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Prolonging Life or Hindering Death? An Orthodox Perspective on Death, Dying and Euthanasia

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses death as a biological event and attempts to approach it as a mystery within the light of the Orthodox Christian theology and tradition. First, the value of the last moments of the life of a human being is analyzed; then the state of living is differentiated from the state of surviving that results, in some extreme cases, from the intrusion of technology in medicine. The article elaborates on the sacred and spiritual character of death which, when viewed within the light of Christ's resurrection, is transformed into a great blessing. The last part of the article focuses on the newly emerged issue of euthanasia and the reasons behind it. It poses certain vital questions that ought to be answered before legalization gets on its way. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the position of the Orthodox Church of Greece on death, dying and euthanasia.

Keywords: death, euthanasia, Orthodox Christianity

I. INTRODUCTION

Human death, in the Orthodox Christian tradition, is the rupture of the psychosomatic unity, the untying of the bond between body and soul; it is the separation of the soul from the body (Nemesius, PG 40.304ff).¹ This is not explicitly stated in the Holy Scripture, but it is indirectly described by the words of Saint James: "the body apart from the spirit is dead" (Js 2:26). According to Saint Gregory the Theologian, life is the tie between body and soul, while death is their separation (Saint Gregory the Theologian). Similar formulations are found in the Areopagite literature (Saint Dionysius Aeropagite, PG 3.404B),² in Clement of Alexandria, Saint Gregory of Nyssa

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(Saint Gregory of Nyssa, PG 46.20B, PG 45.1153D, PG 45.797C)³ and Saint Gregory Palamas (Saint Gregory Palamas, 1987, p. 93).

The soul is non-visible and, although being created and mortal by nature, it is by grace immortal (Saint John of Damascus PG94.924; Zizioulas, 1952, pp. 5–26; Florovsky, 1953; Trebelas, 1979, p. 337).⁴ The visible and tangible part of human nature is the body. Death, considered as a biological phenomenon exclusively, refers only to the body.⁵ The body is subjected to the laws of nature. Due to its very essence, these laws cannot influence the soul. Accordingly, any attempt to define biological death by referring to the changes of the soul's situation is arbitrary and may disregard that difference in essence. At the moment of death, it is not the "departure" of the soul from the body that causes the latter's collapse. The soul neither enters nor exits the body, but co-exists with it. Rather, it is the body's own decaying that renders it unable to "follow the course" of the soul and receive its life-giving energy.⁶

Apart from the spiritual character, which is expressed as free will, the soul has also a deterministic, natural expression, which is often called *psyche* (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2000).⁷ The *psyche*, which seems both to have a strong connection to the brain function (biological body) and to express important faculties of the soul (thought, emotions, behavioral reactions), indicates in an exemplary manner the psychosomatic nature of man. Thus, biologically speaking, we could indeed identify death with the collapse of the body and mental manifestations (autonomy, potential for expression, awareness, consciousness, etc.), which basically means the irreversible cessation of the brain function.

II. THE MOMENT OF BIOLOGICAL DEATH

The moment of biological death epitomizes the value of a human's life. It is the moment at which God's closeness to man is realized in its most intense form. For this reason, Orthodox Christians regard it with awe, respect, humbleness and a deep sense of mystery.

We humans are immortal by grace, yet we experience mortality, since we have mortal bodies. From the very moment of our conception, mortality is evident throughout our entire life (Christodoulos, 2002, p. 21). In this respect, death is not merely a momentary event, but also a continuous process. We could say that man is biologically dead, when the consequences of the process of mortality become non-reversible. The body ceases to exist as such from the very moment it ceases to support the person (Loudovikos, 1990, pp. 113–137).⁸

Orthodox Christian theology considers death as a mystery (Vassiliades, 1993, pp. 3–7). Mysteries can neither be observed, nor understood, or, even more so, defined. Every effort to determine details that are by nature inexplicable and inaccessible runs the risk to profane the mysteries' sacred character with false knowledge and misleading definitions.

The life of the Church abounds with incidents that, although not rationally explainable, indicate that death is not only a natural occurrence that can be precisely defined, but also a spiritual event that ought to be approached with humbleness and fear of God. Thus, Saint Seraphim of Sarov "passed away, while he was praying: his soul separated from his body before the body was dead – he was holding a lighted candle in his hand" (Sophrony, 1996, p. 48).

