

Day for Life 2024

‘The Lord is my Shepherd – Compassion and Hope at the End of Life’

There has been much discussion in the media recently about ‘assisted suicide’, whereby people who feel they are overburdened by suffering will be facilitated in bringing their lives to a premature end by a change in legislation. The Catholic Church opposes such proposals. As Catholics, along with many people of other faiths and none, we share a different vision about what it is to be fully human, especially when we are suffering and approaching death in the hope of eternal life. People who are coming towards the end of their lives are vulnerable, and recent research shows that many feel themselves a burden on their loved ones and wider society. Jesus shows us that life always has dignity and that there is no such a thing as a useless life. We are called to defend this gift of life to its natural end and to protect vulnerable citizens from a culture that could pressure them into assisted suicide. We support people with the companionship of a listening ear, appropriate treatment, and the best of care, so that their last days can be times of grace, intimacy and love.

Jesus did not send the sick away. Our Lady remained at the foot of the Cross to the very end as Her Son, Jesus, died. Mary is the model of compassionate presence and prayer whom we are called to imitate. People close to death and their loved ones, often go through similar darkness and pain but can come to a more complete acceptance and find peace in those treasured last moments accompanied by spiritual care.

(Bishop Kevin Doran, Bishop John Keenan and Bishop John Sherrington, representing the Bishops Conferences of Ireland, Scotland and England & Wales)



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Meeting Matt – the experience of one priest

I first met Matthew when he was about twenty. His girlfriend, Claire, called into the house one day and asked if she could bring her boyfriend for a blessing, because he had been in hospital having treatment for Leukaemia. He was back home, but he still couldn’t go into public spaces because of the risk of infection. She suggested that she would bring Matt to meet me the following Saturday.

To be honest, when I saw him first, Matt looked a lot healthier and stronger than I had expected. The impression changed a bit, when he took off the woolly hat, because he had lost all his hair from the chemotherapy. We chatted for a while, initially about themselves and then about Matt’s illness. He was hopeful, but realistic. They had opened a door for me by asking if Matt could have a blessing. We ended up celebrating the anointing of the sick and I gave them Holy Communion.

We kept in regular contact after that and I got to know Matt and his family fairly well. A few months later, the leukaemia took hold again and he was back in hospital. It soon became clear,

however, that Matt was not getting better, so he decided to come home and spend his final weeks surrounded by his family. There was nothing more that medical science could do. Matt was dying, but he was still surrounded by a community of care. The hospice team called regularly. Matt’s bed was in an alcove off the sitting room. His parents and siblings and, of course, Claire, accompanied him with love every step of the way.

A couple of days before he died, Matt asked me to come and say Mass for him in the house. He told me he had picked the Gospel himself; the well-known passage from St John: ‘I have given you a new commandment, love one another as I have loved you’. As I was setting up for the Mass, Matt said: ‘If it’s ok, I’d like to say a few words after the Gospel.’ He spoke very simply to those who were gathered around him about how, like Jesus in the Gospel, he would be leaving them very soon. He reassured them that, throughout the experience of his illness, he had felt surrounded by love, and he encouraged them to continue loving one another’. That was it; nothing complicated, but very powerful.

Matt did not just live with dignity through his final illness; he grew in his humanity and in his faith. All we had to do was to accompany him and to make sure that he never felt abandoned or alone. It was the story of the Good Samaritan in real life.

For further information and resources see www.councilforlife.ie

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