

In Florida a young woman named Terri hangs between life and death in a struggle that has split her family, challenged Catholic bishops, and involved her governor. Thirteen years ago, in her 20s, Terri fell unconscious from a possible potassium imbalance; it deprived her brain of oxygen for several minutes, and she has never been the same. Terri and her parents are Catholics. They say she understands things, and that she is not in a coma. Her husband disagrees. He had the feeding tubes removed last month, but the governor ordered them reinserted. Florida's Catholic bishops cautiously sided with the parents because Terri's physical condition is not clear. Our hearts go out to this family and especially to Terri.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says we may discontinue "medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome." You may refuse what it calls "over-zealous" treatment. Patients should make the decisions if they are competent. If not, we respect the reasonable decisions of those responsible. We may not purposefully take someone's life: We may not poison someone who is dying. But painkillers are acceptable even if they hasten death, because they do not intend to kill. Medical personnel should not withhold treatment to empty another bed for the next patient; and families should not withhold treatment because they are inconvenienced by the illness. But when death is inevitable, it may be accepted; we do not have to hold it off indefinitely.

Normally, artificial nutrition and hydration are not considered extraordinary measures. But in instances when the approach of death makes someone unable to take or process food, many people agree they are not obliged to try. These are very difficult decisions.

On All Souls Day our church remembers those who have died. Isaiah's prophecy in today's first reading looks for a day when God will come to end the threat of death. "The Lord will destroy death on this mountain." Death is "the veil that veils all people" and "the web that is woven over all the nations." Death frightens us, but we believe it is not the end. Its approach need not be resisted.

Do the people you love know what you think about these questions? What constitutes a good quality of life? How expensive do you wish end-of-life care to be? Who will make final decisions? If we make our wishes clear to our families, we give them a gift they will need, and we reaffirm our faith that God is more powerful than death.