



Bioethics Review

The Scholl Institute is a nonprofit, Judeo-Christian organization that addresses bioethical issues including euthanasia, (physician-assisted-suicide) the withholding or withdrawing of food and water from non-dying patients, brain death, organ transplantation, genetic engineering, and rights of disabled or mentally ill persons.

TERRI SCHIAVO'S FINAL HOURS - AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT

by Fr. Frank Pavone - National Director, Priests for Life

AMERICA'S SHAME - THIRTEEN DAYS OF TORTURE

We all remember one year ago when Terri Schiavo died a painful death only because she wasn't perfect. Here is a first hand report. Let's pray the memory of Terri will give Americans the will to keep this from happening again.

You may have seen on the news that I was at Terri Schiavo's bedside during the last 14 hours of her earthly life, right up until five minutes before her death. During that time with Terri, joined by her brother and sister, I expressed your care, concern, and prayers. I told Terri over and over that she had many friends around the country, many people who were praying for her and were on her side. I had also told her the same things during my visits to her in the months before her feeding tube was removed, and am convinced she understood.

I've known Terri's family for about six years now and they put me on the visitor's list. Terri was in a hospice but there were police officers stationed outside her room. If I were not on that visitor's list I could not get in that room beyond the armed guard because the visitor's list was kept very, very small and very well controlled. The reason? The euthanasia advocates had to be able to say that Terri was an unresponsive person in some kind of vegetative state, coma or whatever terminology they want to use to suggest that she was completely unresponsive. The only way to prove she was responsive was to see her for yourself.

I went down to see her in September 2004 and again in February 2005.

When her mom first introduced her to me, she stared at me intently. She focused her eyes. She would focus her eyes on whoever was talking to her. If somebody spoke to her from the other part of the room she would turn her head and her eyes towards the person who was talking to her.

You know what some of the doctors have dared to say about this? "Oh, it's just reflex reactions. Unconscious reflex reactions." Interestingly, that's exactly the same thing they say about the unborn child when you look at the video The Silent Scream when the child opens his mouth and tries to move away from the instrument that is about to destroy him. They say, "Oh, that's just an automatic reflex." That's the phrase they always use to dehumanize the person.

I told Terri she has many people around the country and around the world who love her and are praying for her. She looked at me attentively. I

said, "Terri now we are going to pray together, I want to give you a blessing, let's say some prayers." So I laid my hand on her head. She closed her eyes. I said the prayer. She opened her eyes again at the end of the prayer. Her dad leaned over to her and said, "OK Terri now here comes the tickle," because he has a mustache. She would laugh and smile and after he kissed her I saw her return the kiss. Her mom asked her a question at a certain point and I heard her voice. She was trying to respond. She was making sounds in response to her mother's question, not just at odd times and meaningless moments. I heard her trying to say something but she was not, because of her disability, able to articulate the words. So she was responsive.

Now, the night before she died I was in the room for probably a total of 3-4 hours, and then for another hour the next morning - her final hour.

Brothers and sisters to describe the way she looked as peaceful is a total distortion of what I saw. Here now was a person, who for thirteen days had no food or water. She was, as you would expect, very drawn in her appearance as opposed to when I had seen her before. Her eyes were open but they were going from one side to the next, constantly oscillating back and forth, back and forth. The look on her face (I was staring at her for three and a half-hours) I can only describe as a combination of fear and sadness ... a combination of dreaded fear and sadness.

Her mouth was open the whole time. It looked like it was frozen open. She was panting rapidly. It wasn't peaceful in any sense of the word. She was panting as if she had just run a hundred miles. But a shallow panting. Her brother Bobby was sitting opposite me. He was on one side of the bed I was on the other facing him. Terri's head in between us and her sister Suzanne was on my left. We sat there and we had a very intense time of prayer. And we were talking to Terri, urging her to entrust herself completely to the Savior. I assured her repeatedly of the love and prayers and concern of so many people.

We held her hand and stroked her head. During those hours, one of the things I did was to chant, in Latin, some of the most ancient hymns of the Church. One of the chants I used was the "Victimae Paschali Laudis," which is the ancient proclamation of the resurrection of Christ. There, as I saw before my eyes the deadly work of the Culture of Death, I proclaimed the victory of life. "Life and death were locked in a wondrous struggle," the hymn declares. "Life's Captain died, but now lives and reigns forevermore!"

And then we had just times of silence ... just sitting there in silence trying to absorb what was happening.

But besides Bobby and his sister and Terri herself, you know who else was in the room with us? A police officer. The whole time. At least one.

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Sometimes two. Sometimes three armed police officers in the room. You know why they were in the room? They wanted to make sure that we didn't do anything that we weren't supposed to do, like give her communion or maybe a glass of water. In fact, Bobby, sitting on the other side of the bed, would occasionally stand up to lean over his sister. When he stood up and did that, the officer would change position. He would move around towards the foot of the bed so that he could have a direct line of sight on what we were doing. The morning that she died we went in there fairly early and I had to go back outside in front of the hospice to do an interview. In order to go out on time I had a little time piece in my hand and at the beginning of our visit I put it in my left hand, leaned over Terri and extended my right to bless her and we began praying. I closed my eyes and I felt a tap on my left hand. It was the police officer who said, "Father, what do you have in your hand?" I said, "Oh, officer, it's a little time piece." "I'll have to hold it while you're here," he said. We couldn't have anything in our hands. He didn't even know what it was. Maybe I was going to try to give her communion. Maybe I was going to try to moisten her lips. Who knows what terrible thing I was about to do?

