

Death and Dying in Florida and Rome

By Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes

Before our Holy Father experienced his dramatic decline in his physical health and then died, the plight and death of Terri Schiavo dominated the news last week. The decisions surrounding the last weeks for Terri Schiavo and for Pope John Paul II provide a stark contrast and call for some reflective teaching.

The first fundamental truth for us to recall is that human life is sacred. We have an obligation to sustain that God-given gift and to oppose unequivocally its *intentional* termination. Anyone who claims that those who are seriously ill have a “right to die” by causing or seeking their own deaths are in grave error and are acting contrary to the law of God: “Thou shalt not kill.”

However, it is in keeping with the Church’s Gospel teaching to accept the natural journey toward death and to refuse extraordinary or disproportionate means to maintain life. We are then yielding to God’s providential plan. No one is obliged to preserve life in this world in all circumstances through *extraordinary* means.

It may be helpful to reiterate a clarification which the bishops of Louisiana offered in a 1995 statement: “If steps taken to preserve life are genuinely beneficial and do not involve severe pain, excessive costs or severely disabling effects, they are ‘*ethically ordinary means*’ and must be taken. On the other hand, ‘*ethically extraordinary means*’ – or ‘*disproportionate means*’ – are those which are useless or which become useless during the course of treatment or which are disproportionately burdensome in that their burden outweighs whatever benefit they provide. Persons are not obliged to use ‘*ethically extraordinary*’ or disproportionately burdensome means but they may, at their option, request them. Their refusal to do so is not the same as suicide.”

Please note that nutrition and hydration administered orally, through a peripheral vein, a nasogastric tube or stomach tube should normally be considered care rather than treatment.

With this teaching in mind let us first turn to the sad Terri Schiavo drama. Terri Schiavo was not in the process of dying before her feeding tube was removed. Moreover, the use of the term ‘vegetative state’ was terribly misleading. She was living in a subconscious state, the precise nature of which was medically uncertain. She was not a *vegetable*! The physical care that was being provided to her was basically nutritional and hydrational. Hence, the moral presumption should have been to continue to provide that human support unless the burdens outweighed the benefits to her.

Our Holy Father witnessed the dignity of life to the very end. He courageously accepted ordinary means of medical treatment. He continued in his latter years to give powerful witness to the capacity of a human person both to suffer in union with Christ and to carry on his mission in a profoundly spiritual way. He also decided not to choose the

extraordinary measures of returning to the hospital as his life began to wane so that he could experience more easily the human and spiritual support of his home environment. When called for, he accepted a tracheotomy to facilitate breathing and a nasogastric tube to provide nutrition and hydration. As those closest to him reported, he continued to make a self-gift to the end with prayerful reverence and serenity.

May I be permitted one final reflection? Many Americans experienced a revulsion over the last-minute intrusion of government into the plight of Terri Schiavo. The drama culminated in a struggle between three branches of government. This underscored a serious issue that we still need to address with wisdom and courage. It is the role of the legislative branch, not ordinarily to enter into individual life-and-death decisions, but to develop a responsible public policy which provided for a presumption in favor of life and makes the proper distinctions between providing extraordinary/ordinary medical care and offering nutrition and hydration. It is the role of the judiciary to respect the development of responsible public policy and be restrained in deciding what is truly rooted in the Constitution or what is not. The Administrative branch can propose legislation, but then respects the roles of the other two branches of government.

God grant us the grace to learn from the tragic death of Terri Schiavo and the remarkable witness unto death of Pope John Paul II to develop a vision for our own lives and a responsible public policy in our state and country.

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