

Book Review

Charles Camosy, *Living and Dying Well: A Catholic Plan for Resisting Physician-Assisted Killing* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2025), 184 pp., \$20.95

Reviewed by Benjamin Parviz

FOR A LONG TIME, CHRISTIANS IN THE U.S. have resisted the advance of physician-assisted suicide (PAS) politically and legally by activities such as campaigning against proposed laws, voting against them, and participating in lawsuits. It is difficult to measure or assess the success of this resistance effort. Since it was first put into effect in Oregon in 1997, PAS has in various ways become permitted by law in 12 additional U.S. states and the District of Columbia. Most recently, Gov. J. B. Pritzker signed the Medical Aid in Dying Bill in Illinois in December 2025, and in February 2026, Gov. Kathy Hochul signed a similar law in New York. Two states—Oregon and Vermont—have removed state residency requirements from their PAS laws, meaning that anyone who can qualify and who has the means and ability to travel to those states can die by PAS there. Despite Christian efforts to resist the advance of PAS, the practice now confronts Christian communities directly. The church must change its approach to resistance. Instead of resisting a law and practice that may come in the future, Christian communities must now resist a choice and a temptation that any member of the community and congregation may now face. What kind of approach do Christians take to resist the temptation of PAS?

This is the question that Charles Camosy—moral theologian and bioethicist at The Catholic University of America—takes up in his most recent book *Living and Dying Well: A Catholic Plan to Resist Physician-Assisted Killing*. Camosy is a prolific and respected Catholic moral theologian, and he wrote this book for a public and Catholic audience. The book would be ideal for use in a parish setting with faithful lay Catholics who want help knowing how best to respond to what they are reading online and in the newspapers. The book substantively engages an important and relevant moral question, and it is accessible and understandable for anyone. This review first provides a broad overview of Camosy’s argument, then considers whether this book of Catholic moral theology is useful for Lutherans who similarly want to resist PAS.

To begin, Camosy makes use of the phrase “physician-assisted killing” instead of the more familiar phrase “physician-assisted suicide.” His reason for doing so is to

emphasize that deaths that are named as “physician-assisted suicide” are not purely the result of the patient’s autonomous choice. Rather, in his words, in such an act “the killing of the person is explicitly or structurally coerced, or both” (7). On one hand, Camosy’s concern about coercion is a valid concern that is shared by many, and in cases in which coercion is at least partly the cause of the death of the individual, it is perfectly legitimate to correctly name such coerced deaths as “killings.” On the other hand, the nomenclature for this-thing-that-we-are-talking-about is famously complex and controversial. We could name it “physician-assisted suicide,” “death with dignity,” “medical aid in dying,” “voluntary active euthanasia,” “voluntary assisted death,” “assistance in dying,” “assisted death,” “end of life options,” or more. Each of these names for this-thing-that-we-are-talking-about highlights a unique and meaningful shade of meaning, shades that are sometimes objectively discernible and that are at other times anchored in a value system and a particular moral perspective. Not knowing how to name this-thing-that-we-are-talking-about actually makes it difficult to talk about and negatively contributes to moral analysis and argumentation about it. It may be that by offering yet another name, Camosy adds more confusion than he does clarity on the subject. For the remainder of this review, Camosy’s preferred term, abbreviated “PAK,” will be used.

Camosy’s goal is a “counterculture” that undercuts PAK. He wants to highlight the many ways the dominant culture of the contemporary West lays the foundation for the choice to die by PAK. At the same time, he wants to highlight how the dominant culture of the contemporary West is antithetical to Roman Catholicism. His project, then, is to consider a kind of culture that Catholics can help establish, one that works against PAK by cutting it off at its foundations.

The author characterizes the culture of the contemporary West as one of individualism, autonomy, independence, and control. This culture functionalizes these values, making them capacities for action. When disease, disability, aging, and dying appear to deny one of these capacities, PAK offers a helpful means of reclaiming the ability to freely act. Following Pope Francis, Camosy calls this kind of culture a “throwaway culture” that kills and discards individuals who lose these capacities and become unwanted burdens on others. One problem with throwaway culture is that it impedes human flourishing by denying access to the best and most profound human experiences that come from being cared for by another.

