

## Catholic Considerations for Our Earthly Passing

We know earthly death is not the end, but rather the door through which we must pass to gain eternal life. Because of our belief and hope in the Resurrection, we can face death not with fear, but with preparation. Although certainly not comprehensive, the following considerations are provided as starting points for understanding and preparing for this transition, whether it is imminent or not.

### Now and at the Hour of our Death<sup>1</sup>

We prepare for eternal life by choosing to love and follow God now, in our daily lives and decisions. For example, through prayer and regular reception of the sacraments, especially Confession and the Eucharist, we obtain grace to live in ever-deeper communion with God and with one another in lives of faith, charity, and justice.<sup>2</sup> We ask for Our Blessed Mother's help now, and we entrust ourselves to her further as we "surrender 'the hour of our death' wholly to her care."<sup>3</sup>

### Forming Our Consciences

Our journey with Christ naturally includes equipping our consciences to make morally good judgments and acting accordingly.<sup>4</sup> Learning about the dignity of human life and the indispensable respect for it,<sup>5</sup> as well as applicable principles for medical care, is particularly important in preparing for our eventual passing.

Some bishops offer guides applying moral principles to local legal options.<sup>6</sup> Parish and online resources are also widely available for careful and prayerful study, and the *Ethical and Religious Directives* from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops give direction for health care services to those who are seriously ill or dying.<sup>7</sup>

### A Note on General Principles

No summary can substitute for thorough catechesis, but some general principles are clear. We are entrusted by God with the gift of life, and in response, we care for our lives and health in obedience and gratitude to our Creator.

This obliges us to make use of appropriate, effective medical care. However, even effective treatments may at times impose such a great burden that we, in good conscience, may forgo or discontinue them. This applies even to life-sustaining treatments. Of course, nothing should be done or deliberately omitted to hasten death.<sup>8</sup>

The Church affirms the inviolable dignity of every person, regardless of the duration or extent of the person's incapacity or dependency. Nothing diminishes the unchangeable dignity and sanctity of a person's life, or the obligation to protect and care for it. In principle, assisted feeding and hydration should be provided unless it cannot sustain life or is unduly burdensome to the patient, or if death is imminent whether it is provided or not.

Moreover, no one should choose suicide, nor counsel or assist another to take his or her own life.

**Comment [mao1]:** Neither does catechesis fully prepare us for reality. Few principles apply as clearly in reality as they do in theory. What seems so clear when we signed a DNR clause in the kitchen can suddenly be less clear when we've coded in the ER.

**Comment [mao2]:** But sometimes in contrast continued treatment may seem a deliberate lengthening of suffering. There is a lot of gray between the black and white.

**Comment [mao3]:** Is it safe to assume that extending life at all costs is the best or only way to caring for it?

**Comment [mao4]:** Vehemently reminding a suffering person of the evil of suicide is not exactly helpful either. We may not plan on being tactless and insensitive, but when our deep seated beliefs are threatened or challenged we can unconsciously say some pretty thoughtless things.

## Discerning Treatment Options

Judging the effect and burden of treatments can be difficult, especially as death draws near. To understand health facts and treatment options, we need professional medical advice. To understand Catholic moral teaching, we need to consult Church teaching and those who can faithfully explain it.

## Speaking with Loved Ones

After informing our consciences, we need to inform our families. If we are unable to make decisions, they most often have legal authority to make surrogate decisions on our behalf. Or we may designate a health care agent by a durable power of attorney.

Though it is often helpful to also have written, signed documentation, no living will “check box” can ever replace clear conversations about our faith-guided principles. The best option is to choose an agent who will make medical decisions on our behalf in accord with our Catholic faith and Church teaching.

We should also inform family of our pastoral care preferences, and make clear that after death, we desire prayer, funeral rites, and Christian burial.<sup>9</sup>

## Accompaniment before and after Death<sup>10</sup>

Those who are sick should not be alone, as multiple popes have reminded us in messages for the annual World Day of the Sick. Patients who have serious or life-threatening illnesses, as well as their families, can be provided with physical, psychological, and spiritual care through team-based palliative care.<sup>11</sup> Hospice care can provide similar integrated care for those nearing death and for their families.

