

A Catholic Perspective on Approaching the End of Life

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Yes, we will all die. Many of us will suffer for a time before that moment comes. As Catholics, the moment of death is a sacred one; the way in which we and those we care for live out the time until that moment is of spiritual significance.

As disciples of Christ we hand our lives over to Him. To live a life as a Christian means to continually seek His will and do it. We know from Christ's example that suffering will be involved. Much suffering comes about because of our own sins; other suffering is necessary to bring about greater good. If we believe the Father is all-knowing and all-powerful, and that Jesus Christ came to save us with His great love and mercy for each of us, then we trust that God's will for our lives is borne out of that love and mercy, knowledge and power. Our lives, our sufferings, have a greater purpose.

For many, that suffering will entail a prolonged and debilitating illness. Do we have trouble looking upon the infirm? Are we made uncomfortable by the physically or mentally disabled? Does a lack of human beauty repulse us? Do we think, "I don't want to live like that?" Can we not see with the eyes of Christ with deep love and concern for every one of these? Do we not trust Christ enough to know that should we come to suffer in these same ways that some greater good is being done in us?

If we believe and if we trust then we will live in a way that reflects those beliefs as our infirmities and sicknesses draw us closer to the moment of death. For us to decide when that moment of death will come by an act of suicide because we cannot bear the suffering is spiritually devastating. We have made it harder for the Father's will, which desires the most good to be done.

Just as the mystery of suffering is central to our faith so too is the act of caring for others. Suffering with sickness inevitably means being cared for not only by our families but also by the medical community. Human Life in and of itself has dignity by virtue of its eternal soul and being made in the image and likeness of God. No frailty is undignified, no life without meaning. Every beneficial medical treatment should be offered to every patient and accepted by every Catholic. This does not mean every treatment under every circumstance, not at all. And therein lies the problem with advance directives: every situation is different, so we cannot refuse ahead of time treatments such as ventilation, dialysis, antibiotics, or chemotherapy. We want them if they are beneficial yet we refuse them if they do little to prolong our lives or ease our suffering.

If we value Life as Christ does, we cannot say, "Well, if I am like *that* then I don't want to live." What does that say to the physically or mentally disabled? What does that say to those who lack human beauty? What sort of world are we creating in which every life is not loved? And who will be the one in charge of deciding which lives are worth living and which lives should be terminated? It starts out as the individual but, as we've seen in Europe, that soon becomes doctors, ethicists, insurance companies, and government panels.

As Catholics, let us live, die, suffer, and care for one another as Our Lord Jesus Christ did for us.