

The Sacredness and Inviolability of Human Life: A Biblical-Moral Discourse of Exodus 20:13

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Abstract

This paper focused on providing the proper understanding of Exodus 20:13 with the view of highlighting the moral implications of euthanasia, orthothanasia, and dysthanasia. In other words, this paper argued that Exodus 20:13 is the foundation of the church's moral teaching, affirming human dignity and the sacredness of human life. The historical-critical, theological and analytical methods were deployed and it was discovered that the proper translation of the verb 'rāṣaḥ' in Exodus 20:13 is murder. Thus it is translated as 'You shall not murder'. It discovered that the biblical cum moral implications of this translation is that any intentional act of terminating human life is classified as murder. Therefore, killing might be intentional or unintentional whereas murder necessarily is intentional. Furthermore, it discovered that euthanasia is a premeditated or intentional action regardless of the reason behind it. In orthothanasia, the will of God is allowed to prevail while in dysthanasia, there is the intentional act of unduly preserving life marked by unnecessary suffering. This paper found out that euthanasia and dysthanasia fall short of the moral principle established by Exodus 20:13 in that they both undermine the sacredness of human life while orthothanasia upholds the sacredness of life. Lastly, this paper concluded by insisting that the Church's moral teaching on human life maintains a balanced approach in distinguishing between euthanasia, orthothanasia and dysthanasia. The paper showed that the Church maintains that human life is inviolable, sacred and any action that suggests the contrary violates the moral principles established in Exodus 20:13

Keywords: Murder, Ethanasia, Orthothanasia, Dysthanasia, Premeditated, Sacredness, Human life

1.1 Introduction

The existence of laws fosters a sense of order within human society, making it clear that every misdeed and act of misbehaviour carries consequences. This structure of accountability helps to safeguard social harmony. In a similar way, order exists within the divine economy. As the Psalmist declares, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (Ps 24:1), affirming that God is the sovereign owner of all creation, including humanity. Consequently, God wills that human beings live peacefully and responsibly within the created world. This divine desire to establish an ordered society that reflects God’s own holiness and justice finds concrete expression in the gift of the Decalogue to the people of Israel.

The Decalogue is traditionally understood as consisting of two interconnected dimensions: commandments governing humanity’s relationship with God and those regulating relationships among human beings. Central among the latter is Exodus 20:13, “You shall not murder.” This commandment highlights the sacredness of human life and the moral obligation to protect it from conception until natural death. While the commandment admits of broader interpretations within biblical and moral theology, this study focuses specifically on its implications for the sanctity of human life. In this light, the paper examines Exodus 20:13 in relation to contemporary end-of-life issues, particularly euthanasia, orthothanasia, and dysthanasia.

Although civil laws governing these medical practices vary across different countries, the Catholic Church, as a herald of the Gospel of life, offers a moral vision grounded in Scripture, Tradition, and the Church’s enduring Magisterial teaching. Accordingly, this paper evaluates euthanasia, orthothanasia, and dysthanasia through the lens of Exodus 20:13 and Catholic moral doctrine.

1.2 Thesis

The commandment ‘you shall not murder’ is often misquoted, misinterpreted and misunderstood and this erroneous understanding results in using the word ‘kill’ in place of murder. In today’s world, the meaning attached to human life in some cases attacks the dignity that was bestowed to human life at creation. Relativism and other strange ideologies continue to create the platform for debate about the integrity of human life and little wonder therefore, actions such as euthanasia, orthothanasia, and dysthanasia, etc. have increasingly been practiced in some quarters. The misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the Hebrew verb *‘rāṣah’* in Exodus 20:13 (kill instead of murder) creates a moral confusion. That is, those who hold on to *‘rāṣah’* as murder argue that it is not biblical to take a life while those who translate it as ‘kill’ hold vehemently that the content of the commandment does not in any way prohibit the taking of life especially within the context of modern bioethical considerations and practices.

