

“Three Beliefs” About End-of-Life Care

Bishop Robert P. Deeley Reflects on the Threat of Physician-Assisted Suicide April 2017

In the midst of the joy of Easter, we celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus which the Catechism tells us is the “the crowning truth of our faith in Christ” (#638). It is indeed true and a cause for joy. Jesus’ death on Good Friday is answered by our loving Father in His resurrection at Easter. And in Jesus’ resurrection is our promise of eternal life. Death, for us, is not the end; it is the pathway to eternal life. Death is inevitable for all of us, but as believers, we are consoled by the promise Jesus gives us of immortality. “Indeed for your faithful, Lord, life is changed not ended, and when this earthly dwelling turns to dust, an eternal dwelling is made ready for them in heaven” (Preface of the Funeral Mass).

This past January, on the feast of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, I promulgated a guide for Maine Catholics on end-of-life care entitled “Three Beliefs.” It offers helpful assistance and guidance to Catholics on this difficult subject. As the document teaches, there are three basic Catholic beliefs that are the foundation for making those determinations which confront us when we deal with end-of-life care.

The first belief is that each one of us has been created in the image and likeness of God. Being created by God gives each human being a priceless dignity, value, and purpose in life. This is why we are called to respect and protect human life and to be good stewards of this gift for ourselves. While it is entrusted to us, we are called to care for it, preserve it, and use it for the glory of God.

The second belief is that stewardship of life should avoid the opposite extremes of the deliberate hastening of death and the overzealous use of treatment or care to extend life artificially and prolong the dying process. All those who are sick have the right to expect, accept, and be provided with appropriate food, water, pain control, bed rest, suitable room temperature, personal hygiene measures, and comfort care. These are not medical treatments but the basic care that is owed by one human being to another.

The third belief is that for the Christian, illness and death, with the suffering that so often accompanies them, become a way of being deeply united with the death and resurrection of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. Even though palliative care offers us significant ways to alleviate pain, confronting our own mortality in death brings its own difficulties.

My hope is that all Catholics, not just the elderly and the infirm, will take the time to read “Three Beliefs” carefully and prayerfully and then use the Advanced Health Care Directive form to memorialize your wishes. Fill out the form in conversation with

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family members or friends who would be affected and/or authorized to make decisions on your behalf. Oftentimes, simply having the discussion ahead of time can avoid difficult and often painful deliberations by next of kin. Your own expressed wishes will be able to guide their decisions. The document can be found at www.portlanddiocese.org/ThreeBeliefs as well as by calling your local parish for copies.

As we engage this discussion, I think it is also important to tell you that this spring, the Maine State Legislature will decide whether or not to legalize physician-assisted suicide in our state. It is the seventh legislative attempt to normalize and legalize a practice which would have long-term devastating effects on the common good. Suicide should always be seen as a tragedy. Allowing doctors to prescribe deadly prescriptions to hasten a person's death would be a horrendous wound to the dignity of the human person. The unintended consequences would include the elderly feeling undue pressure to view this as an option to prevent being a burden to others, a desensitization of the value of human life, as well as teaching young adults that people can be disposable. All people should have palliative and hospice care available to them when it is needed so that everyone can truly die "with dignity."

As the U.S. Bishops wrote in "To Live Each Day with Dignity," "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."

I ask all Catholics to pray for their legislators and reach out to them to express constituent opposition to this bill. Communication from constituents via letter or phone call can be very effective. You can find your legislators' contact info through the Diocese's Office of Public Policy website: www.faithfulcitizenme.org.

Let us all pray for an increase in the appreciation of the value and dignity of human life from conception to natural death.