Moreover, Russian tradition refers to the impressive story of hierodeacon Serapion, who slept in the Lord on June 25, 1859, while at his hermitage in Glinsk, Russia. As his biographer describes "to the astonishment of the brethren, for three hours after he died, his fingers continued to move over his prayer rope; his body did not decompose and gave off no odor" (Clare, 1984, p. 106). It is worth noting that well before the occurrence of his death, he had ordered his fellow monks to keep him unburied for three days.

Another interesting example appears in the martyrdom of Saint Dionysios Areopagite. "After working many miracles in the city of Paris, he was decapitated; taking his head in his own hands, he walked for two miles causing wonder to those who watched him. He only released it from his hands when he met a woman named Katoula and, with God's providence, he placed this treasure in her hands" (Menaion of October, 1970, pp. 31-32).⁹ This miraculous incident indicates that it is possible for the soul to remain in the body after death and continue to enliven it, as well as for the body to maintain certain functions.

It is such reports that support the teaching of the Orthodox tradition that death can be generally described but not exactly defined, because along with a biological event it implies an unknown mystery. Therefore, the Orthodox Christian Church avoids clear-cut statements that identify death with the cessation of the brain, cardiac or any other function.

III. THE VALUE OF THE LAST MOMENTS

The desire to sympathize with the dying person and the effort to delay the moment of his death express the struggle of human nature against death as the consequence of original sin. Life and death are totally in God's hands (Job 12:10).¹⁰ Even more so, the last moments of a person's life may have

greater value than its entire past (Kleopas, pp. 177–181). In fact, they may be more valuable to the doctor, who has the obligation to protect life (according to the Hippocratic oath), and the relatives than they are for the patient himself.¹¹ The need for a patient's staying alive is sometimes greater for those standing by, while he himself may not even be conscious any more of his own existence. This is why compassion and love, which are fundamental elements of spiritual life, are incomparably superior to biological life itself.

On the other hand, the last moments of a person's life are also of great value to that person himself. Perhaps they are more valuable than any other moment of his life; even more than the "moments of eternity" (Hatzinikolaou, 2002, p. 329). During these moments after all, the soul is judged, can repent, and passes from ephemeral life to everlasting reality. This is why the attempt to prolong life is ethically permissible, as opposed to hastening the moment of death. Time constitutes the guarantee of the sacred tie between the soul and the body and, therefore, death should never be precipitated. We have no right to disrupt this tie, or to steal away moments from the psychosomatic union.

Death is so sacred to all of us that its purity should be safeguarded by any means. It is the process and moment during which the person is worth the greater respect from society. Society should in no way reduce death from a spiritual mystery to a mechanical and merely temporal event. It is unethical to denude the body from the last clothing of its dignity, when it has just been deprived from the protection of the soul.

Finally, the last moments of a patient favour the bond between him and his relatives and the medical staff, the growth of love and communion, the manifestation of sympathy and mercy. The request of certain patients to end their lives may conceal a wish to test their relatives' love and desire to be with them for as long as possible. During these moments one can experience the grace of God and the love of human beings.¹²

IV. LIVING AND SURVIVING

The quality of life should be compatible with survival. Life within the natural world appears with certain quality specifications. Presently, however, advancements in medical technology allow patients to survive under conditions that are unacceptable quality-wise. Thus, surviving and living become two different things.

The numerous motorcycle and car accidents and the development of medical technology have led to Intensive Care Medicine that keeps patients alive under very extreme conditions and at times blurs the borderline between life and death (brain death, persistent vegetative state, etc.). In addition, the amazing progress in pharmaceutical technology and the aggressive chemotherapy or radiotherapy prolongs the life of cancer patients, who, quite often, experience multiple metastases that reduce the quality of life to a very low level.

It seems that sometimes technological surviving is even worse than death. When life runs the risk to be degraded to the level of unbearable suffering, even nature itself protects man's dignity¹³ by initiating the process of death. Contemporary technology may hinder this protection and produce unprecedented forms of death or conditions of painful survival incompatible with life. In other words, technological advancements may create human beings who would either be unable to die, or be unable to die in a natural way.

The use of the respirator is a typical example. When it cannot keep the patient alive, it results in "brain death." Artificial support of brain dead people is an undesirable condition because of its therapeutic failure and the ethical dilemmas it generates. Medical intervention, in this case, does not provide therapy or give hope, but instead creates an insurmountable impasse.