Therefore, it is clear that biblical exegesis provides the appropriate interpretation and the field of moral theology has continued to advocate for the sacredness of life. However, it is a fact that there is an obvious disconnect and disagreement between appropriate biblical interpretation, moral theological teachings and some modern ideologies and thoughts that deny or don’t uphold the sacredness and dignity of human life. Also, there are individuals, Christians who continue to exhibit clear ignorance on the biblical foundation of the dignity of human life and the church’s teachings on this matter. Therefore, this essay answers the question of: How does Exodus 20:13 establish the sacredness and inviolability of human life? What actions morally violate the sacredness and inviolability of human life? This essay thus argues that Exodus 20:13 prohibits the willful or intentional termination of life and any action to the contrary falls short of appropriate moral demands. In specific terms, this essay focuses on the moral appropriateness of end-of-life issues (euthanasia, orthothanasia and dysthanasia) from the biblical perspective of Exodus 20:13.

1.3 Literary Consideration of Exodus 20:13

The text of Exodus 20:13 will now be critically analyzed with the view of understanding the full import of the verse and the appropriate interpretation of *rāṣaḥ*. *This is key as it surely will aid the biblical understanding of Exodus 20:13 and provides adequate moral perspective understanding euthanasia, orthothanasia, and dysthanasia.*

1. Delimiting Exodus 20:13

Exodus 20:13 is among the ten commandments and it is part of the larger instructions found in the second division of the book of Exodus (chapters 20-31). Exodus 20:1-21 is titled the ‘Ten Commandment’¹ while Lang, Schaff, Mead, argue that chapters 20-31 form the second part of the book of Exodus which is termed: “The Ten Words or The Ethical Law”² The entire Ten Commandments are divided into two parts with the first part constituting the vertical dimension and the second part constituting the horizontal dimension. That is, the first part deals with laws prescribing the relationship of humans with God and the second set of laws focus on the social relations among humans³. The commandment contained in Exodus 20:12 concludes the first part of the commandment in Exodus 20:1-17 and it forms a transition into the second part⁴ and it is important to stress that its form ties it to the first part of the commandments. In clear terms, Exodus 20:13 begins the second part which deals “with relationships among social equals”⁵ and forms the basis for the laws or instructions that follow (Exodus 20:14-17). Each instruction in the Commandments (cf. Exod 20:1-17) is unique, distinct instruction, with specific meaning and application. Exodus 20:13 is different from the instructions before it (cf. Exod 20:1-12) and those after it (cf. Exod 20:14-17). Consequently, while Exodus 20:13 can be taken as a unique literary unit, it must be interpreted within its immediate context of Exodus 20:1-21 and the broader Sinitic experience in the book of Exodus (cf. Exodus chapters 19-24).

2. The Hebrew Text and English Translation of Exodus 20:13

Hebrew Text	English Translation (Exodus 20:13)
לֹא תִרְצָח	You shall not murder

3. Analyzing Exodus 20:13

In analyzing Exodus 20:13, the verb *rāṣaḥ* is fundamental and central to the interpretation of the verse and its understanding in terms of the meaning it conveys. The verb according to Harris is purely a Hebrew word and has no equivalent in the contemporary language. The initial occurrence of its root is in Exodus 20:13 and it appears in the form of a simple Qal stem and a negative adverb attached to it “lo trəṣāḥ” which is translated as ‘do not murder’⁶. Furthermore, it is emphasized that the usage of the root in Exodus 20:13 should not be interpreted to imply that *rāṣaḥ* means the proscription of intentional or premeditated crimes (to kill) only. This point is argued when the usage of the root word in chapter 35 of the book of Numbers is considered. That is, the verb *rāṣaḥ*

¹ Fretheim, Exodus. 220.

² Fretheim, Exodus. 220.

³ MacLaren, Alexander, *Expositions of Holy Scripture: Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers*. (Bellingham, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009),107.

⁴ Lange, John Peter ; Schaff, Philip ; Mead, Charles M., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures : Exodus*. (Bellingham, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2008), 80.

⁵ Fretheim, *Exodus*. 232.

⁶ Harris, Laird R., Harris Robert Laird , Archer Gleason Leonard, Waltke, Bruce K., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. electronic ed. (Chicago : Moody Press, 1999), 860.

can apply also to cases of unpremeditated and accidental crimes (murder). Thus, *rāṣaḥ* as a verb applies to both premeditated and unpremeditated crimes (murder, killing, man slaughter, etc.)⁷.

