

"I, Paul Turner, being of sound mind, voluntarily make known my desire that my dying shall not be artificially prolonged under the circumstances set forth below. If at any time I should have an incurable injury, disease, or illness, and the application of life-sustaining procedures would serve only to artificially prolong the dying process, I direct that such procedures be withheld or withdrawn, and that I be permitted to die naturally with only the performance of any medical procedure deemed necessary to provide me with comfort."

That's a statement from my living will. Nancy Cruzan was injured in an automobile accident in 1983. She lies now in a Missouri hospital in a "persistent vegetative state," sustained by food and water through a surgical tube. Her parents want to let her die, but the State of Missouri ruled it lacked "clear and convincing evidence" that Nancy would want to die under these circumstances. This week the Supreme Court upheld the decision of the State of Missouri. They cannot let her die.

Traditionally, the Catholic Church has long distinguished between ordinary and extraordinary means of sustaining life. If someone is dying, we are not required to take extraordinary means to sustain the life.

There is a difference between dying a being sick. When someone is sick, we actively seek the means to help. But when the body begins to die, we need not. It's all right to refuse extraordinary assistance to a body which has begun to die.

To the contrary, the Church has long opposed the practice of euthanasia; that is, we do not condone actively taking someone's life. There is a difference between dying and killing someone. Removing life supports from a person who is already dying may be all right. Injecting poison to hasten dying is not.

This is why the case of someone like Nancy Cruzan is so different from one like Dr. Kevorkian, who invented a chemical suicide machine. He recently assisted a woman who wanted to take her own life. Such actions stand outside those by which the Church holds human life sacred. There is a difference between taking a life and letting a person die. Still, when a Catholic commits suicide the Church will offer a full funeral service, and show compassion to the bereaved.

Each of us has the power to lighten the decisions our families make about our dying. When Jesus speaks about discipleship today, he calls us to be perfectly selfless, for in thinking of others, we discover who we are.

Our greeters have a living will available for you after Mass today. I encourage you to take several copies home. Please, please, talk it over with your family and your physician. Let them know your wishes, and give several copies away. I myself served on the task force that composed this particular version, and I think you'll find it flexible to express your desires.

I'll also have in the parish office this week a booklet which contains a prayer service families may use in a hospital room as the life support systems are disconnected from the one you love. It's called "Let Them Go Free."

Discipleship means losing ourselves for Christ. Death means the same.