Artificial support is justifiable only when it offers therapy, prospect for life and hope for recovery to the patient. Wishing to survive by artificial means alone, without any conscience and prospect for life, amounts to nothing but wishing to hinder death. This manifests earthliness, ephemeral mentality and refusal of the beneficial dimension which death opens for the soul. Just as we are not entitled to speed up death, so we are also not entitled to prolong its process. When the inevitable moment of death comes, we ought to humbly accept it and respect it (Harakas, 1982, p. 176).

Although the desire to be kept alive is an indication of man's innate craving for immortality, "the purposeless prolongation of life with artificial means also indicates man's prideful attitude that is similar to the one underlying life's violent interruption" (Zizioulas, 2002, p. 58). Moreover, when that desire transforms death from a momentary event to prolonged suffering, agony and doubt, it bears witness to a lack of faith.

The body helps the soul manifest itself in this world. In certain cases, when an individual has lost permanently his awareness, consciousness, cognition, volition, emotions or any of the necessary brain functions, his body fails to manifest the soul, even if some of its functions are supported mechanically or

bio-chemically. Instead, the body provides a form of life which may be inferior even to the life of animals itself, for animals possess awareness and maintain instinctive functions. Although the body of such a person maintains its sacredness, since it once hosted his soul, coexisted with it and still bears its imprints, it has ceased to live as a unified whole.

For the Orthodox Christian Church, the freedom of the soul is expressed through its coexistence with the body, so long as the latter is biologically alive. However, when death occurs, its freedom is manifested through its temporary deliverance from the biological body, with the perspective to reunite with it after its resurrection in the kingdom of God. The persistent refusal of death when its time has come, as well as the denial of the soul's eternal perspective and resurrection on "the last day" (Saint John Chrysostom PG 49.71-72) actually torment the soul.¹⁴

Accordingly, we may medically intervene in the body only for therapeutic reasons. Any act that favors and precipitates its decay is insulting to the soul and, as such, it is unethical. The decay process should be entirely natural and should never be forced.

V. TRANSCENDENCE OF LIFE AND TRANSCENDENCE OF DEATH

In certain cases, respect for life means that we must invest all available resources for keeping a patient alive, even if this life is marred by extensive bodily disability. Our love, which is beyond measure, can complement in excess the deficiencies of this disability. The success of our efforts does not lie in the fact that our fellowman will live; nor is it undermined by the eventual physical disability. The expression of medical love, the common struggle of doctors and nurses, and the desire not to let "evil" (i.e., the illness, the accident, the criminal act, carelessness, etc.) win all focus on the life of our fellowman, which is of utmost value.

On other occasions, respect for a human being is shown not only by allowing him to die, but even by "facilitating" his death. This does not imply that we actively cause his death, or in some way partake in the process, but that we pray more for his repose than for the prolongation of his life. We prefer to see him "being made perfect" (He 12:23) than watch him suffering. Death is not only sacred as an incident; it is also sacred as a moment within time, as a means and as a process leading to salvation. The Church prays for the

“facilitation” of the soul’s departure (Prayer for those being in the agony of death, *Small Prayer Book*, 1988, p. 193)¹⁵ because, although She proclaims that life is a great gift, She also believes that death could be a greater blessing.

The prayer for those being in the agony of death is an expression of the Church’s experience; namely, although She respects the gift of life and loves man,

(S)he stands with such great compassion before the pain of a dying person that She prays that his life end the soonest possible. This proves that our Church’s mentality is not based on legal and ethical criteria, but places man above Sabbath. (Zizioulas, 2002, p. 57)

The utmost gift that the Church can offer to a living person is the Body and Blood of Christ. However, in certain cases (i.e. brain dead individuals, PVS patients, patients in coma, etc.), the giving of the Eucharist is strictly prohibited, according to the Holy Canons (Quinisext Council).¹⁶ A dying person may receive Holy Communion just before he passes away, provided he has not lost his consciousness and is able to communicate. On the contrary, if he is unable to respond to external stimuli, he is also unable to partake in the Holy Sacraments. These people, along with their consciousness, feelings and perceptive ability, have absolutely lost the possibility to receive Holy Communion. All the Church can offer them is Her prayers, which She does anyway both to the living and the deceased, without any discrimination.

Society respects the wishes of the deceased even when these concern the details of their body’s condition after death, (i.e. burial place, donations in his memory, memorial services etc.), so long as they do not oppose eternal values and everlasting principles. However, we should not support the request of a terminally ill patient, who seeks help in hastening the moment of his death. In this case, our love is better expressed as respect for the gift of life than for the will of the patient.