The concise or brief nature of the instruction in the Hebrew text (cf. Exod 20:13) which is simply translated as *lo trəṣāḥ* (do not murder), makes it difficult for a better appreciation of the meaning of the verse⁸. Therefore, Janzen argues that:

This economy of words leaves us with only two clues to interpret the scope of the commandment. First, The OT never uses this commandment to forbid killing in war, capital punishment, and the slaughtering of animals. Second, the root verb *raṣaḥ*, used here, is not one of the common Hebrew words for killing generally, but has a more restricted meaning⁹.

The verb appeared to have metamorphosed over the centuries in its meaning and application. In its original context it was used in referring to killing as a result of blood vengeance and later was used to refer to killings associated with malice, rivalry and hatred¹⁰. Consequently, a befitting translation of the verb *rāṣaḥ* as used in Exodus 20:13 would be 'murder', suggesting or pointing to "socially unsanctioned killing"¹¹. That is, the verb *raṣaḥ* is not used to indicate "killing in battle or of executions after the death sentence has been passed"¹². The clear impression that one gets from the use of the verb in Exodus 20:13 is that the life of anyone within the community or society is not at risk of being terminated by anyone else. Thus, Exodus 20:13 emphasizes a strong theological truth which is that God is the giver and creator of life and as such, he only has the divine powers to take life. Divine powers here is extended in its understanding to mean all other divine sanctions which in the Old Testament included wars, death sentence, etc. may determine whether life is taken or not¹³.

It is important to state that the commandment in Exodus 20:13 does not prohibit humans from killing animals for food or carrying out lawful sanctioned executions¹⁴. The commandments in Exodus 20:13 focused on the dignity and sanctity of human life. That is, humans have value and intrinsic dignity in themselves and in the sight of God who created them and bestowed this value. Therefore, Exodus 20:13 speaks to the truth that God would not allow human life to be trampled or terminated by others who on account of power have what it takes to act in such a manner. Personal aggrandizement, selfish moral ideologies etc. cannot be allowed to destroy or rubbish the dignity of the human person. Exodus 20:13 thus serves as a warning and a major restriction to humans in using their freewill to subvert God's creations¹⁵.

In concluding the analysis of the verb *rāṣaḥ*, it is important to state that it finally became associated with murder in respect to intentional killing of a person's enemy and this meaning informed the instruction in Exodus 20:13. That is, the instruction 'do not murder' means all forms of illegal intentional killing that is detrimental to society and communal living¹⁶. The murder (killing) of Naboth by Ahab is a very strong and instructive example of the action that Exodus 20:13 forbids

⁷ Harris et al. *Theological Wordbook*, 860.

⁸ Janzen Waldemar, *Exodus*. (Waterloo, Ont., Herald Press, 2000), 262.

⁹ Janzen, *Exodus*. 262.

¹⁰ Osborn, Noel D., Hatton Howard, *A Handbook on Exodus*. (New York : United Bible Societies, 1999), 479

¹¹ Osborn, Noel D., Hatton, Howard, *A Handbook on Exodus*. 479.

¹² Ashby, G. W., *Go Out and Meet God: A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*. (Grand Rapids, Mich., Handsel Press, 1997), 92.

¹³ Ashby, G. W., *Go Out and Meet God*. 93.

¹⁴ Allen Ross, Oswalt John. *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol.1: Genesis, Exodus*. (Carol Stream, IL : Tyndale House Publishers, 2008) 438

¹⁵ Allen and Oswalt. *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Vol.1: Genesis, Exodus*. 445.

¹⁶ Waldemar: *Exodus*. Waterloo. 262.

(1Kings 21:19), That is, killing is an act that causes death and this action may be intentional or unintentional. Murder is unlawful and deliberate killing of an innocent person. It becomes appropriate therefore to translate the verb *rāṣaḥ* in Exodus 20:13 as murder and not kill.

