

When someone is dying, family members may be making difficult choices about life and death. One of those choices concerns the administration of artificial nutrition and hydration. At first it sounds like a simple enough choice to make: if someone you love cannot eat or drink on their own, hook them up with a tube. But it is not so simple. They may not have a reasonable hope of recovery. Our church says we have a duty to preserve life, but that duty is not absolute. Death is part of life, and it brings us to God.

Our church believes in giving care that is ordinary and proportionate. Extraordinary care means unreasonable care; proportionate care means there is hope of benefit without increasing burdens.

But several weeks ago Pope John Paul II spoke to an international conference on nutrition, hydration and the vegetative state. He said, “the administration of water and food, even when provided by artificial means, always represents a natural means of preserving life, not a medical act. Its use, furthermore, should be considered, in principle, ordinary and proportionate, and as such morally obligatory, insofar as . . . [it provides] nourishment to the patient and alleviation of . . . suffering.” The church has never said that artificial nutrition and hydration were necessary in every case, but the pope said it should be given to people in a persistent vegetative state, if such care would achieve nourishment and the alleviation of suffering. There are other circumstances when feeding tubes may be withheld or withdrawn. Most people who are dying naturally stop eating and drinking. A few years ago, the pope wrote an encyclical defending the value of human life, and he approved refusing forms of treatment that were not expected to produce sufficiently positive results or that were imposing an excessive burden on the patient and the family. He wrote this: “To forego extraordinary or disproportionate means is not the equivalent of suicide or euthanasia; it rather expresses acceptance of the human condition in the face of death” (EV 65). Often, nutrition and hydration are ordinary and proportionate, but there are times when the burden outweighs the benefit.

In today’s passage from the Book of Revelation, John sees a multitude of people worshipping God. They are identified as “the ones who have survived the time of great distress.” In one sense, they did not survive at all. John was seeing a vision of the first martyrs of the church. The word “martyr” means “witness”, and these were people who gave testimony to God all the way up to their death.

Today in our culture, Christians are not persecuted to their death, but we do try to live and end our lives in ways that bear witness to what we believe. Family members have difficult choices when someone’s life is nearing its end. Those choices are easier if we each tell our family our preferences regarding end of life care. We can help each other make good,

moral decisions that will enable us all to join the great multitude from every nation, race, people and tongue, who worship at the throne of the Lamb.