

Hospice seen as alternative to assisted suicide

By Mark Pattison
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — In one corner is a string of assisted suicides presided over by Dr. Jack Kevorkian, who is now facing trial for murder.

A best-selling book advises suicide for those suffering — *Final Exit* by Hemlock Society leader Derek Humphry — as well as efforts, though failed, to get Washington state's euthanasia initiative passed.

In the other corner are images of dying loved ones being hooked up to tubes and machines in a sterile hospital room with no hope of recovery.

For families hoping for another option, hospice presents itself as an acceptable alternative to these two grim scenarios.

At its core, hospice recognizes that death is a part of life, and that death need not be either hastened or post-

poned for the dying person to live as full a life as possible.

"The Lord gives life. It's his to take," said Lorraine Berlin, a nurse who is patient-care coordinator for Angela Hospice, run by the Felician Sisters in the Detroit suburb of Livonia, Mich.

But there are only 1,850 U.S. hospices in the United States, which tended to 206,000 people in 1990. In contrast, 500,000 people died of cancer alone that year. Hospices, most of which give in-home care, often go unnoticed because hospitals, with their ever-expanding compounds, are the norm.

Education is needed to clear up the "misconceptions all around," said Jan Jones, executive director of Catholic Hospice in Miami Lakes, Fla.

"When I go out in the community, I get questions like, 'Oh, what about that book *Final Exit*? Isn't that guy with hospice?'" Jones said.

On the other end of the scale, some tell her prolonging life is "the be-all and end-all," she said.

The 1980 Vatican Declaration on Euthanasia said that the intentional taking of life, either by commission or omission, is wrong. Patients, it added, may refuse a medical technique "which carries a risk or is burdensome."

It pointed out Pope Pius XII's 1957 statement to a group of doctors that, under certain circumstances, drugs may be used to stop pain, even if the drugs unintentionally shorten life.

Theologians have said that "one is never obligated to use 'extraordinary' means" to save life, the Vatican document said. In recent years, several bishops have insisted that the provision of food and water should be considered ordinary treatment, and have waged verbal battle with doctors and lawmakers on that point.

Catholic Hospice, which is supported by the Miami Archdiocese and two Catholic hospitals, holds in its mission statement that "the story of Jesus tells us that suffering need not be useless, but can become meaningful and redemptive."

Such a statement "fits smack right in there" with Catholic teaching on death, said Jesuit Father William Ellos, medical ethicist at Loyola University in Chicago.

Hospice, Father Ellos said, is "an absolutely wonderful and beautiful thing. People look forward to their death in joyful expectation, not in terror."

Patients must be diagnosed as terminally ill before they are accepted into a hospice program. The patient and family agree that no aggressive therapies will be pursued. Instead, treatment is given to the disease's symptoms, associated pain, and the patient's well-being.

A team of doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists, clergy, social workers, therapists, health-care professionals and volunteers work with the patient and family to guide them through the patient's dying.

Priests emphasize the personal in funeral homilies

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Father James J. Marvin, pastor of Irondequoit's St. Ambrose Parish, takes a different approach than Father Callan in relating a Mass of Christian Burial's Scripture readings to the deceased. Whereas Father Callan usually ends his homilies by exploring the meaning of the service's readings, Father Marvin begins his homilies with such insights.

"I think it's important to reaffirm that life is eternal," Father Marvin said, adding that he usually spends the first five minutes of his funeral homilies talking about the Scripture readings and the church's theology of death. Like Father Callan, he also consults the deceased's family prior to the service in order to add relevant comments to the homily.

"Let's sit and talk about this person," Father Marvin said he usually tells the family. The priest often asks family members to provide a list of words describing the deceased. He added that

he then asks them, "If you were to give the homily, what would you say?"

Despite his personal emphasis, Father Marvin stressed that his funeral homilies are neither personalized eulogies, nor abstract theological sermons. Catholic funeral homilies should recognize both the church's faith in the Resurrection and how the deceased's life was touched by that faith, he commented.

Father Marvin also explained that because the Order of Christian Funerals allows family members to consult with the priest about what Scripture will be read at the Mass, it is often easy for the priest to relate the homily to the deceased's life. He sometimes allows a family member to talk about the deceased during his homily, he concluded.

Father Thomas P. Mull, priest consultant to the diocesan Office of Liturgy, observed that most priests try to combine theological insights and per-

sonal anecdotes in their funeral homilies. For example, if the deceased was an active parishioner, the priest will often use that person's contributions to parish life to tie in the church's faith with the individual's life, he said.

Personalizing the homily during the Mass of Christian Burial is one way in which clergy acknowledge the need for the deceased person's relatives and friends to hear about the life of their loved one. Members of the deceased family may also speak a few words during the Final Commendation and Farewell, which conclude the funeral liturgy.

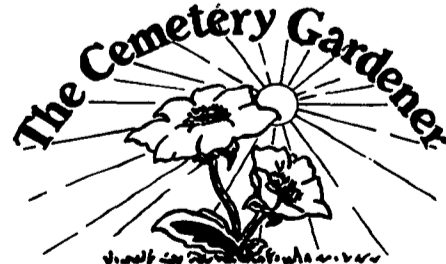
About a third of all families at Masses of Christian Burial opt to have someone speak about the deceased during this part of the service, Father Mull and other observers said. Generally, such orations take place at funerals of civic and church officials, the priest said.

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