You know what the most ironic thing was? There was a little night table in the room. I could put my hand on the table and on Terri's head all within arms reach. You know what was on that table? A vase of flowers filled with water. And I looked at the flowers. They were beautiful. There were roses and other types of flowers and there was another one on the other side of the room at the foot of the bed. Two beautiful bouquets of flowers filled with water. Fully nourished, living, beautiful. And I said to myself, this is absurd. This is absurd. These flowers are being treated better than this woman. She has not had a drop of water for almost two weeks. Why are those flowers there? What type of hypocrisy is this? The flowers were watered. Terri wasn't. The other irony is - had I dipped my hand in that water and put it on her tongue - the officer would have led me out probably under arrest. He would have certainly led me out of the room. Something is wrong here.

As you may have also seen, those who killed Terri were quite angry that I said so. The night before she died, I said to the media that her estranged husband Michael, his attorney Mr. Felos, and Judge Greer were murderers. I also pointed out, that night and the next morning, that contrary to Felos' description, Terri's death was not at all peaceful and beautiful. It was, on the contrary, quite horrifying. In my 16 years as a priest, I never saw anything like it before.

After I said these things, Mr. Felos and others in sympathy with him began attacking me in the press and before the cameras. Some news outlets began making a story out of their attacks and said I was "fanning the flames" of enmity and hatred.

Actually, there's a simple reason why they are so angry with me. They had hoped that they could present Terri's death as a merciful and gentle act. My words took the veil of euphemism away, calling this a killing, and giving eyewitness testimony to the fact that it was anything but gentle. Mr. Felos is a euthanasia advocate, and like all such advocates, he needs to manipulate the language, to sell death in an attractive package. Here he and his friends had a great opportunity to do so. But a priest, seeing their work close-up and then telling the world about it, just didn't fit into their plans.

One of the attacks they made was that a "spiritual person" like a priest should be speaking words of compassion and understanding, instead of venom. But compassion demands truth. A priest is also a prophet, and if he cannot cry out against evil, then he cannot bring about reconciliation. If there is going to be any healing between these families or in this nation, it must start with repentance on the part of those who murdered Terri and now try to cover it up with flowery language.

Another aspect of the Terri Schiavo tragedy is that many people misunderstand its cause and therefore its solution. They think the problem was that Terri did not leave any written instructions about whether she wanted to be kept alive. In order to avoid any such problem in their own lives, they are now told that they have to draw up a "living will." This is both erroneous and dangerous.

Terri's case is not about the withdrawal of life-saving medical treatment, but rather about the killing of a healthy person whose life some regarded as worthless. Terri was not dying, was not on life support, and did not have any terminal illness. Because some thought she would not want to live with her disability, they insisted on introducing the cause of death, namely, dehydration.

So what good is a living will supposed to accomplish, aside from saying, "Please don't argue about killing me, just kill me?"

The danger in our culture is not that we will be over-treated, but rather that we will be under-treated. We already have the right to refuse medical treatment. What we run the risk of losing is the right to receive the most basic humane care - like food and water - in the event we have a disability.

Our culture also promotes the idea that as long as we say we want to die, we have the right to do so. But we have a basic obligation to preserve our own life. A person who leaves clear instructions that they don't want to be fed is breaking the moral law by requesting suicide.

If you want to make plans for your future health care, do not do so by trying to predict the future. The reason you cannot indicate today what medical treatments you do or don't want tomorrow is that you don't know what medical condition you will have tomorrow, nor what treatments will be available to give you the help you need. Living wills try to predict the future, and people can argue over the interpretation of a piece of paper just as much as they argue about what they claim someone said in private.

The better solution is to appoint a health care proxy, who is authorized to speak for you if you are in a condition in which you cannot speak for yourself. This should be a person who knows your beliefs and values, and with whom you discuss these matters in detail. In case you cannot speak for yourself, your proxy can ask all the necessary questions of your doctors and clergy, and make an assessment when all the details of your condition and medical needs are actually known. That's much safer than predicting the future. Appointing a health care proxy in a way that safeguards your right to life is easy. In fact, the National Right to Life Committee has designed a "Will to Live," which can be found at www.nrlc.org and which I recommend highly.

I am in regular contact with Terri's parents, Bob and Mary Schindler, and her siblings, Bobby and Suzanne. They are strong Christians with a beautiful, gentle spirit. If you wish to relay a personal message to them, you can send it to terri@priestsforlife.org and I will pass it along to them myself.

Meanwhile, let us continue to commend Terri to the Lord, mindful of the equal value of every life, no matter how prominent or obscure, healthy or sick.

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