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From: Daniel C. Maguire, Professor of Moral Theology at  
Marquette University, a Catholic, Jesuit Institution

An open letter to Catholic Legislators in California:

I write to you about AB 651, legislation permitting a physician to write a prescription for life-ending medication to a mentally capable, dying adult if his or her suffering becomes unbearable.

As a Catholic theologian I have long considered such a choice to be morally and ethically acceptable in extreme and strictly safeguarded circumstances and there is nothing in AB 651 that cannot be supported by a Catholic.

Catholic theology is broader and more nuanced than Vatican theology. A Catholic lawmaker need not be strictly bound by Vatican theology. There is legitimate ethical pluralism within Catholic theology on the subject of assisted dying.

The core principle for Catholic theology should be the intent of the patient and caregivers when all hope is gone, when suffering is unbearable to that dying patient and stringent safeguards protect against any error or coercion.

Catholicism in the 21st century must acknowledge that the technology and advances in medical practice that prolong life can also be utilized in rare circumstances to alleviate unbearable suffering by aiding a dying patient by accelerating the dying process that is already ongoing. It is clear that a substantial majority of California Catholics understand this distinction because the March 2006 Field Poll found that 65% of them support a patient's right to hasten death if he or she is suffering intolerably at the end of life.

I believe that one can be a devout Catholic and support the enactment of laws that leave such intensely personal decisions to the faith and spiritual practice of individuals.

I do understand the difficulty of the choices that are before you and the pressures that have been brought to bear on you by the Catholic hierarchy's allegiance to Vatican theology. AB 651 allows this difficult end of life decision by codifying protections so that the choice of dying patients is based on their individual religious morality.

I believe you can be a devout Catholic and still in good conscience vote for AB 651, which I personally endorse. True Catholicism does not require you to impose your religious beliefs, or the doctrine of the Catholic hierarchy, on others. A majority of your Catholic constituents will appreciate your stand in behalf of compassion and choice and your respect for the Constitution of the United States.

Sincerely,



Daniel C. Maguire  
Professor of Moral Theology