



BECAUSE WE ARE CATHOLIC

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN CALIFORNIA SERVES AND ADVOCATES FOR THE POOR, VULNERABLE AND THOSE IN NEED NOT BECAUSE THEY ARE CATHOLIC, BUT *because we are Catholic.*



“WISDOM OF THE HEART MEANS BEING WITH OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS. TIME SPENT WITH THE SICK IS HOLY TIME. IT IS A WAY OF PRAISING GOD WHO CONFORMS US TO THE IMAGE OF HIS SON, WHO ‘CAME NOT TO BE SERVED BUT TO SERVE, AND TO GIVE HIS LIFE AS A RANSOM FOR MANY’.”

– Pope Francis

Year of Mercy - End-of-Life Conversations and Visiting the Sick

A controversial law – opposed by both political parties – went into effect last week. Instead of devising compassionate, informed and dignified end-of-life treatment, patients can now ask their physicians to prescribe a lethal dose of drugs instead.

Doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals and organizations – recognizing the fundamental shift in patient care this law entails – have announced they will not participate. Instead, they are recommitting to better end-of-life care, better education for patients and families, and a better overall approach to treatment at the end of life.

Many people are reluctant to talk about death, fearing that talking about death will somehow make it happen. It’s awkward and not something people like to talk about.

But we should.

Sister Suzanne Krawczyk, RSM, RN, CHPN, and Director of Palliative Care Services for Dignity Health St. John’s Hospitals, is often with families at the end and she implores people to start these conversations early.

“It is important for patients to realize,” says Sr. Krawczyk, “that a time will come when the burdens outweigh the benefits. We need to know their plan so we can address their fears and honor their wishes.”



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Catholic teaching doesn't require prolonging life at all costs. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is clear: "Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate; it is the refusal of 'over-zealous' treatment. Here one does not will to cause death; one's inability to impede it is merely accepted." [2278]

Having the difficult conversations ahead of time will relieve unnecessary anxiety and educate the patient and the family about the process of dying and the alternatives that alleviate suffering, such as palliative care.

Michele, from a Northern California parish, felt overwhelmed earlier this year when taking care of her mother. Although her mother was able to verbalize what she wanted, "It was still hard to believe that I had to take her home and let her die. Part of me wanted her to fight more."

Struggling with her conscience, Michele sought advice from doctors, nurses and her parish priest. For some, just hearing that not every treatment, or every alternative to prolonging life must be undertaken, is a comfort.

"It was incredibly scary to realize that death was imminent, but talking this over with my priest provided me with peace and allowed me to do what my mom wanted," said Michele.

Having family and friends surrounding a loved one as they make their final journey is the ideal, but Sr. Suzanne and others at St. John's saw a need for those that were making this journey on their own.

Without family or friends, many people die alone in hospitals all over the country. Programs exist for volunteers to come and be with those people in their final hours. The By Your Side at St. John's and the No One Dies Alone programs elsewhere, train volunteers to sit with those that are dying if family is not able to be present.

Sometimes they just provide a few moments of respite for the family.

Gale from Padre Serra Parish in Camarillo became involved with the program when she retired. She was trained by Camarillo Hospice and provides a compassionate presence to patients at St. Johns.

"I play soft music, hold their hand and make them comfortable. It's not much but I feel strongly that no one should be alone during this time and it is an honor to be with them," said Gale.

Pope Francis challenges us to accompany others in their time of need. "Wisdom of the heart means being with our brothers and sisters. Time spent with the sick is holy time. It is a way of praising God who conforms us to the image of his Son, who "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mt 20:28) Jesus himself said: "I am among you as one who serves." (Lk 22:27)

In this year of Mercy, this corporal work of mercy – visiting the sick – is more meaningful now when Californians will be making drastic decisions at the end of their lives. By being with them throughout the entire process and listening to their wishes, it can relieve their stress of feeling burdensome to their family. This act of mercy can truly be beneficial to all.

For more information, go to:

catholic.org

<http://www.catholic.org/embracing-our-dying>

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/end-of-life/euthanasia/index.cfm>

For additional information on the By Your Side program, please contact Laurie Davis at 805.389.6870 Ext. 12