4. Exodus 20:13: Biblical Perspective of Human Life

Exodus 20:13 has serious implications for human life. That is, the instruction opens up numerous spheres of discussions about the dignity of human life and the obligation to preserve life. The obligation to preserve life is first on the individual who has the moral duty to preserve life which is a gift from God. Secondly, the moral obligation to preserve life rests on the other person who is morally bound to desist or avoid any action that will lead to the murder (intentionally killing) of a fellow human person. Understanding that life is a gift also implies accepting the truth that life has intrinsic value which is the basis of dignity and substance of life. This dignity therefore means that human life from its very beginning (conception) must be respected, protected and promoted. By implication, all intentional or premeditated actions targeted at ending human life must be shunned. In this respect, all forms of bioethical ideologies and structures or frameworks that support actions that are inimical to the preservation of human life are banned or proscribed by Exodus 20:13. However, it should be said that “killing, when permitted or even commanded, is to be regarded as in principle a consequence of the duty of the preservation of life in the higher sense¹⁷”.

At the heart of Exodus 20:13 is that the commandments makes it clear that all life belong to God (cf. Lev. 17:11; Gen. 9:6)¹⁸ and the implication here is that no life should be taken or terminated. Humans have no power, authority and right to manipulate or do whatever they will with human life. He who gives life alone has the authority over life and to do with it what he wills¹⁹. Humans cannot murder fellow humans. One aspect that continues to come to mind when Exodus 20:13 is interpreted is the issue of wars, capital punishment, etc. Thus, in relation to capital punishment in Israel’s history, the “limited use of capital punishment, as specified in certain God-given laws (cf. 21:12–17; 22:18–20), had to do with violations of God’s created order. The issue thus became a matter of world restoration under God²⁰”. As it appears, protecting life which is part of God’s created order might lead to termination of life in cases of war and as have been argued, such scenarios are not implied in the scope of Exodus 20:13.

1.5 Exodus 20:13 in Catholic Moral Teaching

Exodus 20:13, expressed in Scripture as “You shall not murder”, forms a cornerstone of Catholic moral teaching by affirming the fundamental dignity and sacredness of human life. This commandment is grounded not merely in legal prohibition but in the biblical understanding of God as the source and Lord of life. The Book of Genesis provides the theological foundation for this teaching by declaring that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen. 1:26–27).²¹ Because every person bears this divine image, human life possesses an intrinsic worth that precedes all human judgment, social utility, or political authority. Exodus 20:13 therefore protects life not as a human convention, but as a reality rooted in God’s creative will.

Flowing from this biblical foundation, the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that “Human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves the creative action of God and it remains forever in a special

¹⁷ Lange John Peter, et al. *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures. Exodus*. 80.

¹⁸Fretheim, *Exodus*. 233.

¹⁹ Fretheim, *Exodus*. 233.

²⁰ Fretheim, *Exodus*. 233.

²¹The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version, Gen. 1:26–27.

relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end.”²² This suggests that human life is sacred and inviolable from conception until natural death. Life is understood as a gift entrusted by God to human stewardship, not an object over which individuals may exercise absolute control. As a result, no one has the moral right to directly and intentionally destroy innocent human life. Exodus 20:13 thus condemns not only murder in the strict sense but also any action or omission that deliberately treats human life as expendable or unworthy of protection.

In order to apply Exodus responsibly to concrete moral situations, Catholic Theologian St. Thomas Aquinas evaluates human actions according to three essential elements: the moral object, the intention, and the circumstances. The moral object refers to the act chosen in itself, intention concerns the purpose for which the act is done, and circumstances include the surrounding factors that may affect responsibility or gravity.²³ For an action to be morally good, all three elements must be morally good. Neither a good intention nor difficult circumstances can justify an intrinsically evil act, such as the direct killing of an innocent person.

Exodus 20:13 also underlies the Church’s consistent ethic of life, which recognizes the interconnectedness of all threats to human dignity. This ethic calls for opposition not only to abortion and euthanasia, but also to capital punishment, unjust war, and social structures that endanger or devalue human life.²⁴ Rather than treating these concerns as isolated moral issues, the Church understands them as unified expressions of a single commitment to protect life at every stage and in every condition. In this way, Exodus 20:13 is revealed not merely as a negative command against killing, but as a positive moral mandate to foster a culture of life grounded in justice, solidarity, and respect for the inherent dignity of every human person.

