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The *Catholic Courier* wishes to provide space for readers throughout the diocese to express opinions on all sides of the issues. We welcome all signed, original letters about current issues affecting church life.

Although we cannot publish every letter we receive, we seek, insofar as possible, to provide a balanced representation of expressed opinions and a variety of reflections on life in the church. We will choose letters for publication based on likely reader interest, timeliness and a sense of fair play. Our discerning readers may determine whether to agree or disagree with the opinions of the letter writers.

We reserve the right to edit all letters. Mail them to: *Catholic Courier*, 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, New York 14624. Please include your full name as well as telephone number and complete address for verification purposes.

# Suicide is never the best treatment

**EDITORS' NOTE:** The following statement was submitted for publication by Richard Seeger, M.D., president of the diocesan Catholic Physicians' Guild, on behalf of his organization's board of directors and that of the St. Thomas More Lawyers' Guild.

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By now, many of us have heard the dramatic story of "Diane," the patient of Dr. Timothy Quill, a local internist. This 45-year-old woman was diagnosed with a leukemia that had only a 25-percent cure rate, even with complex and difficult treatment. Rather than suffer through the therapy, she made a conscious and informed decision to refuse treatment and accept her imminent death as inevitable. Further, she requested and received barbiturates from her physician explicitly to "when the time came, ... take her life in the least painful way possible." When the bone pain, weakness, fatigue and fevers began to dominate her life she said her goodbyes, dismissed her family and took her life, alone.

Our hearts go out to Diane and her family and friends. From what we hear of her, she was a courageous woman, who despite many problems, had become a creative, loving person. We respect Dr. Quill for being a skilled practitioner who cares for his patients and communicates openly with them, even about the most difficult issues.

Yet we remain deeply troubled by this story. The implication of Dr. Quill's article in *The New England Journal of Medicine* and of the editorial written by the Editorial Board of Gannett Rochester Newspapers is that this is a better way to deal with the terminally ill. When the burdens of life are too great, and there is no hope left, then individuals have the right to actively terminate their own lives. And society must support them out of respect for their individual decisions.

So the debate begins. Society vs. the individual? Outdated values vs. the hard realities of advancing medical technology? Painful, non-productive life vs. the blessed relief of painless death? Are these the real issues that should be addressed as we reflect on what happened to Diane and the

thousands of others who, like her, face terminal illnesses?

We think not. The real issue at hand is concern for the inviolable principles of human value and dignity. As a society we must continually reaffirm the precious worth of each and every one of us, whether young or old, genetically complete or deficient, rich or poor, vigorous or ravaged by disease, from the beginning of life to the time of natural death.

Does society affirm such values at present? Never enough, but at least it remains against the law to aid suicide in New York state. The state Medical Society proclaims, "The use of euthanasia is not in the province of the physician."

Is there a reason to change current law and principles? Certainly modern technology presents us with ethical dilemmas previously unimaginable. Many of life's decisions are hard. But life and death have always challenged us, hurt us, drained us, left us in tears. And so it shall continue to be. Just ask the 35-year-old multiple sclerosis patient confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his or her life. Or the 60-year-old woman restricted and in pain from crippling arthritis. Or the 75-year-old senior citizen sinking into an oblivion of Alzheimer's Disease.

What can we best do for them? What could we have best done for Diane? Did we let Diane down somehow, or did she fail to find the best way? Is there something more that we can offer to Diane and her family that makes suicide an unnecessary release, reveals its despair and diminishment, and provides a liberating — though not easy — alternative?

We believe so. We believe in Diane as a person of infinite worth, just as we do for each and every one of us. The source of that belief is the Divine, an acknowledgement so many of us share, whether we are Catholic, Protestant, Jew, Muslim or persons of other faiths. None of us should shrink from acknowledging our faith and the profound impact that it has on how we see each other. Sadly, society misunderstands the very concept of personhood.

It is through faith in God's love that we are imbued with the awareness of worth present throughout life. Through hope we



can believe each day we will share in God's abiding presence. And through love for ourselves and others, our actions, however limited, are energized so that we can become fully human, fully alive, fully dignified. We believe that Diane had many gifts, but did not fully understand them, otherwise she would not have sought to end her own life.

