

Euthanasia in Florida, Sanctity in Rome

On Sunday March 20th legislation was passed by the U.S Senate to prolong the life of a brain-damaged 41-year-old Florida woman named Terri Schiavo. The case was passed in the House of Representatives and was moved into the jurisdiction of the federal courts. Mrs. Schiavo is said to be 'brain dead.' However, if this was entirely true, then her brain would be sending no signals to her body for her to breathe or move or complete any basic bodily function. The problem with her body began about fifteen years ago when Terri collapsed due to heart failure as a result of an eating disorder. The problem became even more severe when no recovery seemed possible, and Terri was no longer able to swallow anything without choking to death.

Courts have ruled since then that she is in a "persistent vegetative state", yet, ironically, Terri responds to affection, touch, sound and more. Terri's husband, Michael Schiavo believes that his wife would not want to be kept alive artificially, and, therefore, the feeding tube which was keeping Terri alive was disconnected for the third time. According to the Life Saving Pro-Life Committee, Terri is able to communicate to others her desires. This is something that her parents have been trying to tell the public for years. However, Michael believes he knows what is best for his wife and does not see her activity as communication but as a reaction gesture. Strangers who do not know Terri are on the outside. Those connected to her by bonds of indescribable love have to watch her suffer. Admittedly, making judgments about this particular case is hard, but not impossible.

There are two means of survival; ordinary and extraordinary. Ordinary means of survival include food, water, air, shelter etc. Extraordinary means of survival include "any treatment, medication, procedure and operation that are gravely burdensome for the patient to bear or otherwise require heroic virtue."¹ It is morally incorrect to deny anyone food and water, if it can be administered ordinarily. If it is denied, then life is being directly disrupted and endangered. Bishop Sgreccia told Vatican Radio: "The removal of the gastric tube used for nourishing Terri cannot be considered an 'extraordinary' measure or a therapeutic measure," he said. "It is an essential part of the way in which Mrs. Terri Schiavo is nourished and hydrated."² This tube, which was keeping Terri alive prior to Friday's operation, obviously causes physical pain (the tube must be constantly cleaned to prevent clogging, leaving an open sore leading to the intestines, which cannot be stitched up). But the Church has raised the following question: Which is worse - bearable pain in order to sustain life through ordinary means or no life at all? The American Life League argues "Judge Greer's ruling is unconscionable. Terri is not being treated as the living, breathing human person she is. Rather, her basic civil rights are being tragically trampled upon."³

However, a patient has the right to refuse an operation that may inflict excessive pain, tremendous effort and unreasonable expense. Despite what the media is telling us, Terri has communicated with many people, including Michael, indicating that she does

¹<http://www.all.org/issues/eol01.htm>

² <http://forums.catholic.com/showthread.php?t=43448>

³ http://www.michnews.com/artman/publish/article_7078.shtml

⁴ http://wnd.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=43383

⁵ <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/showarchive.php?date=2005-03-03>

not want to die. Barbara Weller, an attorney, was in Terri Schiavo's room at the Woodside Hospice in Pinellas Park (Florida) on the day when Terri's tube was to be disconnected once again. She states that "the severely brain-damaged woman cried out hysterically when she was told that her tube would be disconnected later that day." The following is an excerpt from the events that took place that day:

Weller essentially told Terri Schiavo, "You had better say you want to live or they will kill you. Just say you want to live."

Schiavo responded with a drawn out, "IIIIII," then screamed out "waaaaaaaaa" so loudly that a police officer stationed outside the room came in.

The officer then ordered Weller removed from the room. ⁴

With this new evidence many debates have arisen once again about whether or not an appeal is needed to be brought forth in order to reconnect the feeding tube. After the court's decision in Michael's favour was released, a former nurse for Terri came forward claiming, once again, that Michael had previously tried to kill Terri with an insulin injection. Two years ago, after watching Michael depart from his wife's hospital room, the nurse went in to see Terri who was crying hysterically. After examination the nurse found many needle wounds as well as a syringe in the garbage. With this new evidence at hand a new case is obviously needed. As history has proven time and time again, this culture of death that we live in can be changed, yet the people who have the power to do so, simply choose not to. We must continue to pray for Terri's life.

Life is sacred from the moment of conception until natural death. All life! Not only lives which are healthy and young or healthy and old. No matter what the condition of life, depriving someone of the chance to continue to live is immoral. Yet right in the midst of this painful drama in Florida, Pope John Paul II, an ever loving example of strength, courage and faith, is fighting a very similar battle - the difference being that the Holy Father refuses to give in to any death which is preventable. "The right to die is an essential aspect of human dignity," said George Felos, Michael Schiavo's attorney and spokesman, "and the right to kill those who no longer have any value and are a drain on the economy is inseparable from this right."⁵ This statement is not only ignorant, but extremely sickening. As a witness to suffering, faith, hope and love, Pope John Paul II has shown the world that every human life has immeasurable value. Only the One who gave us life has the power to take that life away, and as Catholics we must do all we can to ensure that people like Terri can keep their dignity and their life until He decides that our earthly life should end.

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