

Editorial & Opinion

Food, water aren't medicine

Guest
Editorial

By Father Kenneth J. Doyle

Mary O'Connor, a 77-year-old stroke victim, is a patient at Westchester County Medical Center. Like so many other patients in hospitals and nursing homes, she cannot feed herself, but must be fed through a tube in her nose. She is awake and conscious, can feel pain and can speak short phrases like "fine," "all right" and "OK." Her family would like to stop feeding her, but on October 14, the New York State Court of Appeals said that she should continue to be fed.

The court suggested that food and water might be "qualitatively different" from those types of medical treatment from which Mary O'Connor may have foresworn in saying that she would never want to be a burden to anyone. In so suggesting, the court has hit upon a critical distinction. In fact, food and water are not medical treatment. They are minimal means of ordinary human care.

Nutrition meets a basic need of all human beings, a need which is not specifically medical. Nourishment never was intended to cure anything; it does for the sick person what it does for all of us — keeps us alive. To remove nutrition and hydration is to bring about death directly.

It is especially troubling when the desire to remove food and water involves a judgment of the "quality" of the patient's life. The dissent in the O'Connor case makes much of the fact that Mary O'Connor "responds only sporadically to simple questions or commands, and then frequently inappropriately" and that "no hope exists for significant improvement in her mental or physical condition." If a person with a serious disease is judged to have such a low quality of life that society can choose to end it, have we not started down a slippery slope without anything to hang onto? Is it really much of a leap to apply that same utilitarian analysis to the handicapped, the retarded or those afflicted with Alzheimer's Disease?

Already in *The New England Journal of Medicine* a group of distinguished physicians has suggested that nutritional support might in certain circumstances be withheld from

elderly patients considered "severely and irreversibly demented."

Within the memory of many readers, hasn't our world already suffered enough from the arbitrary arrogance of those who determined that certain groups had no right to live?

When food and water are removed, death results not from the underlying disease but from the starvation of the patient. Medical testimony in the O'Connor case indicated that the removal of the feeding tube would result in death from thirst and starvation within seven to 10 days, a death that would be accompanied by "extreme, intense discomfort." But once we grant the power to remove food and water, why not take the next logical step and short-cut that whole painful process — a pain that may even be experienced in some cases by a comatose patient? A lethal dose of drugs would almost surely act more quickly than the removal of nutrients, and suddenly we are standing in a land where we never wanted to be, killing people because we presume to know what's best for them.

Interestingly, in the state of Oregon last year, when legislation regarding life-sustaining situation was being discussed, two groups actively involved in testifying were the Association for Retarded Citizens and the Oregon Commission on Black Affairs. Both organizations saw correctly that their own people were in jeopardy once society started to decide who should live and who should die.

That the Westchester County Medical Center would refuse to stop feeding Mary O'Connor should surprise no one. Earlier this year, when the New York State Senate and Assembly health committees held a legislative hearing on this topic, the association of New York City nursing homes — the Greater New York Health Care Facilities Association — strongly rejected any role in advancing death by starvation. In testimony, the association said:

"To deny food and water, and to thereby induce death by starvation and dehydration, is either to commit euthanasia or to assist in another's suicide, and we are morally and ethically opposed to both. We agree with U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop who has stated: 'Withholding fluids or nourishment at any time is an immoral act.'"

It is appropriate and admirable that health-care institutions and the Court of Appeals feel uncomfortable about starving people to death.

Father Doyle is director of government relations for the New York State Catholic Conference.



Two views on vocations shortage: Seminarian suggests encouragement ...

To the editor:

There are many challenges facing our church, both on the local level as well as the universal level. Some people are concerned with only local issues and others concerned with the more universal issues facing the Catholic Church. I would like to call attention to an issue that affects both the local church of Rochester and the Universal Catholic Church.

The issue is the ordained priest. As a first year seminarian studying for the Diocese of Rochester, the issue of priesthood is of obvious concern for me, as I think it should be for all in our church, locally as well as universally.

