

April 2005 Informational

A little perspective on the Church's approach to death/dying (in light of Terry Schaivo):

Natural Death

There is a difference between prolonging life and prolonging death. If a person is dying naturally, there is nothing immoral or unethical about allowing death to occur and not halting or prolonging the natural process of dying. However, Terri Schaivo is not dying. She is living and it is morally wrong to end her life by removing food and water. Pope John Paul II has recently stated that food and water are natural rights. Dying is a natural part of life. The Christian should not fear death for we know there is a greater place waiting for those who know God.

Ordinary vs. Extraordinary Care

The vast majority of Christian medical ethicists view food and water as ordinary care. Even if given by a feeding tube, nutrition and hydration are still ordinary, natural and necessary care needed to sustain any life. Babies are fed in their mother's wombs by "tubes" called umbilical cords. Patients everyday in hospitals are fed from tubes for various periods of time while recovering from injuries to the throat, esophagus or mouth. The presence of these tubes delivering food and water do not make babies or hospital patients less than human. Extraordinary care on the other hand is optional care. Ventilators, pacemakers, dialysis machines or other devices which would keep major organs running artificially are considered extraordinary. These devices could be ethically removed by a patient or by a health care surrogate to allow a person to die naturally. A person at the end of life can refuse extraordinary care and die naturally as a legitimate expression of their confidence in the life to come.