VI. THE “OPPORTUNITY” OF DEATH

Death is not only an event that reminds us of the original fall. In the Orthodox Christian tradition and theology, death is viewed mainly within the light and experience of the resurrection. Death means passing to the eternal state “where there is no pain, no sorrow, no sigh, but life everlasting” (Vaporis, 1977, p. 106); “departing from the body and dwelling in God;” “translation

from things sorrowful unto things better and more delightful and unto repose and joy” (The Pentecostarion, 1990, p. 425); putting off bodily weightiness (Saint John Chrysostom, PG 57.404);¹⁷ riddance from the curse that followed Adam’s “fall”; and partaking in true life. Moreover, it means that body and soul move to a new form of existence that may resemble the “ancient beauty” more than their previous unified existence does (Florovsky, 1987, p. 206). Death is a special stage of man’s development and preparation for the resurrection and the last judgment (Vatsikouras, 1999, p. 344).

“If we live, we live to the Lord, if we die, we die to the Lord” (Rom 14:8). The event of the resurrection of the Lord has limited noticeably the tragedy of death and has bridged significantly the gap between death and life (Harakas, 1990, p. 149). This is clearly revealed in the pericope, which is read at the funeral and memorial services:

Truly, truly I say to you, he who *hears* my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly I say to you, the hour is coming and now is, when the dead will *hear* the voice of the Son of God, and those who *hear* will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself, and has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will *hear* his voice and forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment. (Jn 5:25–29; emphasis added)

For the Church, death has been abolished. Although the last moments of a person bear great significance, the meticulous search for the exact moment of death has no special interest and meaning. The faithful, even while still being actually alive, “have passed from death to life” (Jn 5:24). The pursuit of the prolongation of life by any means and the agonizing transfer of the moment of death to the far most future weaken faith, since death is already of the past (“have passed”). Natural death that constitutes the typical untying of the bond between body and soul is “an incident of very small significance compared to spiritual death, for it occurs within the context of time and space” (Christou, 1991, p. 30). True death is spiritual death. For those who are spiritually dead, who cannot hear the Lord’s word and fail to discern the Father’s signs, fear biological death and have no hope in the resurrection.

In the above pericope, the hearing of the word and voice of the Lord is repeatedly emphasized. For the Church, the prolongation of biological life is

insignificant in comparison to the stimulation of our spiritual senses and our experience of spiritual life (Hatzinikolaou, 2002, p. 333). Hope in the resurrection to eternal life is incomparably superior to the desperate struggle for the prolongation of the earthly life.

VII. SHOULD EUTHANASIA BE LEGALIZED?

During the last years, the issue of euthanasia has been broadly discussed among legislative bodies, expert committees, the mass media, conferences, and in public debates. This newly emerged subject has affected our consciences and altered the ethical criteria in such a way that we tend to develop a logic and perception of things that requires – or in the best case justifies – the legalization of euthanasia.

In our days, euthanasia appears as a serious problem for various reasons. First, our society tends to become hedonistic; as a result, people's resistance to pain is getting weaker. They cannot stand hardships and pain for they lack patience and endurance. Similarly, modern societies are reluctant to support citizens who are not considered productive. Second, the prolongation of the average life span, on the one hand, and the reduction of births on the other, which are both achievements and consequences of modern civilization, respectively, lead to the ageing of our societies; therefore, there is a relative increase of chronic and painful or degenerative diseases (Davis, Konishi, & Mitoh, 2000, p. 11).¹⁸ Third, the intrusion of technology in medicine and, generally, in health, very often results in the unprecedented prolongation of the dying process; hope for survival often turns into agony. Such "therapeutic" interventions may lead to pathological states which medicine is incapable of overcoming and to ethical dilemmas that our society cannot resolve. Finally, healthcare has become very expensive and has turned into a financial enterprise that transforms patients into cost factors and their treatment into an issue of managed economic rationality. Consequently, medical and nursing support is in danger of no longer being determined by love and respect for the patient but predominantly by financial considerations.

Sometimes, terminally ill patients ask for help in speeding up their own dying, and very often doctors feel obliged to intervene and assist them in that process. Thus, there is a developing logic, an ethics and perception that renders legal support of euthanasia almost imperative.