1. Euthanasia

The term euthanasia derives from two Greek words: *eu* (εὖ), meaning ‘good’, and *thanatos* (θάνατος), meaning ‘death’. It thus etymologically refers to a gentle and easy death.²⁵ Euthanasia is commonly defined as an act or omission that intentionally causes the death of a person in order to eliminate suffering. In moral and medical discussions, a distinction is often made between: (1) Active euthanasia: which involves a direct action such as administering a lethal substance, and (2) Passive euthanasia: which refers to the withdrawal or withholding of treatments with the intention of causing death. Euthanasia is further classified according to consent: voluntary euthanasia occurs at the explicit request of the patient; non-voluntary euthanasia is performed when the patient is unable to consent, such as in cases of severe cognitive impairment; and involuntary euthanasia is carried out against the expressed wishes of the person.²⁶ While these distinctions are important for descriptive clarity, Catholic moral teaching holds that any form of euthanasia that intends death is morally unacceptable.

The Catholic Church unequivocally teaches that euthanasia is a grave violation of Exodus 20:13 because it involves the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. Saint John Paul II defines euthanasia as “an action or omission which of itself and by intention causes death, with the purpose of eliminating all suffering,” and firmly condemns it as morally unacceptable under all circumstances.²⁷ This condemnation applies regardless of motive, including compassion, perceived

²²Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 2258.

²³Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), I-II, qq. 18–20.

²⁴John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), no. 15–16.

²⁵Oxford University Press, “What is Euthanasia” <https://opil.ouplaw.com/display/> access 08-07-2026.

²⁶E. Christian Brugger, *A Catholic Introduction to Biomedical Ethics* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019), 245–252.

²⁷John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), no. 65.

quality of life, or economic considerations. Human life, even when marked by illness, disability, or imminent death, retains its full dignity and may never be intentionally destroyed.

At the same time, the Church carefully distinguishes between killing and allowing natural death. Catholic teaching does not require the use of extraordinary or disproportionate means to prolong life when such treatments offer no reasonable hope of benefit or impose excessive burden. The refusal or withdrawal of such treatments, when death is neither intended nor directly caused, is understood as acceptance of the natural process of dying rather than euthanasia.²⁸ This distinction reflects a morally significant difference between intending death as a means or an end and permitting death to occur while continuing to provide ordinary care, such as nutrition, hydration, comfort, and spiritual support. The moral reasoning underlying the Church's rejection of euthanasia rests primarily on the role of intention. An action whose moral object is the causing of death is intrinsically evil, regardless of the subjective intention to relieve suffering. By contrast, actions aimed at alleviating pain, even when they may foreseeably shorten life as a secondary effect, can be morally permissible under the principle of double effect, provided that death is not intended and proportionate reasons exist.

Catholic moral theologians such as Germain Grisez emphasized that authentic compassion does not consist in eliminating the sufferer, but in accompanying the person with care, solidarity, and respect for their inherent dignity until natural death. Euthanasia, they argue, undermines the moral foundation of medicine by transforming the healer into an agent of death and by redefining human worth in terms of autonomy or productivity.²⁹ In rejecting euthanasia, the Church affirms that suffering, while deeply painful, does not negate the value of life and should be met with palliative care, emotional support, and spiritual accompaniment rather than lethal intervention. This moral stance upholds both the sanctity of life and the authentic meaning of human compassion, calling society to protect the most vulnerable precisely when they are weakest.

2. Orthothanasia

Etymologically, the concept, rooted in the Greek terms *orthos* (right) and *thanatos* (death), expresses the conviction that there is a morally right way to die, one that respects both the sanctity of life and the limits of human control over it. It refers to the morally appropriate acceptance of death when it occurs naturally, without either intentionally hastening death or unreasonably prolonging the dying process through disproportionate medical interventions.³⁰ In Catholic moral theology, orthothanasia is clearly distinguished from euthanasia, which involves an action or omission carried out with the intention of causing death in order to eliminate suffering. Whereas euthanasia seeks to master death by directly inducing it, orthothanasia recognizes death as a natural and inevitable part of human existence and permits it to occur without moral fault when further medical intervention would be futile or excessively burdensome.³¹

This moral distinction is clarified through the Church's longstanding teaching on the use of ordinary (proportionate) and extraordinary (disproportionate) means of treatment. Ordinary or proportionate means are those that offer a reasonable hope of benefit without imposing excessive burden, pain, or expense, and their use is morally obligatory. Extraordinary or disproportionate means, however, are treatments that do not offer a proportionate benefit or impose grave physical,

²⁸ Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2278.

