

ITALIAN DEBATE ON END-OF-LIFE DECISIONS

Minister Giovanardi's "personal remarks" and the Italian debate on end-of-life decisions

The recent statements regarding child euthanasia in the Netherlands by the Italian minister Giovanardi can not be simply considered as regrettable and glaring, unfortunately; they rather should be considered as true opinions of a "second rate" politician who wishes, under election, to catch the attention and consensuses of the conservative grassroots.

The shadow of the "Nazi eugenics" has been frequently evoked in Italy over the last year. It happened when the Terry Schiavo's affair turned on the debate about withdrawing artificial hydration and nutrition for patients in a permanent vegetative state. It also happened in occasion of the referendum on the Italian assisted reproduction act, to contrast the claim for the abrogation of the article that bans the pre-implant embryo diagnosis of genetic disorders.

This occurs in a period of the Italian political and cultural life characterized by a reactionary dominant trend together with a strong interference by the high hierarchies of the Catholic Church. This situation takes a chance on reaffirming an extreme "vitalism", which compromises both the respect of the individuals' autonomy, and the realization, in the perspective of an ethics of responsibility, of the individuals' (children and newborns in particular, who are unable to express their wishes) best interest.

However, Italian bioethics is far from being identified or from having its most remarkable part in this dominant trend. It can count on a significant number of lay representatives who are, both individually and within institutional organisms such as ethical committees, committed to counteract the current trend; to do that they are willing to foster open debates on the thorniest topics such as child euthanasia. Obviously we do not underestimate any difficulties, since battles (such as the battle for the legal right of competent individuals to refuse life sustaining treatments, and to draw up living wills) that were already successful in other European countries cannot yet be considered won in Italy. The next months will be decisive and the new political context, which will be established in the country after the elections, will not be irrelevant.

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