

an important decision. Your selection of a person or persons to make decisions for you if you are unable to do so is of paramount importance. In many ways this form of a living will is similar to a durable power of attorney for health care.

End of life decisions are rarely clear cut and often require deliberation on the part of the person making the decisions about treatment. It would therefore be necessary for your proxy to understand the importance of your Catholic faith in end of life decisions. Additionally your proxy should also understand the Catholic Church's teaching on extraordinary care. The person you designate as your proxy should be someone who can be an advocate for you in health care situations to insure appropriate medical treatments and/or adequate palliative care.

You should make a point to communicate with your proxy about what is contained in your living will and why those provisions are important to you.

End of life decisions are frequently difficult and usually not clear cut. Speaking with a parish priest, hospital chaplain or the Office for Respect Life can prove to be very helpful.

For further information, call 412-456-3156.

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*“Those who believe in God and in eternal life know well that despite its human tragedy, death, the consequence of human sin, must also be the gateway to their final and eternal union with God, their Creator and Father. In this regard, let us remember what the fathers of the Second Vatican Council said to Christians in their ‘Message to the Poor, Sick and the Suffering’ in December 1965: ‘Christ did not do away with suffering. He did not even wish to unveil to us entirely the mystery of suffering. He took suffering on himself, and this is enough for you to understand all its value.’ Thus the Christian sees suffering and death itself as the opportunity to unite himself inwardly with the sufferings and death of Christ, who died and rose for us.”*

*Pontifical Academy for Life  
The Dignity of Dying People  
Released March 8, 1999*

### A Catholic Perspective on Living Wills & Advance Directives

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## Difficult Decisions?

Living Wills  
&  
Advanced  
Directives

A Catholic  
Perspective

Serious Thoughts on  
Serious Situations:  
*Ethical Considerations  
in end of life decisions*

## Making Ethical End of Life Decisions

Many health care providers request that their patients sign living wills (also known as advanced directives). These forms, often provided by physicians, hospitals or lawyers, usually contain a list of various medical treatments with boxes next to them to be checked as a directive to health care providers.

From a Catholic perspective, it is good and worthwhile to think about how you or your loved ones will make end of life decisions. However, there is a problem with the type of form which reduces ethical decision-making to checking off boxes. Every medical treatment can be considered both appropriate care and extraordinary care depending on the circumstances requiring the treatment. It is therefore important that all those considering signing a living will or an advanced directive keep in mind that it is not wise to stipulate in advance that a specific treatment be withheld.

The majority of people understand



a living will to be a document that limits a health care provider from administering an unwanted treatment. And that can be a necessary component of an advanced directive. Under Church teaching it is not necessary to use extraordinary means to prolong one's life or to partake in a treatment that would cause a significant burden.

In order to effectively make end of life decisions one must understand how the term "extraordinary" is defined in the eyes of the Church. The Catholic Church teaches that a medical treatment or procedure that carries with it little hope of benefit or is burdensome to the patient is "extraordinary" and is not obligatory. Serious reflection should be given to the determination of whether a treatment is appropriate or extraordinary.

However with the arrival of managed health care living wills have also become a safeguard to assure medical care that might otherwise be denied. Society now embraces a utilitarian mentality requiring people to live up to a certain quality of life standard in order to maintain their value as a human being. This is in direct conflict with our Judeo-Christian heritage which holds that all life is the gift of a loving God.

The living will that has been approved by the Catholic Bishops of Pennsylvania provides for a

comprehensive understanding of the human person. It reiterates the Church's position that human life is sacred and inviolable at every stage and in every situation and that a human being never loses his or her dignity regardless of physical, psychological or relational circumstances. It specifically says that euthanasia or assisted suicide (the deliberate taking of life) are not morally permissible.

It does not contain any boxes that need to be checked to indicate future guidance about medical decisions. You will see instead a section directing that your spiritual needs be taken care of (Sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick and Viaticum).

It also explains the difference between ordinary and extraordinary care and makes specific mention of the continuation of nutrition and hydration. It further directs that ordinary medical care including pain management be instituted.

The document also makes a provision that all medically indicated measures and medically assisted nutrition and hydration be provided to a pregnant woman in order to sustain her life until her unborn child is born.

This document also gives you the opportunity to designate a proxy to make medical decisions for you if you lack sufficient capacity to make or communicate decisions about health care. This is