

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

Dear Parishioners,

This month of All Saints and All Souls is a good time to consider the reality of our own passing from this world. The subject of death, specifically *my death*, is not something most of us are comfortable thinking about. However, we shouldn't let our fear of the unknown, that is, the exact nature of what our life in the next world will be like; overcome our faith in the promises of Jesus Christ who has revealed that our life in heaven will be glorious beyond our imagining. We also shouldn't let our nervousness about death prevent us from facing some of the practical realities of our passing. In my columns this month I want to address some of these important issues. The moral issues which are related to end of life decisions are treated very thoroughly in the document "Comfort and Consolation" which was published by the Catholic Bishops of Maryland. This booklet helps Catholics think through the often difficult questions that arise in times of grave illness and impending death. This document was developed in light of Catholic teachings and in accord with Maryland law on advance directives. "Comfort & Consolation" also includes a practical four-page form, the *Catholic Declaration on Health Care Decision Making* that Catholics can use to tell health care providers how they wish to direct their care. It covers spiritual support, nutrition and hydration, pain-relieving medication, terminal illness and pregnancy. Free copies of this document can be downloaded from the bishops' website at www.mdccathcon.org. If you would like a copy but do not use the internet let me know and I will get you one.

When it comes to prolonging life when is enough enough? This is a question that many people find themselves asking as a result of the advances in medical science in recent decades. Many are confused as to just how far should we go and must we go in preserving life. There are two fundamental teachings of our Catholic Faith that can help us answer these questions. First of all, we believe that God is the giver of all life and that each human life is sacred from the moment of conception until the moment of natural death. Therefore, no one has the right to take an innocent human life for any reason. Secondly, we believe in the promise of Jesus that each of us has been called to eternal life. Therefore, death is not the worst thing that can happen to us because, as St. Paul says, not even death can separate us from the love of Christ.

Bearing these two truths in mind, the Church teaches that we are not obligated to use every possible means to prolong our lives or the lives of our loved ones. In short, we are not obligated to use "extra-ordinary means" to prolong life. There can be situations when truly "enough is enough" and we must entrust ourselves or our loved ones to the Lord and His promise of eternal life. Practically speaking, this means we can decline complicated surgeries, chemotherapy, radiation and other such treatments when they offer no real hope of reversing a terminal condition. It also means that we are not obligated to stay on life support machines when there is little possibility that we will recover from whatever it is that is preventing our hearts or lungs from functioning on their own.

"For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink..." (Mt 25:35) However, refusing nutrition and hydration for ourselves or someone else under our care is not morally permissible. Why? Because providing food and water are normal forms of care, not extraordinary forms of treatment.

Now there can be situations when death appears imminent when the administration of artificial nutrition and hydration becomes pointless because the person's body can no longer assimilate them and it causes them discomfort. The question to be asked in these situations is "What is the person going to die from?" If the person is going to die from a lack of water then it is not permissible to stop giving them hydration. However, if they're going to die from the underlying condition before they become dehydrated, there's no need to prolong food or water.

The obligation to provide nutrition and hydration always applies when the person is not in danger of imminent death, even when they are mentally impaired. People who are mentally impaired are still human beings with a God-given right to life that no one has the right to take from them. This was the tragedy involved in the Terri

Schiavo case in 2005. Although impaired by a heart attack and severely disabled for a long time, Terri wasn't dying. That is, not until court officials allowed her husband and the hospital to stop feeding her and giving her water. After two weeks of being deprived of these most basic forms of care Terri Schiavo died. Actually, she didn't die. She was killed.

Apart from the immorality of deliberately depriving another human being the most basic forms of care, food and water, we should also be horrified at the cruelty of it. While there are plenty of experts who will say that a person in such a state doesn't feel any pain, how do they know that? Again, apart from the immorality of it, I can't imagine subjecting another person let alone a loved one to such an ordeal if there was the remotest possibility that they could feel the pain involved in death by dehydration & starvation. Family members don't do to each other, no matter how disabled a person may be.

“I was ill and you cared for Me...” (Mt 25:36) In recent years “living wills” have become very popular as people think these documents will protect their loved ones from having to make difficult end of life decisions on their behalf. However, living wills, also known as “advanced medical directives,” are clumsy instruments because no one can know ahead of time the situation they may be in. A much better approach is to ask a relative or trusted friend who knows your convictions to act as your “health care proxy.” This person is given “legal power of attorney” to make health care decisions on your behalf if you should become incompetent to do so yourself. Obviously this is a tremendous responsibility, but the Lord does call us to care for those who are ill and this is an important way to do that. Spouses are normally entitled and expected to fulfill this role. In other situations it would be good to consult an attorney as to what you need to do in order to make some one your “health care proxy.” *Next week-“It's your funeral so why don't you plan it?”*

With my prayers,

Fr. Conley