

By Kim Cardwell

Sanctity of Life Ministry coordinator at St. Peter's Church in Waldorf, Maryland.

This past summer, my Facebook feed was flooded with news stories and pictures of a vibrant woman with a wide smile. This woman was from California, where assisted suicide had recently been legalized. The news articles detailed her plan to end her life. Since she faced a grim diagnosis of ALS and the promise of a debilitating death, she wanted to take matters into her own hands. With the support of her friends and family, she decided to end her life through assisted suicide. Along with these articles, I saw pictures of her surrounded by loved ones as she neared her chosen date of death.

As I viewed these articles, my thoughts trailed back to my grandmother who died in August 2014. She fought cancer and won three times. But in 2013, she began a gradual decline. The cancer came back and this time there was nothing anyone could do. Every time I visited, her decline was obvious. She wasted away to 100 pounds. But whenever I visited her, she exuded joy. She was always happy to see me and my children. Just the sight of us would lift her spirits.

Every visit became harder to bear. No one wants to see their loved one waste away, so I can see why the family and friends of the woman from California supported her choice. In fact during the last month of my grandmother's life, I found my thoughts wandering into the assisted suicide mindset. If Granny didn't want to suffer, why should she be made to? Who am I, or anyone, to say that she has to suffer when she's just going to die anyway? That mindset came to a screeching halt on August 22, the day before she died.

I went to the hospital with Cecilia, my two-month-old baby, to see her. When I arrived, Granny was wavering in and out of consciousness. Her breathing was labored. Her entire body struggled to inhale and exhale. Her skin tone had faded to a pale yellow. My aunt gently woke her to let her know that I was there. As soon as she saw Cecilia and me, her face lit up with joy!

She had lost her ability to speak because she was too weak to form words. However, she focused in on Cecilia and Cecilia's eyes met hers. Both of them smiled at each other. Cecilia cooed in delight and Granny kept smiling and stroking her foot with her fingertips. Neither one of them could speak, but the love they

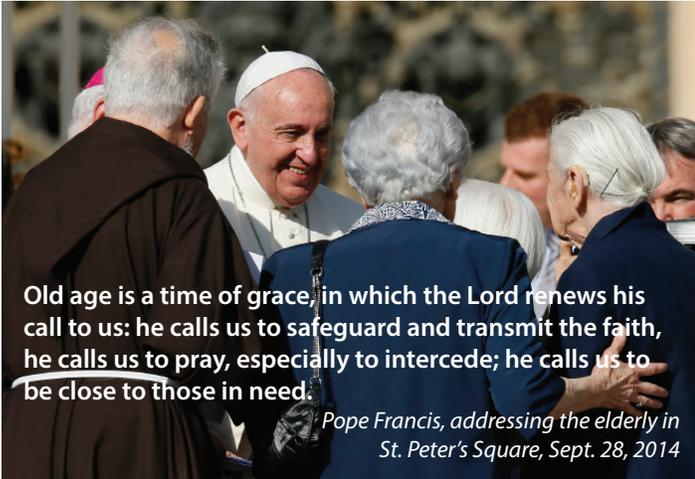


Kim on her wedding day with her grandmother.

communicated back and forth was something I will cherish forever. There wasn't a dry eye in the room. God was there with us and we could feel the love of the Holy Spirit. When Cecilia is old enough to understand, I will tell her the joy she gave to her great-grandmother in her final moments. That was the last time I saw Granny in a conscious state. She died the following evening surrounded by her loved ones.

All life is sacred. But to me, life is especially sacred when it is difficult to live. I wish the circumstances had been different for that woman whose bright smile filled my Facebook feed. I wish she could have experienced joy in the midst of her suffering just as my grandmother did in her final moments. I wish her friends and family had felt comfortable giving her the same type of support that my grandmother experienced, and I know that for many people these wishes are just not true. Still, despite any and every form of suffering, life itself is always sacred.

In the days after my grandmother's death, this verse from 2 Corinthians brought me peace and confirmation that her suffering was not in vain. *"Therefore, we are not discouraged; although our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison."* 2 Cor 4:16-17



Old age is a time of grace, in which the Lord renews his call to us: he calls us to safeguard and transmit the faith, he calls us to pray, especially to intercede; he calls us to be close to those in need.

Pope Francis, addressing the elderly in St. Peter's Square, Sept. 28, 2014

CNS photo/Paul Haring

In 2017, Maryland introduced legislation to legalize physician assisted suicide. Fortunately this legislation failed; however, Washington, D.C. has legalized assisted suicide. Assisted suicide, a grave offense against the sacred dignity of human life, presents major problems even from a secular point of view:

1. While the bill requires a life expectancy of six months or less, it's impossible to predict a terminal diagnosis accurately.
2. Patients are not required to receive a mental health screening for depression before receiving a lethal prescription.
3. No family notification is required in advance.
4. No doctor, nurse, or independent witness is required to be present when the lethal dose is taken, creating serious potential for abuse.
5. People can pick up their lethal prescription like any other drug at a local pharmacy.

Must I do everything possible to prolong life?

Are there times when medical therapies, procedures, or equipment may be withheld or withdrawn?

- God's gift of life obliges us to faithfully protect and preserve that which He has given us. This does not mean, however, extension of life at all costs.
- Refusal of life-sustaining treatment is permissible in some cases and prohibited in others.
- At some point in time, natural death does approach and should be accepted.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

"Discontinuing medical procedures that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate; it is the refusal of 'over-zealous' treatment. Here one does not will to cause death; one's inability to impede it is merely accepted." (CCC #2278)

Prayer of the Elderly

Grant, O Lord of life,
That we may savor every season of our lives as a gift filled with promise for the future.
Grant that we may lovingly accept your will, and place ourselves each day in your merciful hands.
And when the moment of our definitive "passage" comes, grant that we may face it with serenity, without regret for what we shall leave behind. Amen.

Pope Saint John Paul II