

Catholic Review Column: Comfort and Consolation

Questions about the end of life have faced human beings for as long as we have walked the earth. When will it come? What is a “happy death?” Is there life after death?

Thanks to modern medicine, we now live longer, and thankfully can prevent many premature deaths. But with these advances come many more questions: What is a “natural death?” How long would I want to prolong my life if I were facing a serious illness? What does it mean to “die with dignity?” Will I be ready for death?

Whether we face these questions from a spiritual or practical perspective, we know one thing with certainty. Death will come to each of us and to our loved ones, and we would do well to think about some of these difficult questions before we are facing a crisis.

I have been blessed to enjoy a very long life with my parents. Mom and dad are both in their 90s, have been remarkably self-sufficient and are doing everything in their power to sustain themselves. My mother still lives in the family home and only recently has my father moved into an assisted living facility. I cherish the time I still have with my parents, and thank God every day for granting them the gift of such a long and rich life. Moreover, my parents have carefully planned their future medical care in accordance with the teachings of the church.

I sympathize with those who are the appointed health care agent of a loved one with responsibility for making emotionally and ethically challenging decisions for them as their health declines. I am thankful that when the time may come for me to make decisions on my parents’ behalf, I will have the comfort of being guided by our shared faith, and by their trust in me to apply their wishes and the principles of our faith to whatever medical circumstances might present themselves during their care.

No matter when or how that moment arrives, I am sure of one thing. Regardless of the decisions I may make on their behalf – whether to accept a treatment, prolong a

treatment, or withdraw a treatment – I know that, just as God has given them the gift of life, the moment of their passing is also in his hands alone. I am ready to be at their side, to do what I can to make sure they are at peace and without pain, and to wait with them until God calls them home.

Evaluating the merits of medical interventions in a patient's treatment involves as much prayer as it does science, and every circumstance must be judged according to its individual nuances. All patients deserve access to effective pain management to ensure they do not suffer needlessly, and to appropriate palliative and hospice care. No one should feel the obligation to accept treatments that are excessively burdensome or that offer no medical benefit. But nonetheless, our most basic moral and ethical principles remind us that we can never cross the line that would allow us to willingly administer or provide the means to cause the death of another, no matter how "merciful" such an act may seem.

Just as important is the provision for our spiritual care, having one's relationship with the Lord and with the church in good shape as that time approaches. Regular participation in the sacrament of reconciliation and reception of holy Communion at Mass are among the greatest consolations our church offers us as Catholics as we prepare ourselves and our loved ones to return home to the Lord.

Recently, the Catholic bishops in Maryland issued several publications addressing these issues, including "Comfort and Consolation," a foundational document outlining ethical principles to consider when making end-of-life decisions. We have also published a Q-and-A brochure summarizing Comfort and Consolation, and a practical brochure offering guidance in how to appoint a health care agent and complete an advance directive for medical decision-making. It is our hope that these documents will be useful not only to Catholics, but to all who wish to give serious and faithful thought to preparing for the end of our lives and of those we love.

We do not know the day or the hour, but by confronting these questions – before a crisis arises – we can do a great service for ourselves and our loved ones by sharing our wishes with faith, honesty and hope in the life to come.