²⁹ Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 3, *Difficult Moral Questions* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1997), 514.

³⁰ Fernando M. Runzer-Colmenares, José Fonseca, et al., "Orthothanasia: Science's Contribution to Dignifying Death," *Revista Peruana de Medicina Experimental y Salud Pública* 41, no. 4 (2024): 445–447, accessed July 6, 2026, <https://www.scielosp.org/article/rpmesp/2024.v41n4/445-447/en/>.

³¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on Euthanasia (Iura et Bona)* (Vatican City, 1980), III.

psychological, or financial burdens, and their refusal or withdrawal is morally permissible.³² The decision to forgo such measures does not constitute suicide or euthanasia but rather reflects prudent stewardship of life and acceptance of human finitude. Catholic bioethicists emphasize that refusing disproportionate treatment is an affirmation, not a denial, of human dignity, since it avoids reducing the person to a mere object of technological intervention.³³

Central to orthothanasia is the acceptance of pain management and comprehensive palliative care. The Church strongly endorses the use of analgesics and other therapies to alleviate suffering, even when such treatments may foreseeably shorten life, provided that death is not intended and that proportionality is respected.³⁴ Palliative care addresses not only physical pain but also emotional, social, and spiritual distress, ensuring that the dying person is accompanied with compassion rather than abandoned. Edmund Pellegrino argued that palliative care best embodies the authentic goals of medicine by respecting the patient's dignity while resisting both therapeutic obstinacy and the temptation to eliminate suffering by eliminating the sufferer.³⁵

From a Catholic moral evaluation, orthothanasia is morally permissible because it upholds the intrinsic dignity of the human person while recognizing that life is a gift entrusted to human stewardship rather than an absolute good to be preserved at all costs. Saint John Paul II warns against "the illusion that life can be extended indefinitely by technological means," noting that such an approach risks undermining the human meaning of dying.³⁶ Orthothanasia avoids this error by rejecting both euthanasia and the disproportionate prolongation of life, affirming instead a balanced moral path that respects life while accepting death as a natural passage.

Finally, orthothanasia is deeply grounded in a Christian vision of human dignity illuminated by hope in eternal life. Death, while a consequence of sin, is transformed by Christ into a passage toward resurrection and communion with God. The Church therefore insists that the dying be supported with spiritual care, the sacraments, prayer, and the presence of loved ones, enabling them to face death with trust and hope rather than fear or despair.³⁷ Joseph Ratzinger emphasized that accepting death in faith is not resignation but an act of hope that affirms the ultimate destiny of the human person beyond biological life.³⁸ In this light, it reflects a profoundly Christian understanding of death, one that preserves dignity, fosters compassion, and places ultimate trust in God's promise of eternal life.

3. Dysthanasia

The term derives from the Greek *dys* (bad or difficult) and *thanatos* (death), signifying a "bad" or unduly prolonged death marked by unnecessary suffering. It is often referred to as "therapeutic obstinacy" or "overzealous treatment," and describes the prolongation of the dying process through excessive or burdensome medical interventions that offer no reasonable hope of benefit to the patient.³⁹ Unlike euthanasia, which seeks to hasten death, dysthanasia attempts to delay death at all costs, even when medical interventions no longer serve the authentic good of the patient. In

³²Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2278.

³³ Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol. 3, *Difficult Moral Questions* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1997), 508.

³⁴Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2279.

³⁵ Edmund D. Pellegrino and David C. Thomasma, *For the Patient's Good: The Restoration of Beneficence in Health Care* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 169–

³⁶ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), no. 65.

³⁷ Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers, *Charter for Health Care Workers*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), nos. 149–152.

³⁸ Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 213.

³⁹ Wikimedia "Dysthanasia" <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/dysthanasia> accessed July 8, 2026.

