

“SO, HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT WHAT YOU WOULD WANT?”

PLANNING YOUR CARE
AHEAD OF TIME.



*Fifth of an
8 Part Series*

We must be a nation of mind readers.

How else can one explain the results of a recent study by the National Hospice Foundation? The Foundation discovered that, according to a 1999 survey, “Americans expect their loved ones to carry out their wishes about end-of-life care, but have not made these wishes clearly known.”

Telepathy remains scientifically unproven. So we need to look for other ways to get the job done.

Base your wishes on realities, not myths

Part of the issue may be our own confusion about what we would want as death approaches. How can we share with others what our wishes are before we know them ourselves?

Naturally as Catholics, we will take into account our Church’s teaching when forming our wishes.

However, be careful to separate certain myths from the realities of Catholic teaching:

Myth: Use every effort to sustain human life!

Reality: We may reject treatments that offer no reasonable hope of benefit or that impose excessive burdens or risks.

Myth: Never stop a treatment once it’s begun!

Reality: If a treatment becomes too burdensome or is no longer working, we can stop it.

Myth: It’s wrong to take pain medication; offer up your pain!

Reality: Pain relief is permissible; the call to join our suffering with Christ’s does not require us to endure severe yet treatable pain.

Myth: Avoid death at all costs!

Reality: Life is always a good, but it’s not an absolute good; we may accept the natural coming of death without aiming to cause death.

Find the time to “talk turkey”

The National Hospice Foundation also found that all too often people view a passing comment about how they would like to be treated as sufficiently informing their loved ones of their end-of-life wishes.

More is required. We bear a heavy responsibility when we have to make decisions for a loved one. What a gift it is when the loved one has taken time beforehand to share with us his or her

wishes. How can we do the same for those who might have to decide for us some day?

The Massachusetts Medical Society urges families to “talk turkey” about these issues on the Friday after Thanksgiving, when most families are together. Any day will do. How about today?

You do not have to start from scratch. Materials available in your diocese, or from the Massachusetts Catholic Conference, can help begin the discussion.

Appointing a health care agent

The Catholic Health Care Proxy provided by the Massachusetts Catholic Conference can serve as a good conversation starter. The proxy is a form you can use in Massachusetts to appoint someone to serve as your health care agent. If you should ever lack the ability to make your own health care decisions, the law authorizes your agent to make these decisions for you.

The Catholic Health Care Proxy comes with a brief overview of Church teaching and satisfies all the legal requirements.

To obtain a copy of the Proxy and other educational materials, and for more information about sources for advice, contact the Massachusetts Catholic Conference at 1-617-367-6060 or go online at: www.macathconf.org.

Bring it to a family gathering and let the others see it. Talk about the Catholic principles and the types of decisions involved.

Think about whom you want to be your health care agent. Ask someone you trust and complete the appointment by filling out the proxy. Discuss your wishes carefully with your agent. You do not have to anticipate every possible scenario. Consult your doctor. Your values and your religious beliefs will help as guides. Get spiritual advice.

Remember also that care at the end of life is not limited to medical treatment. Your wishes about comfort care and hospice, spiritual needs, and tasks to complete are just as important.

Avoid inflexible statements; share hopes and wishes. Times change, views change. Advance planning is an ongoing process of reflection and sharing — the less mind-reading, the better.

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