I really do not believe that people really see the problem of the priest shortage that we are in, and will be in, in the near future. Many people stay away from this issue because of the emotional feelings that some people have with it. Surely many believe the ordination of women must be dealt with. Others believe that the clergy should be allowed to marry and then our priest shortage will be fixed. I don't believe that this is the case, nor do I believe that these two alternatives should occur as a result of the priest shortage, they should only occur, as do all other major changes in the church, that is out of a sound biblical theology.

Whatever the side issues of the priest shortage bring, we still are faced with a drastic problem that is upon us. Today the Diocese of

Rochester has seven men in the major theologate (seminary). My experience here at the seminary tells me that this number is very low. There are diocese here at the seminary that have many more seminarians in the major seminary, some even with 12 or more.

This letter is not to attack on our vocation office or, to lessen the significance of the other issues that today surround the priesthood. This letter is to alarm the people of our diocese of the current situation that faces us today. This letter is an attempt to give a view of how one seminarian sees the church in regards to the future of the ordained priesthood in our diocese.

The future is bleak, the projections for the near future do not lend hope. However, we as Christians are founded in hope. The hope in the resurrection of Jesus leads me to believe that God will not forget his people, God has never done that. However, God has always demanded a response from the faithful, from those despaired, and the hopeless. We as a church, as people of God must respond to this problem.

All have a responsibility to respond to this situation. Parents have the obligation and opportunity to encourage their sons and daughters to enter the religious life and priesthood. Other priests have the unique gift and the opportunity to share with men their own stories

and to encourage others to follow them if they enjoy their priestly ministry. Encouragement from priests is essential and key, very much needed and needed more often from all priests. Relatives, friends and all the faithful have the chance to encourage other's to seek a possible religious vocation, and to especially pray for them. Seminarians also have the opportunity to encourage men to discern the possibility to become a priest, and so I do this now.

I give to you the advise I once received, "If you are thinking, or ever have thought about the priesthood or religious life, doesn't it make sense to go talk to somebody who lives that life," or contact the diocesan vocation office. There will is not commitment asked of you for your inquiring, perhaps answers will be given you.

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... and layman urges righting diocesan ship

To the editor:

As a *Courier-Journal* reader, I was deeply shocked at the November 3 article on the condition of Becket Hall. When one considers that our diocese has well over 300,000 Catholics and yet there are but four students preparing for the priesthood — and they are not full time — at Becket, it is eerie to say the least.

Granted these are difficult times, but then they were difficult times when Christ sent his little band of apostles and disciples to challenge the spiritual might of the Roman Empire.

Perhaps we ought to refer to those times for guidance. They had a message and they did not concern themselves with compromising it with the pagan philosophy of Rome.

Perhaps we should ask if our message today is the same as theirs. I think we will find our concerns are different.

Firstly we have a fetish for organization. Everything, all activity, must be highly organized via committees, commissions, administrative tiers, special appointments, meetings, hearings ad infinitum so that all results are presented in a so-called detailed manner. This, of course, can produce a paralysis of decision making, and it often does with an attendant exhaustion and confusion of the participants.

Secondly, there is a tendency, and it is pronounced today, to view as a first priority attention to sociological and modernity concerns in the Church. As a first priority, no; as a legitimate concern in the context of the unchange-

able truths of our doctrine, acceptable.

These characteristics of much of our Church today can and do beget, when carried to extremes, such aberrations as liberation theology, theologians termed "progressives" such as Charles Curran and Richard McBrien, radical sproutings of organizations such as Pax Christi, and Catholics for Nuclear Disarmament, and virulent feminist trends, etc.

To return to specifics, i.e. Becket Hall, should we not be plumbing the depths of our Christian doctrine teachings and presentations when they can only create four part-time seminarians in a diocese this size? Is life so different today that it can account for the infertility of vocations we are experiencing?

In my opinion, we cannot lay the onus of this condition on the times alone. The priesthood is the core of our religious organization — a legacy from the apostles and Christ Himself. To allow it to wither is to commit sacrilege.

Let Bishop Clark expend his energies on a top-to-bottom review and evaluation of his diocesan Christian doctrine programs. Give our youth what is genuine and authentic, sweep out the shallow and error-laden theologies.

Do this and whatever else is required to correct the list of your diocesan ship, and perhaps your vocation crisis will fade. Certainly your present methods are not working after 10 years.

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