

Whose Life Is It Anyway: Thoughts on Physician Assisted Suicide

By Sister Constance Veit, I.S.P.



In college I wrote a medical ethics paper on a play entitled *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* That old paper came to mind recently when I learned that the campaign for physician assisted suicide has been gaining momentum. The renewed push to legalize “aid in dying,” or “death with dignity,” as various groups euphemistically call it, is the result of positive media coverage in the wake of a young terminally ill woman’s decision to end her life on her own terms and at the precise moment of her choosing.

Whose life is it anyway? I can’t get this question out of my mind as I come to grips with the fact that assisted suicide legislation is currently being introduced in a dozen states and the District of Columbia. While some persons faced with serious illness consider taking their lives because they fear they will be a burden to others or have no one to care for them, for others this choice is a declaration of personal autonomy. To the question, “Whose life is it anyway?” they answer, “It is mine to do with what I want.”

The claim that each of us is master of our own life, with the power to do with it whatever we choose, just doesn’t make sense. After all, which of us chose the date, time or conditions of our birth? Who of us ultimately gets to choose the path that will lead to our death — will it be an accident, a random act of violence, a sudden heart attack or a prolonged illness? Human logic would tell us that we are never completely in control of our lives. God’s word should convince us of this as well.

Sacred Scripture reminds us that we are God’s creatures — made in his image and likeness — and that our lives are in his hands at every moment. From the psalmist’s confession that “every one of my days was decreed before one of them came into being” (Ps 139:16), to Saint Paul’s proclamation that “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28), it is clear that God is the author of our existence. Each of us is a steward — not the master — of our own life.

But God is a loving master, and that makes all the difference. In his landmark encyclical, *The Gospel of Life*, Saint John Paul II wrote, “If it is true that human life is in the hands of God, it is no less true that these are loving hands, like those of a mother who accepts, nurtures and takes care of her child.” Pope Francis shared similar sentiments in his 2015 Lenten message: God “is not aloof from us. Each one of us has a place in his heart. He knows us by name, he cares for us and he seeks us out whenever we turn away from him.”

In our sophisticated, materialistic society we easily turn away from God, denying him and his providence over us. Modern man, Saint John Paul II wrote, has “lost the sense of God,” and with it, the sense of the human person and his dignity as “mysteriously different” from the rest of

creation. In this context we can easily succumb to the temptation to manipulate and dominate our lives rather than cherishing them as a gift. Suffering is seen as a useless burden to be eliminated at all cost, even if this means suppressing life itself.

There is another path, however. Even as the media focused their attention on a dying woman from California late last year, a similarly ill college freshman in Ohio vowed never to give up. Despite the seeming hopelessness of her situation, she professed her belief that God has the last say. This young woman has found a purpose in her suffering and insists that she still loves life. She keeps on giving of herself and is an inspiration to many.

I pray for this young woman and for all the elderly, disabled and those with terminal illnesses, that they may find peace and courage in the conviction that God knows them by name and holds them close to his heart. Strengthened by the sacraments and assisted by Our Lady and all the angels and saints, may they serenely abandon their lives into his hands.

Whose life is it anyway? God has given us this life as a gift and he expects us to cherish it as his good stewards.

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