

DOCTRINE

Paglia adds insult to injury on euthanasia and assisted suicide

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A few days ago the [Daily Compass commented critically](#) on the Small Lexicon of the End of Life, drawn up by the Pontifical Academy for Life (PAV). The criticism, ours and that of others, must have reached the ears of Monsignor Vincenzo Paglia, president of the PAV.

So to defend himself he gave three interviews to three Italian newspapers - one to *Vatican News*, a second to *La Stampa* and a third to *La Nazione* - in an attempt to square the circle, that is to reiterate on the one hand his opposition to euthanasia and assisted suicide and at the same time to defend the content of the Lexicon, which clearly opens up to euthanasia and assisted suicide. In short, his rejection of these two practices is only formal, flag-waving, but not substantial.

In the three interviews Paglia returns to some errors in the booklet, making them even more marked if that could be possible. With regard to assisted hydration and nutrition, he articulates a reflection that is the same as that found in the Lexicon: these two means of life support may constitute therapeutic obstinacy. As already explained in the previous *Daily Compass* article, this is only true in very rare cases. In the vast majority of cases the opposite is true. But Paglia does not say this. Instead, he insists on emphasising that it is a priority to reject any form of therapeutic obstinacy. This is very much to be welcomed, but two significant problems remain.

The first lies in the fact that PAV disguises euthanasia as a rejection of futile treatment, especially when it makes the patient alone decide when treatment is proportionate or disproportionate. The second problem lies in the fact that the worrying phenomenon in Western countries is not therapeutic obstinacy but euthanasia. On the latter, both the booklet and Paglia's interviews say very little, instead resorting to the same old pro-forma response, just to keep up appearances, aimed at condemning euthanasia and assisted suicide. The real evil to fight because it is rampant seems to be the unreasonable obstinacy to cure.

Salvatore Cernuzio, for Vatican News, invites Msgr. Paglia to delve into the shifting sands of the relationship between morality and law, when he reminds him that the Lexicon speaks of "mediations on the legislative level". His reply: "There are no a priori 'acceptable mediations'. Certainly on the fundamental and very delicate issues of the end of life it is desirable that the highest possible common consensus is reached, and therefore that respectfully takes into account the different sensitivities and religious beliefs. But, surely this is the task of politics. The Church can collaborate, with a view to the common good of society as a whole. It is up to her to form consciences, more than to draw up laws' (as an aside: the Church, with the exception of its legal system, is not at all responsible for drawing up laws). In his interview with *La Stampa* the reply is substantially identical: 'These are complex issues and reaching a universal consensus is indeed arduous, if not almost impossible. The legislator must comprehend the different positions and sensitivities and find a possible harmony. [...] We identify a space for the

legislator to make the best choices, but not alone. In dialogue with different sensitivities, cultures, religions'.

A few reflections. The first: for Paglia the expression 'a priori' means 'in the abstract'. Therefore, juridical mediations on these sensitive issues are forbidden in the abstract, but in the concrete - i.e. a posteriori - they are lawful because they are inevitable, given that we live in a pluralist society (not at all true, given that a single thought dominates, but that is another matter). Here then, from a methodological point of view, reference must be made to a cardinal principle: democracy. Truth is put to a vote. Therefore, the end point is a consensus as broad as possible. But in doing so, the object of consensus, which is what the Church cares about, is lost along the way. If an almost unanimous consensus could be found - both in Parliament and in the public squares - on a norm legitimising euthanasia, according to Paglia it would be a very good result. The important thing is the consensus, not the content of the consensus. So much so that in a third interview, given to La Nazione, Paglia seems to support the decriminalisation/legitimation of aid to suicide by the Constitutional Court in 2019 because 'there are extreme situations. But the point is there are'.

Church doctrine, however, says something different about the relationship between what is wrong in itself - and euthanasia and assisted suicide are essentially wrong - and law. No legal mediation either a priori or a posteriori is tolerable on these issues; no unjust law, even if it is the result of broad consensus, is to be supported in any way. St John Paul II's *Evangelium vitae* explains: 'Laws which, with abortion and euthanasia, legitimise the direct suppression of innocent human beings are in total and irremediable contradiction to the inviolable right to life proper to all men. [...]. Laws authorising and favouring abortion and euthanasia are thus radically set not only against the good of the individual, but also against the common good, and are therefore completely devoid of genuine legal validity. [...] Abortion and euthanasia are therefore crimes that no human law can claim to legitimise. [...] In the case, therefore, of an intrinsically unjust law, such as the one admitting abortion or euthanasia, it is never licit to conform to it, 'nor to participate in a campaign of opinion in favour of such a law, nor to give it the suffrage of one's vote'" (nos. 72-73). And on the subject of consent: 'Would these crimes [against life] cease to be such if, instead of being committed by unscrupulous tyrants, they were legitimised by popular consent? [...] The value of democracy stands or falls with the values it embodies and promotes' (n. 70). Forgetting Paglia-style mediation and broad consensus, Catholic doctrine commands us to reject at root norms that legitimise euthanasia and assisted suicide, even if approved by all.

But let us continue. After revealing to *La Stampa* that "there is nothing ethical 'a priori'. Only the defence of life is an 'a priori'" thus denying that there are other 'a priori' such as procreation, property, freedom, truth, etc., i.e. the non-negotiable principles, Msgr. Paglia identifies the moral and Christian foundation on which legislation to protect life in relationships should rest. "Closeness, closeness, holding hands". And again: "'Life is mine" is said. The Lexicon tells another perspective, it reflects on the relationships that give meaning to life. [...] From the beginning we are bound to each other'. In short, one should not kill Titius because of the relationships that would be shattered by his murder. The reference to relationships is certainly positive, but it is not the decisive reason for the prohibition of euthanasia and suicide. The decisive motive is respect for the dignity of the person. His or her intimate preciousness demands that he or she not be killed directly, if an innocent person. To follow Paglia, however, the castaway on the desert island could lawfully take his own life.

Pay attention, therefore, to the passages in Paglia's thought: the moral foundation of a just law is the relationship; this Catholic idea is presented for democratic discussion and in the end we will have an end-of-life law, the result of the broadest consensus, and this will be the greatest possible good even if it legitimises euthanasia. It should also be added that the slogan 'Life is mine', rightly criticised by Paglia, is in fact one of the criteria deemed valid by the Lexicon when it states that it is the patient who is the last and most authoritative subject to decide on his or her own life or death.

Lastly, a final straw, so to speak: 'In the search for juridical mediations,' says Msgr. Paglia literally replicating the content of a passage from the Lexicon, 'the contribution of believers takes place within the different cultures: not above - as if they possessed a truth given a priori - nor below - as if they were bearers of an opinion without a commitment to bear witness to justice'. We have therefore understood that apriorism is Paglia's real enemy, i.e. principles, doctrine, dogmas, all things that for him are detached from reality, not concrete, far from the contingent: truth, on the other hand, is particular, never universal, special, never general. Therefore, even the Catholic, Paglia tells us, is not the bearer of a truth entrusted to him by God - the great A Priori of the universe - but rather of a truth unearthed from the recesses of History - the true A Posteriori to which he must pay worship. No Revelation, only reproduction (of current thought).