Is human life an absolute that must be prolonged always at all cost? No, for there is a limit to what we are obligated to do in order to preserve life and delay death. Our actions must not cause unnecessary suffering, but the absence of adequate pain control or the failure to address all of the emotional and spiritual concerns of the terminally ill patient is equally a disservice.

There are other issues that we have not addressed. What does the reality of physician-assisted suicide do to the physician-patient relationship when the patient desperately wants to live? How do we ensure adequate pain control for the terminally ill? How do we ensure that we meet all of the special needs of those like Diane?

We can never eliminate the pain of life and death. We can only try to understand them better and work to find answers in ourselves, our families, our loved ones — and ultimately in our God.

Was suicide the best treatment for Diane? No, indeed not. The best treatment lay in granting her a pain-diminished and an emotionally and spiritually supported life until death became naturally unavoidable. We pray for Diane. We look forward to meeting her, too, in the sunset shore of Lake Geneva and hope to see her in an even more beautiful beyond.

## God didn't relegate Mary to the nursery

**To the editors:**

Shame on Father Shamon!

His July 11 column bore the headline "Jesus chose not to ordain women priests." He wrote that when Christ died on the cross, the Father said, "this time I will honor the male sex; and man will give life to me as woman gave life to me, a body to me. ... In this way I will enable all men and honor the male sex. ... My plan is not man's. Don't try to change it."

I can understand Father Shamon's wanting to substantiate his point of view, but you can't do it by putting words in God's mouth! This is nowhere in Scripture and should not have been in quotes. I would hesitate even to think that's what God might have said had he intended only men to be priests.

It is just as valid to say that women participate in Christ's maleness in that we are permitted to receive Him, and we become what we eat. So, if being male is the criteria for priesthood, women qualify.

I agree with Father Shamon that the church is a sacramental and supernatural reality but it is, and must be, a functionalist society as well. Faith is uppermost of course, but not all judgments are infallible. I don't think anyone would say the church is an American democracy, but neither is it a dictatorship!

As for Mary's being chosen as a successor to Judas? Christ could have said to her "You are Peter" and he could have made her Pope for life which, in her case, would

have meant in perpetuity. But, then, there would be no mystery and no need for the Holy Spirit because Mary has a direct pipeline to God and every one of her proclamations would be infallible. There would no longer be any need for councils or synods, or what have you. And, life would become terribly boring!!!

Father Shamon wrote "Personal attraction to the priesthood means nothing. Nor even one's capabilities." Huh? I always thought attraction to the priesthood was one of the first signs of a vocation and, un-

less I'm mistaken, a candidate does have to demonstrate some capability.

It's good to have dialogue, and we must continue to pray — and listen to the Holy Spirit. Not to worry! Everything always turns out OK in the end. The church is indestructible.

Mary was, and is, an activist, to which you have testified many times, Father Shamon. God didn't relegate her to the nursery!

**Grace B. Carnes**  
Eagle Ridge Circle, Rochester

## Don't put words in God's mouth

**To the editors:**

I have been a reader and admirer of Father Shamon's interpretations of Scripture for many years. There have been times when I haven't agreed, but it was usually over a minor point or two. However his recent attempt to justify the church's stance on not ordaining women to the priesthood, through the misuse of Scripture, cannot remain unchallenged.

The title chosen for the column, "Jesus chose not to ordain women priests" is technically correct, but then Jesus didn't ordain any priests, male or female. The concept of an ordained clergy is not in dispute. Its evolution and that of the entire hierarchy followed a natural course in church history and filled the perceived needs of the Church. The re-institution of

the Permanent Diaconate and the use of Lay Ministers are recent examples of that evolution.

My wife and I have been Eucharistic Ministers for fifteen years, and females are in the majority in that ministry in our parish. If the members of the present day hierarchy do not want females in their ranks — as priests or deacons — find some valid reasons if they really exist. But please, let's not put words in God's mouth — "When Christ died on the cross, the Father said ..." etc. — or attempt to squeeze non-existing justification out of Scriptures apart from the cultural norms at the time they were written.

**George Pfeifer**  
Lynette Drive  
Greece