Catholic moral theology, it is viewed as a failure to respect the natural limits of human life and the dignity of the dying person.

Examples of dysthanasia include the continued use of aggressive life-sustaining technologies such as mechanical ventilation, repeated resuscitation, artificial nutrition and hydration, or invasive surgical procedures in cases where the patient is imminently dying or irreversibly unconscious and such treatments provide no proportionate benefit.⁴⁰ These interventions which may prolong biological functioning without improving the patient's overall condition, often increase pain, distress, and loss of dignity. While modern medicine possesses remarkable technological capacities, the Church cautions against equating technological possibility with moral obligation, especially when treatments impose grave physical, psychological, or financial burdens.

The moral problems associated with it arise from its tendency to reduce the human person to a biological organism to be maintained indefinitely, rather than a person with inherent dignity and a spiritual destiny. By focusing exclusively on prolonging life, it risks ignoring the patient's holistic well-being, including emotional and spiritual needs. It may also foster false hope, delay appropriate palliative care, and place disproportionate burdens on families and healthcare systems.⁴¹ From a moral standpoint, it reflects an implicit refusal to accept death as a natural part of human existence and may obscure the Christian understanding of dying as a moment requiring compassion, accompaniment, and trust in God. Catholic teaching explicitly rejects the use of disproportionate or extraordinary means of treatment when they no longer offer reasonable hope of benefit or entail excessive burden. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that the refusal of such means is morally legitimate and should not be confused with euthanasia, since the intention is not to cause death but to avoid futile or overly burdensome treatment.⁴² This teaching is reaffirmed in Church documents that warn against both the intentional hastening of death and the unreasonable prolongation of life, calling instead for a morally balanced approach that respects life without idolizing it. Saint John Paul II emphasized that true respect for life includes recognizing when medical intervention ceases to be genuinely therapeutic.⁴³

Within this moral context, healthcare providers and families bear significant ethical responsibilities. Physicians and nurses are called to exercise prudential judgment rooted in professional competence, moral conscience, and respect for the patient's dignity, avoiding both abandonment and overtreatment. Families, likewise, are entrusted with making decisions that reflect the patient's best interests, values, and faith, rather than fear of death or unrealistic expectations of medicine. The Church encourages shared decision-making that includes clear communication, palliative care, and spiritual support, ensuring that the dying person is accompanied with compassion and allowed to face death with dignity and hope.⁴⁴ In rejecting dysthanasia, Catholic moral teaching affirms that a truly humane response to dying lies not in prolonging life at any cost, but in loving care that respects both the sanctity of life and the natural limits of human existence.

1.6 Evaluating Exodus 20:13: Biblical Cum Moral Nexus

Exodus 20:13, "You shall not murder," functions as an absolute moral norm within Catholic moral theology because it safeguards innocent human life as a sacred gift originating from God. Its authority

⁴⁰ Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers, *Charter for Health Care Workers*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), nos. 120–123.

⁴¹ Edmund D. Pellegrino and David C. Thomasma, *For the Patient's Good: The Restoration of Beneficence in Health Care* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 163.

⁴² Catechism of the Catholic Church

⁴³ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 65.

⁴⁴ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Samaritanus Bonus* (Vatican City, 2020), nos. 5–7.

does not depend on changing social circumstances, medical capabilities, or subjective experiences of suffering. By grounding moral judgment in God's sovereignty over life, the commandment establishes a non-negotiable ethical boundary: no human being has the moral authority to directly and intentionally end innocent life. This foundational principle provides the decisive criterion against which euthanasia, orthothanasia, and dysthanasia must be evaluated, ensuring that moral discernment is rooted in objective truth rather than emotional or utilitarian considerations.

Euthanasia stands in direct contradiction to Exodus 20:13 because it involves the intentional causation of death as a means or an end. Regardless of whether euthanasia is motivated by compassion, autonomy, or the desire to eliminate suffering, its moral object remains the deliberate killing (murder) of an innocent person. Catholic moral theology rightly rejects arguments that redefine killing in this form as "medical care" or "dignified death," since such language obscures the intrinsic moral disorder of the act. By treating death as a solution to suffering, euthanasia undermines the inherent dignity of the human person and transforms medical practice from a healing vocation into an instrument of death, thereby violating both divine law and authentic human compassion. The moral principle inherent in Exodus 20:13 renders euthanasia as murder (willful or intentional killing).

