



Columbia St. Mary's
A Passion for Patient Care

Now and at the Hour of Our Death

A Pastoral Letter from the Roman
Catholic Bishops of Wisconsin on
End of Life Decisions



Outline

- Invitation from the Bishops
- Signs of the Times
- The Church's Teaching
- Spiritual Needs and the Support of a Loving Community of Faith
- Vital Conversations: Making Decisions and Communicating Your Wishes
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Invitation from the Bishops

- We share a common belief that ultimately we shall all be together, united with the Lord Jesus
- The reality is that medical technology will be a part of our dying process
 - Difficult decisions
 - Importance of discussion with loved ones
- Intention of pastoral letter is to bring comfort and guidance which comes from our belief in Christ as the resurrection and the life



Signs of the Times

- Medical care is blessed with advances in science and technology
 - Technology may alleviate suffering from illness
 - Technology may also present agonizing questions regarding use of such technology in order to sustain human life
- Because disease is a part of the human condition, we are all likely to face these difficult decisions regarding treatment and care at the end of life



Signs of the Times

- Facing the reality of death, may lead some to express support for *euthanasia* or *assisted suicide*
- Such expressions represent a false understanding of the gift of life and personal freedom
- Church teaches life is:
 - A gift from God;
 - We are stewards of that gift, *not* masters



The Church's Teaching

- Our Tradition is steeped in Sacred Scripture, which proclaims its belief in the sacred continuum of life:
 - Life is sacred;
 - Life is social;
 - Life is eternal.
- Death is a natural part of this continuum.
- Death can be a time transformed by the “touch of God” as an individual enters final union with his or her Creator.



The Church's Teaching

- Life is Sacred
 - Gospel of Life, Pope John Paul II reaffirms fundamental principle that each human being has unique sacredness, worth and dignity
 - Created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27)
 - Life is a gift from God
 - As recipients of this gift, we are entrusted with the responsibility to serve as stewards of our own lives and protect human life at all stages



The Church's Teaching

- Life is Social
 - St. Paul's reminder that we are the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27)
 - Human life is interconnected
 - Called on to carry on a stewardship of not only our own lives but the lives of those around us
 - The care we give to the dying is a profound way of reaffirming our belief in the dignity of the life of one who is suffering



The Church's Teaching

- Life is Eternal
 - Human life, given by God, has an eternal destiny
 - With a firm faith in the resurrection, each of us faces the reality of death as part of life
 - Death is transformed into the preface of our eternal life “in my Father’s house...[where] I will come again and take you to myself that where I am, there you may be also.”

(John 14:2-4)



Moral Decision-Making at the End of Life

- Pope Pius XII, 1957 stated that:
 - “...normally one is held to use only ordinary means according to circumstances of persons, places, times, and culture--that is to say, means that do not involve any grave burden for oneself or another.”

Pope Pius XII, “The Prolongation of Life” (Nov. 24, 1957),
The Pope Speaks 4, no. 4, 1958 pp. 395-396.

- What does this mean for persons’ facing death?



Moral Decision-Making at the End of Life

- The Catholic Church has never taught that the faithful are obliged to use all available means to sustain life
- A more strict obligation would be too burdensome for most people and would render the attainment of the higher, more important good too difficult
- Life, health, and all temporal activities are subordinated to spiritual ends



Moral Decision-Making at the End of Life

- *Withholding* and *Withdrawing* life sustaining measures:
 - When a means of life support is removed because it has been judged not to be of benefit to the patient or the burden is too disproportionate
 - The removal of that technology represents removal of an obstacle that was placed to prevent the natural consequences of the pathology
 - In such cases *withholding* or *withdrawing* of life sustaining treatment may be morally appropriate



Moral Decision-Making at the End of Life

- *Artificial Nutrition and Hydration:*
 - The question one must ask is, “Am I bringing about the death or allowing death to occur naturally because continuing therapy is not beneficial for the patient?”
 - Assessment should be carried out on a case-by-case basis
 - A presumption in favor only where there is sufficient benefit to outweigh the burdens involved to the patient.



Moral Decision-Making at the End of Life

- Pain Management:
 - Measures aimed at pain management should always be used
 - Patients should be kept as free of pain as possible so that they may die comfortably and with dignity, and in the place where they wish to die
- Such medicine should be given even if this therapy may indirectly shorten the person's life so long as the intent is not to hasten death

Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services, no. 61

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The Church's Teaching

- Redemptive Suffering
 - Suffering in the midst of knowing the Lord loves us, embraces us, and never abandons us
 - Cardinal Joseph Bernadin in his book, The Gift of Peace, observes, “Notice that Jesus did not promise to take away our burdens. He promised to help carry them.”
 - Suffering is not always physical
 - The suffering of those who feel alone or unloved may well be greater than any physical pain they experience



Spiritual Needs and Support

- Moral questions on end-of-life decision-making ought not overshadow importance of providing spiritual support to the dying person
 - A great test of one's faith may be their own mortality
 - Serious illness may challenge one's own sense of belonging to community



Spiritual Needs and Support

- Prayer
 - Aids one in feeling connected to our Creator
 - Reminds person suffering from illness of the Lord's attention to the spiritual welfare of the sick
 - Reassurance that illness is not punishment inflicted for sin
- Sacraments
 - Providing space for receiving the Sacraments gives communal support to persons who may feel alone
 - Provides forum to ask and receive forgiveness from God and reconciliation with Christian community and Creator



Making Decisions and Communicating Your Wishes

- Difficulty in discussing death must not preclude families from having these vitally important conversations.
- Having these conversations may relieve suffering associated with the even more painful situation where a family member does not know your wishes concerning end-of-life care.



Making Decisions and Communicating Your Wishes

- These conversations ought to include:
 - Personal Reflection and Prayer
 - Talking with your Physician
 - Pastoral Conversations and Support
 - Conversations with Family and Friends
- It is important not only to have good clinical information, but sound moral guidance in your end-of-life care planning



Advance Care Planning

- Engaging the reality of death affords time to reflect on the necessary questions that might include, but not limited to, your preference regarding:
 - The use of various life support measures such as ventilators and feeding tubes;
 - The place where you will spend your final days and hours;
 - The use of CPR should your heart stop;
 - Organ donation.
- It is important to ensure that your wishes are respected when you are unable to communicate for yourself



Advance Care Planning

- Advance Directives
 - *Power of Attorney for Health Care*: a legal document which allows you to appoint someone as your health care agent with the legal right to make health care decisions
 - *Living Will*: a legal document which allows you to make treatment choices if you were declared by a physician to have a terminal condition and were unable to make your wishes known to the health care team
- Assumption with either document is that you have spoken with family, loved ones, physicians, and other appropriate persons regarding your concerns and wishes.



Conclusions

- The pastoral letter is offered as education on the teaching of the Church on end-of-life care
- The pastoral letter encourages us to continue, in our local ministries, a commitment to caring for the well-being of all persons in order that they may feel the loving presence of the faith community
- Death comes to us all. As a people of God, we face it strengthened by our faith in Christ and His resurrection...

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