



A HARD PILL

WHO DESERVES TO LIVE?

Wednesday, October 28, 2015

Are you a burden to someone? How do you know? Do you cook your own meals, wash your own clothes, drive yourself everywhere, pay for your own housing?

You may not think of yourself as a burden to anyone, but there is a good chance you are, or at the very least, that you were as a young child.

Being a burden is part of the human condition, but we usually don't talk about it that way. Instead, we say that humans deserve to be loved and cared for—and we call this being part of a family.

Is it not in large measure what it means to belong to a family: to burden each other—and to find, almost miraculously that others are willing, even happy, to carry such burdens?

Gilbert Meilaender, *First Things*

Whether we think about it as such or not, our interdependence upon other people for the basic necessities of life is part of our very nature as humans. We have all heard the phrase “no man is an island.” Certainly part of what that means is that to treat someone as a burden, rather than as another human who needs help, is to treat him as if he is not human at all.



But what about other people who need help? People in wheelchairs, people who are very sick, or dying, or in a coma? If you've ever been around someone with serious health needs, you find that they may sometimes be completely in need of your help, for even the most basic things. They may be able to do very little for themselves.

What then is our responsibility to these people—the sick, the elderly, and the disabled?

In our culture, there's a growing belief that people who are very sick or disabled are nothing more than a burden. For some reason, people have forgotten that we are all burdens to some degree, and that as infants, we were all huge burdens!

It is never true that people are only burdens. In fact, every person is deserving of love, respect, and help, no matter how much help he or she may need.

Every person has an inherent dignity that is never diminished, no matter what his or her physical or mental condition. Because of that, we don't wish for anyone to get Alzheimer's or to lose mental competency. We don't wish for anyone to suffer or be in pain. But because we are human, sometimes this happens. And when someone we love is facing death or is in pain, we have a responsibility to them.



When we look around at the world, we can find many people who need a little extra help. You may have heard of Nick Vujicic or Bethany Hamilton. Nick was born without arms and legs. Bethany had her arm bitten off by a shark. Both of these individuals are known for their amazing capability to carry on and give back to their communities in spite of their hardships, but both could use a little extra help in their day-to-day lives.

People who have terminal conditions, or who have been told that they will likely die soon, often become depressed by the news. This is completely understandable. Life on earth, even if we are sick, is beautiful, and it's all we know. To learn that you are dying can be scary, and even more so if you are dying of a painful disease.

As members of a family, when someone we know is sick or dying, it is our responsibility to care for them and to love them, even when it's hard. As a student, this might mean visiting a grandparent in the hospital or taking on additional responsibilities for a sick parent.



Adults are called to do a bit more. They might have to work with doctors and nurses to make sure that a sick loved one is getting the best care possible. They might have to make arrangements for home help or hospice care. But just like you, an adult's primary responsibility is to love and care for a sick, elderly, disabled, or dying loved one.

Our community has a similar responsibility to those who are sick and dying. As a culture, we are called to advocate for the sick and the dying, and to enact laws that protect them, and provide them with medication and the care they need.

We have a responsibility to ensure that quality palliative care (a special type of medical care that provides patients who experience great pain and suffering with

medicine, treatment, and mental and spiritual counseling for themselves and their families) is offered so that no one has to die in pain.

Palliative care is an expression of the properly human attitude of taking care of one another, especially of those who suffer. It bears witness that the human person is always precious, even if marked by age and sickness. The human person, in fact, in whatever circumstance, is a good in and of himself and for others, and is loved by God. For this reason, when life becomes very fragile and the end of earthly existence approaches, we feel the responsibility to assist and accompany the person in the best way.

Pope Francis, 2015

There is a growing international trend of people wanting their doctors' help in committing suicide when they become too sick or too old to live like they used to. Some people believe that if they get very sick, they don't want to be alive—that their lives would no longer have any value, and that they would be nothing more than a burden. Sometimes this feeling comes from their families, who may make them feel as though they are a burden because they require special care. In these instances, people may feel like they're better off dead.



But is that true? As Christians, we know that there's far more to life than what we see on the surface, in the material world. We know that God created each person with a specific purpose and that He will call each of us to eternal life at precisely the moment our lives are supposed to be finished. To cut a life short through suicide cuts short God's ability to work in that person's life. Suicide closes the door to hope.

On a community level, assisted suicide is disastrous. People who think assisted suicide is a good idea are usually motivated by their care for others and their desire that people not suffer. No one wants to see someone die in pain, or impoverish a family with the growing costs of healthcare. But the solution is to demand better medical care, not to encourage or help people take their own lives.

We cannot allow California to become a place where we respond to human suffering by simply making it easier for people to kill themselves. Helping someone to die—even if that person is desperate and asks for that help—is still killing. It is responding to the needs of neighbors with indifference, with the cold comfort of death.

Archbishop José H. Gomez, 2015

In communities where assisted suicide becomes a legal option, the ones who suffer are the poor, elderly, and handicapped, as well as the immigrants and minorities. These people already have less access to quality medicines and nursing homes, and receive lower-quality care when it comes to pain management, cancer treatment, and palliative and hospice care. When assisted suicide is legalized, it becomes the easiest and cheapest option for people who are sick, disabled, and dying. And, too often it is

the easiest choice for insurance companies and family members to take, to talk people into ending their lives rather than making every effort to see that they are treated with respect and love. We do not want to become a society that responds to the pain and suffering of others by offering to help them kill themselves.

Undoubtedly, it can be difficult to care for someone who is sick, disabled, or dying, especially if they need a great deal of care. It is relatively easy to help someone for a few days, or even a few weeks. But months and years of care can become exhausting, especially if the person who needs your help is loathe to take it, or can't express gratitude.

However, these are the moments where we can demonstrate the true value of human life, no matter what. We can show these people that we are willing to care for them, because others have cared for us, and will have to care for us again someday. This is what it means to be part of the human community—to care for others in sickness and in health, and to protect the dignity of human life.

We cannot allow California to become a place where we respond to human suffering by simply making it easier for people to kill themselves.

– Archbishop José H. Gomez

DISCUSSION

1. How is being a burden part of the human condition? What happens if someone tried to live completely independently?
2. What is the responsibility of individuals toward the sick or dying? What is the responsibility of a community?
3. What groups of people would be most negatively affected by legalized assisted suicide? Why?
4. What is the value of palliative care? Does this sound like an option in keeping with human dignity?