

“BUT ISN’T THAT JUST GIVING UP?”

WHY HOSPICE SHOULD BE A PART OF YOUR LIFE.



*Fourth of an
8 Part Series*

For some people, even Catholics, the word “hospice” means “the place where you give up and die”. Pope John Paul II begs to differ.

When the Holy Father visited a hospice in Austria in 1998, he had this to say:

The hospice makes one understand that dying means living before death, because even the last phase of earthly life can be lived consciously and organized individually. Far from being a “home for the dying”, this place becomes a threshold of hope which leads beyond suffering and death.

A home for hope

“Hospice” comes from a Latin word meaning “hospitality”, and referred originally to lodgings for travelers. Now it identifies a concept of caring, a form of “hospitality” for those with serious illnesses approaching death.

As noted by the Holy Father in 1998, the focus of hospice “is not sophisticated, high-technology medicine,” but the person in his or her “inalienable dignity.”

According to the National Hospice Organization:

- 1) Hospice neither hastens nor postpones death: it affirms life and regards dying as a normal process.
- 2) Hospice treats the person, not the disease, by providing an interdisciplinary team committed to serving a whole range of patient and family needs 24 hours a day.
- 3) Hospice care is provided in the home or through home-like settings in nursing facilities and hospitals.
- 4) Hospice care extends to the patient’s family during and even after the patient’s death.

Why hospice is not about “giving up” on life

A doctor must certify that, to the best medical knowledge, a patient has six months or less to live to be eligible for hospice. So who wants to hear that death is coming?

Not many do, of course, and many people will insist that “we must do all we can” to the end, meaning intensive treatment and hospital care to ward off death as long as possible.

But the goals of hospice offer a different perspective, one fully compatible with the vision of the Catholic Church.

Hospice encourages patients and their families to redirect, not suspend, their energies. The focus shifts from prolonging life to fulfilling it. Important work lies ahead, especially the tasks of reconciliation, blessing, and completion.

Thus the time before death will become less an excursion through emergency wards and ICUs, and more a journey of growth. The patient and family can reclaim the time:

- 1) To offer and seek forgiveness
- 2) To give thanks
- 3) To prepare for eternal life
- 4) To demonstrate love
- 5) To say goodbye, assured of greater things to come

The hospice environment equips patients and families with resources to address these and other important issues. Physical pain and symptoms will be managed. Comfort and hope will be possible. And the cost of hospice is covered under Medicare and by most private insurers. Clearly, there is no “giving up” in hospice.

This bulletin insert is provided by the Massachusetts Catholic Conference as part of its initiative In Support of Life. To learn more you can contact our office at 1-617-367-6060 or visit our website at www.macathconf.org.

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