

JULY 11, 2010

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

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FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

Dear Parishioners,

Our class "What We Believe and Why" which concludes this week continues to generate some good questions and discussions about our Faith. In our last session we began to consider what it means to live as a follower of Christ. As Jesus tells us in our Gospel reading for this Sunday, if we want to be His followers and have eternal life, we must love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and love our neighbors as we love ourselves. These are the two great commandments of love and if we rely on God's grace and strive to keep them, we truly become followers of Christ. Thus, catholic moral teaching is not about following a bunch of rules. It's about following a person.

It's about following Jesus Christ and doing our best to imitate Him. Catholic morality is about doing what Jesus would do in all of our thoughts, words and actions.

To aid us in knowing what the Lord wants us to do He has given every human person a conscience. Conscience is the ability we have to recognize the judgment of reason whereby we recognize the goodness or evil of a particular thought word or action. While God gives each of us a conscience he also expects us to form our consciences. For the followers of Jesus Christ the way we form our consciences is by learning what both the Bible and the teachings of the Church have to say about what is right and what is wrong. It is our faith as Catholics that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and that the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit continues to faithfully teach in the name of Jesus. Therefore, when the Bible and the Church teach that certain ways of living or behaving are wrong then it is our duty to accept this teaching and act accordingly.

As I mentioned in this column last week, as Catholics we regard the teachings of Jesus Christ as valid or the "norm" for all people at all times.

In one of the sessions I mentioned that if we take our faith seriously we are going to know what is right and wrong in just about every situation. However, there is one area that seems to confuse even faithful Catholics these days and that is end of life issues. You may recall that I wrote about this in a column last November. Since it is such an important issue, I'm reprinting some of that column here.

When it comes to prolonging life when is enough enough? This is a question that many people find themselves asking as a result of the advances in medical science in recent decades. Many are confused as to just how far we must go in preserving life. There are two fundamental teachings of our Catholic Faith that can help us answer these questions. First of all, we believe that God

is the giver of all life and that each human life is sacred from the moment of conception until the moment of natural death. Therefore, no one has the right to take an innocent human life for any reason. Secondly, we believe in the promise of Jesus that each of us has been called to eternal life. Therefore, death is not the worst thing that can happen to us because, as St. Paul says, not even death can separate us from the love of Christ.

Bearing these two truths in mind, the Church teaches that we are not obligated to use every possible means to prolong our lives or the lives of our loved ones. In short, we are not obligated to use "extra-ordinary means" to prolong life. There can be situations when truly "enough is enough" and we must entrust ourselves or our loved ones to the Lord and His promise of eternal life. Practically speaking, this means we can decline complicated surgeries, chemotherapy, radiation and other such treatments when they offer no real hope of reversing a terminal condition. It also means that we are not obligated to stay on life support machines when there is little possibility that we will recover from whatever it is that is preventing our hearts or lungs from functioning on their own.

"For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink..." (Mt 25:35) However, refusing nutrition and hydration for ourselves or someone else under our care is not morally permissible. Why? Because providing food and water are normal forms of care not extraordinary forms of treatment. Now there can be situations when death appears imminent when the administration of artificial nutrition and hydration becomes pointless because the person's body can no longer assimilate them and it causes them discomfort. The question to be asked in these situations is "What is the person going to die from?" If the person is going to die from a lack of water then it is not permissible to stop giving them hydration. However, if they're going to die from the underlying condition before they become dehydrated, there's no need to prolong food or water...

Apart from the immorality of deliberately depriving another human being the most basic forms of care, food and water, we should also be horrified at the cruelty of it. While there are plenty of experts who will say that a person in such a state doesn't feel any pain, how do they know that? Again, apart from the immorality of it, I can't imagine subjecting another person let alone a loved one to such an ordeal if there was the remotest possibility that they could feel the pain involved in death by dehydration & starvation. Family members don't do to each other no matter how disabled a person may be.

With my prayers,
Fr. Conley

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