Now and at the Hour of Our Death

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

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• Spiritual Needs and the Support of a Loving Community of Faith
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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.”


- 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 import 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

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

  - 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*
The Church’s Teaching

• Redemptive Suffering
  – Suffering in the midst of knowing the Lord loves us, embraces us, and never abandons us
  – 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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