports the full text of the speech by Monsignor Vincenzo Paglia, President of the Pontifical Academy for Life, which he gave during the debate *'The last journey (towards the end of life)'*, held as part of the Perugia Journalism Festival.

After painting a fairly realistic scenario on the subject of the end of life - the suffering of the patient and family members, therapeutic abandonment, the gradual disintegration of the principle of autonomy, etc. - Monsignor Paglia refrains from indicating convincing moral solutions, apart from the usual generic invitation to accompany the dying (Radicals agree the dying should be accompanied).

Yet on the legal front, Paglia has clear ideas: "In this context, it cannot be ruled out that in our society a legal mediation is practicable that would allow assistance to suicide under the conditions specified by Sentence 242/2019 of the Constitutional Court: the person must be "kept alive by life-support treatments and affected by an irreversible pathology, source of physical and psychological suffering that they consider intolerable, but is fully capable of making free and conscious decisions". [...] Personally, I would not perform suicide assistance, but I understand that legal mediation may be the greatest common good actually possible in our present living conditions".

So *Il Riformista* is right: the President of the Pontifical Academy for Life supports the enactment of a law legitimising assisted suicide, in compliance with the conditions indicated by the Italian Constitutional Court ([here](#) and [here](#) our critical comments on this ruling). Paglia, in keeping with the principle of 'playing both sides of the fence' and in an attempt to save face as a Catholic, then specifies: "personally I am against assisted suicide, but a law seems to me a point of balance in this pluralist and democratic society of ours".

But, suicide is a moral absolute, i.e. an intrinsically evil action that can never be chosen, neither for a good purpose nor because of special circumstances (e.g. in the case of a person who is suffering greatly). It logically follows that helping someone to take their own life is equally evil. Third point: it follows from this that a rule that legitimises aiding suicide is itself an intrinsically evil rule, and one can never give one's support to such a rule.

Paglia states that this rule would be ethically legitimised by the fact that in the social conditions in which we live today, it would represent the greatest possible good. Two notes on this. The first: supporting such a rule is an evil action. And where there is evil, one cannot speak of the greatest possible good. If I advise John to steal rather than kill, I am not advising the greatest possible good for John, but a lesser evil.

Second note: suicide, even in its collaborative form, can never be legitimised, so it can never be the object of a rule that permits it. That 'never', as mentioned earlier, also refers to conditions and was also rightly reiterated recently by the Italian Bishops' Conference in its Message for the *45th National Day for Life* last February, which rightly stated that "death is never a solution". An intrinsically wrongful action remains so even in the most extreme conditions. Therefore, it is pointless for Bishop Paglia to appeal to current social conditions and widespread pluralism. Even in this context, one cannot be in favour of an unjust law.

These thoughts, of course, are not of our making, but of the Catholic Church's making. John Paul II, in *Evangelium vitae*, wrote that public authority "can never accept [...] to legitimise, as a right of individuals [...] the offence inflicted on other persons through the disavowal of a right as fundamental as that to life". [...]

Thus the laws that, with abortion and euthanasia, legitimise the direct suppression of innocent human beings are in total and irremediable contradiction to the inviolable right to life that belongs to all individuals. [...] Laws authorising and favouring abortion and euthanasia are therefore radically opposed not only to the good of the individual, but also to the common good, and are therefore entirely devoid of genuine legal validity. [...] Abortion and euthanasia are therefore crimes that no human law can claim to legitimise. Such laws not only create no obligation of conscience, but rather raise *a grave and precise obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection*. [...] In the case, therefore, of an intrinsically unjust law, such as the one permitting abortion or euthanasia, it is never licit to conform to it, 'nor to participate in an opinion campaign in favour of such a law, nor to give it the suffrage of one's vote'" (nos. 71-73).

Paglia's words are antithetical to those of the Magisterium.

The archbishop knows this well and in fact in the introduction of his speech he tries to cover his back by presenting a plethora of heresies.

"First of all", writes Paglia, "I would like to make it clear that the Catholic Church does not have a ready-made, pre-packaged compendium of truths". Really, then what about the Creed? What about the Ten Commandments? And the dogmatic pronouncements? In

short, what happened to the *depositum fidei*? The President of the Pontifical Academy for Life then aims higher and with ever more powerful arguments! In fact, he excludes that Catholics possess “a truth given a priori”. But, of course, the Church does hold an a-priori given truth, that is, a truth that comes before the Church itself and believers, because the truth is God who has communicated Himself to us. Truth precedes us, it is not we who precede it.

All this is to say that 'theological thought evolves in history' and therefore though euthanasia was forbidden yesterday, tomorrow, who knows, perhaps it will no longer be. As a side note: the only evolution permitted in theological thought is the deepening of truths already revealed, not the denial of truths already recognised by the Church.

Instead Paglia thinks exactly the opposite and wheels out the subject of the death penalty on which the Pope has modified the Catechism and “today we no longer consider it admissible, under any circumstances”. In fact, on the Pontiff's intervention, it's important to point out that the principles that make the death penalty lawful refer to the defensive purpose of the community, the loss of the offender's moral dignity, and the triple function of punishment. Here we would like to add that Pope Francis has declared - if not *de jure*, then certainly *de facto* - that the death penalty is an intrinsically evil act, that is, as Paglia says, “no longer permissible, under any circumstances”. This is not predicable because the lawfulness of the death penalty has always been uninterruptedly confirmed by the Church since its origins. How could it be possible that so many popes and saints have all consistently taught an error, mistaking a good for an evil?

Finally, let us add a footnote: it is contradictory to invoke the absolute prohibition of execution by the State in order to support a rule that allows one to kill someone with the endorsement of the State. The salient difference for Paglia lies in the fact that in the first case the person is not consenting, in the second case they are. Typical liberalist reasoning.

But to Bishop Paglia all these reflections most probably appear to be abstract moralistic niceties. The message he wanted to get across is instead another. No moral principle is unreformable. No truth is safe.