Orthothanasia represents a morally legitimate response to dying because it respects both the sanctity of life and the limits of human control over death. Unlike euthanasia, it does not intend death but accepts it when it occurs naturally after the refusal or withdrawal of disproportionate medical interventions. This moral legitimacy arises from a correct understanding of stewardship: human beings are guardians, not owners, of life. When medical treatments no longer offer reasonable hope of benefit and impose excessive burdens, their discontinuation affirms human dignity rather than negating it. Orthothanasia therefore aligns with Exodus 20:13 by refusing to willfully or intentionally terminate a life while also rejecting the false moral obligation to preserve biological life at all costs.

Dysthanasia, though often motivated by fear of death or misplaced hope in technology, represents a moral imbalance that distorts the meaning of respect for life. By aggressively prolonging the dying process through futile or excessively burdensome interventions, dysthanasia risks reducing the human person to a mere biological organism sustained by machines. While it does not directly violate Exodus 20:13 through willful or intentional killing, it indirectly undermines human dignity by refusing to accept death as a natural part of the human condition. Catholic moral teaching rightly critiques dysthanasia as a failure of prudence and compassion, emphasizing that respect for life includes recognizing when medical intervention ceases to be genuinely therapeutic.

The moral distinction between euthanasia, orthothanasia, and dysthanasia becomes clear when evaluated through intention, proportionality, and respect for human dignity. Euthanasia is morally impermissible because death is intended; orthothanasia is permissible because death is foreseen but not intended; dysthanasia is morally problematic because it disregards proportionality and the holistic good of the person. This moral framework demonstrates that Catholic teaching is neither rigid nor indifferent to suffering but carefully ordered towards protecting life while acknowledging human finitude. True human dignity is upheld not by controlling the moment of death nor by indefinitely delaying it, but by accompanying the person with care, truth, and hope.

Taken together, the evaluation of euthanasia, orthothanasia, and dysthanasia reveals the coherence and moral realism of the Church's interpretation of Exodus 20:13. The commandment does not merely prohibit murder (willful or intentional killing); it positively calls for reverence toward life, compassionate care for the suffering, and humble acceptance of death within God's providence. Euthanasia is rejected because it destroys life; dysthanasia is corrected because it distorts life; orthothanasia is permitted because it respects

life without idolizing it. This integrated moral vision affirms that authentic human flourishing at the end of life is found not in mastery over death, but in faithful stewardship, loving accompaniment, and trust in God, who alone is Lord of life and death.

1.7 Conclusion

Exodus 20:13, “You shall not murder,” remains the foundational moral norm guiding the Catholic Church’s evaluation of end-of-life issues, affirming the sacredness and inviolability of human life as a gift from God. Grounded in the belief that God alone is Lord of life and death, this commandment excludes any action or omission that directly and intentionally causes the death of an innocent person. The verb *rāṣaḥ*, is translated as murder and critically, it conveys the true moral perspective that the commandment intends to achieve. That is, while killing could be intentional or unintentional, murder is necessarily intentional or premeditated. Consequently, euthanasia is morally impermissible, regardless of motive or circumstance, since it treats death as a solution to suffering and undermines the inherent dignity of the human person. That is, life is intentionally terminated.

At the same time, Catholic moral teaching maintains a balanced and humane approach by distinguishing euthanasia from orthothanasia and dysthanasia. Orthothanasia is morally permissible because it accepts natural death by forgoing disproportionate or futile medical interventions without intending death. That is, one’s actions are guided by the moral dimensions proposed by Exodus 20:13. Human life is created by God and as such, no actions must undermine the value of life. Lastly, dysthanasia is rejected for unreasonably prolonging the dying process and neglecting the holistic good of the person. Together, these distinctions reveal that authentic respect for life is neither the mastery of death nor the endless extension of biological existence, but compassionate accompaniment, prudent medical care, and hopeful trust in God’s promise of eternal life. Exodus 20:13 underscores the value of human life while at the same time proscribing any and all actions that can undermine the value of human life

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