The culture that opposes throwaway culture is firmly grounded in the dignity of all people, which comes from their being created in the image and likeness of God. This is a culture that embraces social connectedness and interdependence and turns away from individualism, autonomy, independence, and control. At the center of this culture is a community that cares for the physical, material, and spiritual needs of its members. This culture is one of hospitality that welcomes weak, needy, fragile, and dying people. It encourages practices that uphold and honor their dignity by

encountering them in a ministry of presence and compassion, suffering with them in their suffering. It also encourages practices that continually call individuals to reflect on their own future death. Camosy says that we ought always to keep death in the front of our minds because doing so shapes a life of hospitality and compassion. This kind of culture and community will both encourage flourishing and remove the temptation of PAK.

For a Lutheran audience or congregational setting, these conclusions are intriguing enough on their own. Again, Camosy is a Roman Catholic moral theologian who writes for a Roman Catholic audience. The closest he comes to describing his book in ecumenical or pluralistic terms is when he says that establishing the counterculture can be a shared project that overcomes the right- and left-wing political divide within the Roman Catholic Church. He does not write this book for Lutherans, so we ought not to criticize either Camosy or this book on Lutheran grounds. Any such criticism is best left to Camosy's fellow Roman Catholics. The question is the usefulness of this book in Lutheran congregational settings. While Camosy's effort and conclusions are laudable, Lutherans will need to justify or explain them on different grounds.

Camosy secures his conclusions primarily through narrative. He examines narratives of the life of Christ, the lives and deaths of St. Joseph, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Robert Bellarmine, and St. Francis of Assisi, as well as the lives of modern monks and friars, and the work of contemporary Catholic care homes and hospitals. By presenting and analyzing these narratives, he illustrates the counterculture he advocates. In many ways, these narratives are interesting on their own terms, sometimes even inspiring. It seems the intended effect of the narratives is to show Catholics that the culture he describes is not new or foreign to Catholicism, but has always been embedded within it. Lutherans can experience this effect only to a limited extent. However, Camosy's telling of these narratives prompts Lutheran readers to look within their own history and tradition to see whether this culture can be found. Similarly inspiring narratives may well be found in Lutheranism's long history in healthcare, especially in the vocation and work of Lutheran deaconesses.

Camosy's preference for narrative in this book results in a surprising lack of Biblical or systematic theology. One will encounter some scriptural references in the chapter that presents a narrative of the life of Christ (chapter two) and a handful of others throughout the rest of the book. Beyond these, the book says little about what God's Word has to say on PAK. The situation is similar with regard to analysis of PAK from the perspective of the doctrine of the church. The most direct doctrinal analyses of PAK relate to the *imago Dei* and to the theology of death. The topic and his overall arguments certainly lend themselves to increased Biblical and systematic investigation. For example, Camosy's thesis advances theological anthropology, arguing that humans are social and dependent beings who thrive more in community

than in isolation. These anthropological claims would seem to lead naturally into reflections on ecclesiology and baptism. The church is the community—established on Christ and on the testimony of the Apostles and nourished by the Word of God and the sacraments—within which we flourish. One is welcomed into the church through baptism. It is surprising that this theology book about PAK, which argues that humans are dependent and social creatures who do not flourish as autonomous individuals, does not explain this in terms of membership in the body of Christ and people's baptismal identity as sons and daughters of God. Lutheran readers and audiences may be similarly surprised by this lack of engagement with Biblical and systematic theology.

For a 4- or 6-week class on physician-assisted suicide for lay parishioners in a Lutheran congregation, this book would not be the best foundation. However, no obvious alternative text comes to mind for class participants to buy and read instead. PAS is usually covered in a chapter of a larger book on end-of-life ethics. It is unusual for it to be the subject of a book-length treatment. When PAS is the subject of a book, it is usually a scholarly collection of essays that deals with detailed or minute questions, often of law or politics, that go beyond the daily concerns of the average lay Christian. Charles Camosy offers something of great value with this little book. He maintains a clear focus on PAK across an introduction and eight chapters. He asks a timely question and provides a theological answer that is appropriately formed for the audience for which he writes. The closest comparable book is Ewan Goligher's *How Should We Then Die? A Christian Response to Physician-Assisted Death*. At present, no Lutheran book appears to accomplish what Camosy does in *Living and Dying Well*. Although it may not be the assigned text for such a Lutheran lay class, it would certainly inform the instructor's thinking and preparation for those discussions. Lutherans need a book like this. Perhaps Camosy's *Living and Dying Well* will inspire a Lutheran to write one.

Benjamin Parviz is a Ph.D. candidate at Saint Louis University in the Department of Philosophy and in the Department of Health Care Ethics. He teaches undergraduate courses in philosophical and theological health care ethics. He researches hope, despair, and the patient's experience of medicine, drawing primarily upon the work of Gabriel Marcel.



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