Our love towards a terminally ill patient is expressed either as a desire to deliver him from pain, or as a wish to prolong his life so as to be together. The suffering of our fellowman and our compassion for him create an inner conflict of love with our desire for togetherness. In a Christian perspective, this conflict presents an inner crisis, which provides an opportunity for strengthened trust in God's will, His consolation, the revelation of a "sign", and His enlightenment of our soul.

Although it is humanly understandable that we wish to postpone death, the broad use of medical technology may go beyond the limits of spiritual ethics. This gives rise to certain questions, which should be answered before legalizing euthanasia: Since we believe that the moment of death belongs entirely to God, are we competent to determine it? Do we have the right to hinder the departure of the soul, while confessing that the end of our life is in the hands of God, and especially when its prolongation becomes distressful? In case a patient asks for euthanasia, where is the balance between our respect for his will and our respect for the gift of life? Where is the borderline between keeping a patient uninformed of his condition so as not to cause him panic and dilemmas and informing him fully of his illness so as to give him a chance to repent?

VIII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Orthodox Christian Church believes in the immortality of the soul, in the resurrection of the body, in the eternal perspective and reality of man, in death as a passage to real life, in pain as "the marks of Lord Jesus" (Gal. 6:17) on our bodies and in trials as causes and opportunities for salvation.

On the basis of the above and within the prospect of growing communion of love and mutual support, we could say that:

1. Our life is exclusively in the hands of God and all incidents are to our own spiritual benefit and constitute part of God's plan. Every death resulting from human decisions and choices alone is an insult against God – no matter how "good" it may be called (Breck, 1990, p. 223).¹⁹ Moreover, the Church condemns as unethical and insulting for the medical profession every medical act which does not contribute to the health or the prolongation of life, but, instead, intentionally, provokes the hastening of the moment of death. We human beings ought to pray, not to decide about life and death.

2. On the other hand, the effort to delay the moment of death, when this moment has already come, may indicate faithlessness, earthliness and difficulty in succumbing to God's will.
3. Transcendence of death is proposed as an alternative to euthanasia. Good life and a good death for the Church mean life and death with meaning and perspective. When the choice to die emerges from the denial of the will of God it is considered a sin. On the contrary, when yearning to die springs from the love of God it constitutes a blessing and a unique virtue (Phil 1:23).²⁰

The Church tradition includes many examples of saints who did not wish to resort to doctors or medicines for therapy, but instead they relied wholly on God's providence. Some ascetics resorted to the use of medicine or other medical means and then considered their act as a deviation from the way of perfection.

"This multi-dimensional stance before pain and death is not due to an enigmatic or ambivalent position of the Church, but to the absolute respect for freedom of man and the acceptance of the uniqueness of each person's spiritual condition".²¹ Therefore, behind the patient's words we ought to discern the deeper state of his soul that interprets his wishes and choices.

4. The final decision that determines our acts should be expressed through the spiritual understanding of pain, life and death and the humble acceptance of our biological end. The Church should base Her teaching on the fact that Her experience transcends pain and death. Pain in human life is "collaborator in salvation" and oftentimes "it is even better than health itself" (Saint Gregory Palamas, 1985, p. 264). Natural as well as existential pain is beneficial because it widens the limits of existence. Pain may constitute a means of ascesis in humility, patience and love, and it can become an opportunity for preparing our self for eternity. (Holy Synod of the Church of Greece, 2002)²²
5. The Church embraces the weakness of human nature and acknowledges that "death is better than a miserable life, and eternal rest than chronic sickness" (Sir 30:17). Consequently, She is very understanding towards those who break down before unbearable pain and death. Her word of truth is always compassionate and Her philanthropy is vested with truth. This is why we always pray for deliverance "from all affliction, wrath, danger and necessity" and ask that the end of life may be "painless, shameless, peaceful"²³ and that in certain cases patients in the agony of death may soon be reposed.
6. In cases of complicated dilemmas, no generalized commandments can determine right from wrong; instead, the enlightenment and grace of God is reflected on each specific person and emerges from his relationship with his

spiritual father. For this reason the Orthodox Church avoids answers, advice or rules in a form of a manifesto. Instead, She limits Herself to indicate mainly Her ethos and mentality. Above all, She withstands with respect, humility, silence and anticipation. The will of God can be expressed through many alternatives that may be different or even contrary in regards to their form or expression, but similar in regards to the revelation of truth.

