

# COLUMNISTS

## Kevorkian show good for ratings, not society

Pope John Paul II has given an apt label to a very troubling dimension of our society. He has called it "the culture of death." As we move toward the end of a century, and a millennium, we are more than aware that he is right on the mark.

A few days ago Dr. Jack Kevorkian managed to get a television network to televise him injecting poison into a patient. Prime-time viewers had the chance to watch a physician-assisted suicide take place. The program was good for the network, since it was aired during "sweeps" month and would promote ratings. It was good for Kevorkian, who has shown himself over and over again to be hungry for publicity and desperate to remain in the public eye.

The program was not "good" for a number of other interests.

\* It was not good for those who suffer from chronic, disabling, or potentially life-ending disease conditions. By showing this act and this death, national television helped to validate the presumption that sickness and disability are alien to human life, and that those who experience them are "strangers" in the midst of the able-bodied.

\* It was not good for those who are cared for by others. In a culture as obsessed as ours is with independence,



the  
moral  
life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

youth, physical fitness, attractiveness and self-determination, to require personal, medical, or even familial care from others is already guilt-inducing enough. To present the option of euthanasia to people in this circumstance creates additional pressure "not to be a burden." What had been an option becomes an expectation, so that those who receive care think of themselves as deprived of dignity, of inclusion in the human community, of the right to live in spite of affliction and dependency. Unspoken pressure to kill oneself is created.

\* It was not good for rational thinking. Kevorkian claims to want to use killing only to "relieve suffering." Still, he intends by this videotape to be charged with murder and tried for his crime. If he is found guilty and must go

to jail, though, he says he will starve himself to death. Apparently a jail sentence is the equivalent of a disabling physical condition, so that death is its solution, too.

\* It is not good for legislators or citizens. In addition to his obsessive need for publicity, Kevorkian shows signs of extreme legalism, too. He apparently believes that we are capable of drafting a precise set of laws that will enter into, govern and end the ambiguity surrounding complex and personal decisions involving patients and doctors, families and care givers, insurance providers, religious and ethical perspectives. Decisions about medical care in time of serious illness occur as part of intensely personal histories for each one of us. To expect that government, law enforcement, or civil codes can settle the questions that surround these moments is only to succumb to the great American quest to codify every single human action and preference.

\* It is not good for health-care providers. We already expect our physicians and medical care-givers to be infallible, inexpensive, accessible, attentive, able to "fix" every physical condition that keeps us from "the good life," and rescue us from our own patterns of in-

dulgence and laziness. If Kevorkian gets his way, we will also expect them now to kill us!

\* Finally, it is not good for those who value human relationships. Normalizing euthanasia imposes an enormous limit on human relating and human caring. "I'll stand with you until you're really inconvenient," becomes a norm that excludes real caring altogether. "I'll be with you until I no longer think of myself as attractive and independent enough," becomes a barrier to genuine commitment. Relationships with these assumptions are burdened with conditions and artificial limits; they are deprived of the potential that true intimacy and genuine acceptance of the other bring.

Other than network ratings and Kevorkian's need for media exposure, I can't think of how that broadcast served the common "good" at all. We live in a cost- and convenience-conscious age. Many of the values that stand at the heart of human life are at risk in the question of physician-assisted suicide. To cheapen our conversation by allowing murder on television cannot possibly help us conduct that discussion.

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Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

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### Kids Answers from page 7

Possible answers: James, John, Martha, Jesse, Moses, Esther,  
Hosea, Jonah, Nahum, Ruth, Aaron, Naomi, Joshua

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