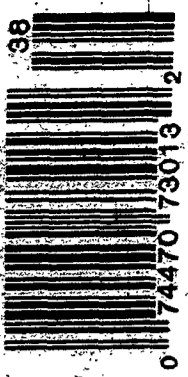


CATHOLIC COURIER

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Settling students

Students are adjusting to life at Northeastern Catholic Junior High after the school opened its doors earlier this month as part of the ongoing reorganization of Monroe County Catholic schools. Page 14.



'Right' stretches teachings to limit

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

When Father John W. Gouldrick spoke earlier this month at a medical-ethics forum hosted by Rochester's St. Mary's Hospital, he admitted he had more questions for his audience than answers.

The priest's speech covered church positions on abortion, and on the withdrawal of nutrition and hydration from irreversibly comatose patients or those in what medical experts call "a persistent vegetative state."

As the director of the secretariat of the U.S. bishops' Pro-Life Activities Committee, Father Gouldrick affirmed the church's clear stand against abortion, and acknowledged its not-so-clear stand on the withdrawal of nutrition and hydration.

"As you may well know, to date, no statement has been issued by the Holy See on the very difficult question of the morality of this action," Father Gouldrick said.

"But the Holy See would welcome a statement from the American bishops," he added. "And the American bishops themselves are eager to establish some clear guidelines on this relatively new moral problem."

Indeed, the "relatively new" problem is that modern medical technology has helped enrich, heal and lengthen human life with such life-saving gadgets as respirators and feeding tubes.

Yet such devices also have created a host of agonizing opportunities for families and physicians, who ponder whether to use technological wonders that could indefinitely prolong the life of someone in an unconscious state.

Last June, the nation focused on one such drama in the noted case of Missouri's Nancy Cruzan, a 32-year-old car-accident victim who has lain comatose for the last seven years.

In a 5-4 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a refusal by the Missouri court to grant the Cruzan family's request to disconnect their daughter's feeding tube. But the court noted that if Nancy Cruzan's wishes had been clearly known before the accident, the treatment might legally have been withdrawn.

Although even the court's five-justice majority was divided over the specifics of the case's implications, the Cruzan decision for the first time found that citizens have a constitutional "right to die."

The decision underpinned a movement to encourage people to record their future wishes regarding medical treatment in "living wills," or to appoint health-care "proxies" to make decisions for

them should they ever become incompetent to make such decisions for themselves.

Until this year, New York was one of the few states left that had not passed some sort of living-will or health-proxy legislation. The New York State Catholic Conference dropped its opposition to a health-care proxy bill after it was amended to allow hospitals to refuse to honor a proxy's decision if that decision conflicted with the hospital's ethical and religious values — provided that the hospital informed the proxy of its position ahead of time.

The law also states that it is not to be interpreted as legalizing "suicide, assisted suicide, or euthanasia."

The state Catholic conference did not actively support the bill because it might be understood to endorse the notion that one can ethically take one's own life — a concept some believe is embodied by living wills, which often include the authors' instructions on when nutrition and hydration may be withdrawn from them.

"We disagree that a person has total autonomy over their life and health," noted J. Alan Davitt, the conference's executive director.

During the St. Mary's ethics conference, Rochester City Court Judge John Manning Regan asserted that the proxy law — in spite of its amendments — essentially gives the individual a right to suicide.

"The proxy bill assumes that the individual who signs (a proxy document) has the right to determine when to die," he said.

The observations of Davitt and Regan point to an uneasy undercurrent in the ongoing debate over the so-called right to die — whether society's decision to grant such a right is tantamount to legally and morally endorsing suicide and euthanasia.

The church has dealt with such thorny questions before. Since the middle of this century, the Vatican has emphasized that Catholics need not use "extraordinary means" to prolong the life of the dying. Generally, extraordinary means were defined as treatments that would only delay an inevitable and imminent death.

The church has held, for example, that

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