

Health Care Concerns at the End of Life

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Addressing health care concerns at the end of life...

“To live in a manner worthy of our human dignity and to spend our final days on this earth in peace and comfort, surrounded by loved ones -- that is the hope of each of us. In particular, Christian hope sees these final days as a time to prepare for our eternal destiny.” (To Live Each Day with Dignity, USCCB, 2011.)

The impending death of a loved one, or even our own death, can raise questions and concerns that can become complicated by modern technology in ways that were not thought of even a hundred years ago. Medical means are now available that can prolong life, sometimes beyond what is reasonable, and those that can destroy life when death does not come “soon enough.”

Oftentimes at the onset of receiving health care services persons are asked if they have a “living will.” This form of documentation allows a person to state *only* their health care wishes. A popular form of a living will is the *Five Wishes* document. Another type of living will document is *POLST* (physician orders for life sustaining treatment). Use of either document by the faithful should cause concern because of their potential to violate Catholic ethical health care principles.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church in paragraphs 2276-2279 sets forth principles by which a person can make moral decisions about treatments or procedures that may benefit them in preserving their life. These principles have been summarized in a document prepared by the North Dakota Catholic Conference (NDCC) as part of a Catholic Health Care Directive:



As a Catholic, I believe that God created me for eternal life in union with Him. I understand that my life is a precious gift from God and that this truth should inform all decisions with regards to my health care. I have a

duty to preserve my life and to use it for God's glory. Suicide, euthanasia, and acts that intentionally and directly would cause my death by deed or omission, are never morally acceptable. However, I also know that death, being conquered by Christ, need not be resisted by any and every means and that I may refuse any medical treatment that is excessively burdensome or would only prolong my imminent death.

➤ Medical treatments may be foregone or withdrawn if they do not offer a reasonable hope of benefit to me or are excessively burdensome. There should be a presumption in favor of providing me with nutrition and hydration, including medically assisted nutrition and hydration if they are of benefit to me.

➤ In accord with the teaching of my Church, I have no moral objection to the use of medication or procedures necessary for my comfort even if they may indirectly and unintentionally shorten my life.

➤ If my death is imminent, I [can] direct that there be foregone or withdrawn treatment that will only maintain a precarious and burdensome prolongation of my life, unless those responsible for my care judge at the time that there are special and significant reasons why I should continue to receive such treatment.

➤ If I fall terminally ill, I [can] ask that I be told of this so that I might prepare myself for death, and ask that efforts be made that I be attended by a Catholic priest and receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation, Anointing and Eucharist as viaticum.

A health care directive can help make sure that your healthcare wishes are followed when you cannot speak for yourself. It gives guidance to family and friends during what may be a difficult time. The NDCC has published a Catholic Health Care Directive that meets North Dakota law, reflects Catholic teaching, and incorporates the advice of health care providers, ethicists, lawyers, chaplains, and experienced laypersons. It can be downloaded from the NDCC website: www.ndcatholic.org/CHD08/resources/index.html

Resources to help individuals and families make good health care decisions:

Your parish priest can provide pastoral care for those facing challenging decisions regarding treatments for disease or at the end of life.

The USCCB website offers an array of resources on Catholic teaching for end of life issues: www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/assisted-suicide/to-live-each-day/

Friends of St. John the Caregiver is an international Catholic organization addressing the growing needs of family caregivers. It provides helpful resources and prayer support. Visit: www.fsjc.org/