7. When the Church speaks about mysteries, Her words have an apophatic nuance; She suggests directions but may not always give solutions. Without being vague, Her language is not completely precise. Vagueness shows irresponsibility. Absence of well-defined answers may facilitate the revelation of God's will and shows respect for the person. Death constitutes a mystery that only man's free will, along with God's transforming grace, can make meaningful.
8. If euthanasia means not hindering a person's death when it is about to occur, then we are in favour of euthanasia. If death is on its way, we ought to accept it humbly and not prevent it. On the other hand, if euthanasia means either not protecting human life in every possible way, or cutting it short before the actual coming of death, then we are definitely against euthanasia. Quite often, society pretends to be doing the former so as to legalize the latter. Since, however, euthanasia does concern the latter, we, as the Orthodox Church, are set against every form of euthanasia.

NOTES

1. Nemesius basically cites Chrysippus.
2. "Death is not the inexistence of our essence, as others believe, but the separation of the already united (soul and body)".
3. "In regards to the flesh, the energy of the physical senses is called movement and life, whereas their ceasing and termination is called death".
4. As Metropolitan of Pergamos Ioannis (Zizioulas) states, only God is by nature immortal. Anything created is mortal. Fr. Georges Florovsky also supports the same viewpoint. According to P.N. Trebelas, "the soul was created so that it is by grace immortal in its nature".
5. The body is physically corruptible, biologically mortal but not extinguishable. Even after death it is not totally extinguished. Its remains are waiting for its resurrection.
6. This is evident in the case of animals, which lack an immortal and rational soul. Hence, when we speak about biological death we mean that the body has collapsed.
7. By the term "psyche", as it is used in psychiatry, psychology, psychotherapy, psychasthenia, etc., we refer to "the faculties of thought, behavior and emotion that consciously or unconsciously adjust or mediate the body's responses to the social and physical environment".

8. For man, the body is an absolute prerequisite for existence as a person, which means that the person as a deep and unconfused communion-in-otherness cannot be realized (within the limits of created things) except in the body.
9. Apparently, Greek hagiographers confused the martyrdom of Saint Dionysios Areopagite with that of Saint Denis of France (source: <http://www.stdenischurch.org/saintdenis.html>, July 15, 2003).
10. "In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind".
11. Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy, *Euthanasia: Motions on the General Principles*, Article 8, Vilnius, Lithuania, June 28, 2003.
12. Holy Synod of the Church of Greece, Press release 14.12.2000.
13. By *dignity*, I mean the value of the human person.
14. The characteristic quality of the faithful is the contempt of death. "How can you demonstrate faith through acts? Through the contempt of death, for this is what differentiates us from the unfaithful; they rightfully fear death for they have no hope for resurrection. However, you have taken a superior road and contemplate about hope after death, how can you be excused for not being encouraged by the resurrection just like those who do not believe in the resurrection and fear death."
15. "Release your servant from this unbearable torment and serious illness so that he may rest together with the spirits of the righteous".
16. "Let no one impart of the Eucharist to the bodies of the dying. For it is written, 'take, eat' (Matt 26:26); for the bodies of dead persons can neither take nor eat anything" (Sts. Agapius and Nicodemus (eds), *The Rudder*, trans. D. Cummings, New York: Luna Printing, 1983, p. 387). Apparently, this applies also to those in coma, to PVS patients, to brain dead individuals, etc., for they "can neither take nor eat anything." However, this canon refers to the Holy Eucharist exclusively and not to other sacraments, i.e. Holy Unction, reading of the prayer of absolution.
17. "The body decomposes at once so that you may see the beauty of the soul" (Saint John Chrysostom).
18. For instance, in Japan, the elderly people (above 65 years) constituted in year 2000 the 15.7% of the population and it is estimated that, in 2025, this percentage will reach 27.4%. In fact, it is anticipated that the population's ageing tendency will continue for another century.
19. The term euthanasia comes from the Greek word εὐθανασία, which means good death (εὖ = good, θάνατος = death).
20. "My desire is to depart and be with Christ".
21. Mantzarides, G. (2001). Pain in the Orthodox tradition and theology (in Greek). A lecture given at the seminar on euthanasia organized by the Bioethics Committee of the Church of Greece, Athens, January 22, 2001 (forthcoming, October 2003).
22. Holy Synod of the Church of Greece, Basic Positions on Euthanasia.
23. In almost all services of the Orthodox Church (Vespers, Matins, Divine Liturgy etc.).

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