

The pastoral activity of the Church must help everyone to discover and to make good use of the role of the elderly within the civil and ecclesial community, in particular within the family.

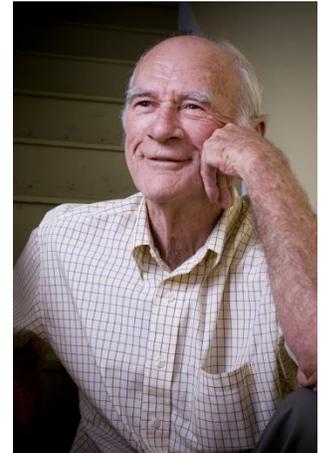
John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (November 22, 1981) n. 27.



When death is “clearly imminent and inevitable, one can in conscience ‘refuse forms of treatment that would only secure a precarious and burdensome prolongation of life, so long as the normal care due to the sick person in similar cases is not interrupted.’”

John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (March 25, 1995) n. 65; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on Euthanasia* (May 5, 1980) IV.

The provision of water and food, even by artificial means, always represents a *natural means* for preserving life, and is not a *therapeutic treatment*. Its use should therefore be considered *ordinary and proportionate*, even when the "vegetative state" is prolonged. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Commentary on Nutrition & Hydration* (August 1, 2007).



**Saint Jeanne Jugan, foundress of the Little Sisters of the Poor and intercessor for the elderly, made it her life calling to care for the needy elderly. She always said, “Making the elderly happy, that is what counts!” There are many ways to help provide dignity and respect for the elderly within our community. Please visit [www.littlesistersofthepoorBaltimore.org](http://www.littlesistersofthepoorBaltimore.org) or contact Sister Lawrence Mary at [volbaltimore@littlesistersofthepoor.org](mailto:volbaltimore@littlesistersofthepoor.org) for information on how you can help the Little Sisters of the Poor and serve our Lord through the elderly at St. Martin’s Home.**

## **ON BEING A BURDEN TO ONE'S FAMILY, ESPECIALLY ONE'S SPOUSE AND CHILDREN**

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Frequently elderly people like me (I will soon be 82 years old), some suffering from an assortment of health problems, are heard to say that they don't want to be a burden on their families, especially their spouses and children. And there is surely some truth in this. But rightly understood—and I hope to make it so here—I *want* to be a burden to my loved ones.

### **Gilbert Meilaender's thoughtful reflections and their relevance to care of dying**

... Meilaender points out that in this life we do not come together as autonomous individuals freely contracting with each other. Rather we find ourselves living with other persons, beginning with our families, and are asked to share the burdens of life while caring for each other. He emphasizes that "morality consists in large part in learning to deal with the unexpected and unplanned interruptions in our life." In short, we can ask ourselves, "How do I bear the contradictions of each day?" –traffic jams when we are in a hurry to get to work; slipping on the ice and breaking some bones; losing our job because of downsizing. Do we accept these or rebel against them and against God, who loves us yet allows these to remind us that we are not in control of our lives; *he* is.

Toward the end of his essay Meilaender said: "Perhaps it is a good thing, lest we be tempted to injustice, that the dying burden the living." Thinking about this, Meilaender suggested that it is far better to name a proxy with the power of attorney to make decisions regarding our medical treatments should we become incompetent and incapable of making them for ourselves when gravely ill. He said that at the time he was writing he would name his wife as his proxy, for he was confident that she would always ask, "What can we do to benefit the life he still has?" realizing that answering this question will put a burden on her. But because she loves him, she will welcome this burden.

### **... The virtue of solidarity**

A great virtue is that of solidarity. In carrying the burden of persons who are in need of care, especially one's loved ones and those most vulnerable in our society, we are given the chance to practice this virtue, highly extolled by Pope John Paul II especially in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. Moreover, although our burdens may frequently be very hard to carry we need to remember that our Lord told us that to follow him we could do so only by taking up our cross daily, and we should likewise remember that he is our Simon of Cyrene, ready to help us bear our cross lovingly.

### **Final reflections**

I do not mean to say that caring for the elderly and others is *not* a burden. It can be, sometimes significantly so. I am saying that bearing this burden is so central to being human that if we run from the burden, we not only disrespect the elderly and vulnerable, we dehumanize ourselves. Our community has been backing away in disgust from persons who are dependent since the selfish sixties. Families with lots of children are no longer considered examples of generosity, but rather of irresponsibility. Children with severe disabilities are not special angels sent to us by God, but drains on the economy; better that they not be born. And the elderly are burdens. But if we succeed in pushing away everyone who is dependent, then we're left with ourselves, our ego-centric, sin-rationalizing, defensive, irritable and vain selves. If we never learn to give till it hurts, till the painful reality that we're not the center of the universe sinks in, we will fail at marriage, at parenthood, at citizenship, even at simple neighborliness. Our community will become a marketplace of the physically strong, but morally weak. The great Protestant ethicist Stanley Hauerwas wrote an essay a few years ago arguing that we need the elderly and disabled more than they need us. Without them to love, to sacrifice for, to give to till it hurts, we will become a community of devils.