Pastoral care is integral to both palliative and hospice care, and includes making available the Eucharist, Confession, Anointing of the Sick, and Viaticum.<sup>12</sup> It also includes supportive prayer<sup>13</sup> and support for decision makers. It may be helpful to familiarize ourselves with local services available in preparation for our own passing or that of loved ones.

Even after death, accompaniment continues. Our prayers can help those who are being purified in Purgatory, so it is a spiritual work of mercy to pray for those who have died.<sup>14</sup>

## Hope in the Resurrection

Those who die in God’s grace and friendship live forever with Christ. Heaven is not an abstract idea, but a true and lasting relationship with God that is beyond all earthly description and understanding. We look forward to the resurrection of the dead and everlasting life by preparing now, in hope, for our passage from this life into eternal life.

We need not fear. Christ is with us.

**Comment [mao5]:** Finding sound advice is not always easy. Both medical opinions and application of moral teaching are both subjective unfortunately. Just as we can shop around to find a doctor to give us the answer we want to hear, the same is true of clergy expounding moral teaching.

Getting as much information as we can is our obligation. But in the end it is up to make a decision and we should expect the doctor or the church to tell the absolute right thing to do.

**Comment [mao6]:** We choose someone as a POA to act as our conscience when we lose that faculty. So that person should be acquainted with how our conscience typically works in a variety of situations. If we love the person we owe it to them discuss it with them ahead of time. It is also a nice touch to acknowledge the potential difficulties and absolve them of any guilt they may feel for making a decision they are uncomfortable with despite feeling it to be the right course of action.

**Comment [mao7]:** This is a topic worthy of a whole other article

**Comment [mao8]:** Help yes, however we do not pray our loved ones out of purgatory. The reformation was launched in part over the Church’s notion that we could buy upgrades on tickets to heaven.

**Comment [mao9]:** Our hope in the resurrection may give us the strength to endure the trials of dying with a greater openness; to see value, gift and grace amidst suffering.

<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2012 ff.

<sup>2</sup> See Pope Francis, General Audience, 27 November 2013 (Libreria Editrice Vaticana), [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20131127\\_udienza-generale.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20131127_udienza-generale.html).

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2677.

<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1776 ff. *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006), pp. 314-315.

<sup>5</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1701 ff., 2258 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Many state conferences of Catholic bishops have published materials which may help you with decisions about advance directives. To find these and other resources, contact your local diocesan Respect Life office. A directory is available at [www.usccb.org/about/pro-life-activities/diocesan-pro-life-offices.cfm](http://www.usccb.org/about/pro-life-activities/diocesan-pro-life-offices.cfm).

<sup>7</sup> *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2009), <http://www.usccb.org/about/doctrine/ethical-and-religious-directives/>. (See especially Part 5.)

<sup>8</sup> See Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), 15.

<sup>9</sup> A summary is found here: <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/bereavement-and-funerals/overview-of-catholic-funeral-rites.cfm>.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis uses the term “accompaniment” often; see its many occurrences in *Evangelii gaudium*.

<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Plenary of the Pontifical Academy for Life” (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/march/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150305\\_pontificia-accademia-vita.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/march/documents/papa-francesco_20150305_pontificia-accademia-vita.html).

<sup>12</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1499–1532. See also Pope Benedict XVI, “Message of the Holy Father on the Occasion of the Twentieth World Day of the Sick” (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2012), [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/sick/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20111120\\_world-day-of-the-sick-2012.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/sick/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20111120_world-day-of-the-sick-2012.html).

<sup>13</sup> See for example these prayers at the time of dying and death: <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/bereavement-and-funerals/prayers-for-death-and-dying.cfm>.

<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis, General Audience, 30 November 2016, (Libreria Editrice Vaticana), [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2016/documents/papa-francesco\\_20161130\\_udienza-generale.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20161130_udienza-generale.html)

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