

## **The Catholic Doctor is In: On Quality of Life**

I recently saw a man in his mid-70's who came to my office accompanied by his wife for his yearly check-up. He had successful coronary artery bypass surgery about 12 years prior and his heart was still doing well. Unfortunately, about 3 years earlier he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's' dementia and during this visit I could really see the mental deterioration. He had very significant short term memory loss and I wasn't confident that he would even remember if he had experienced any chest pain in recent months. His wife would patiently give him adequate time to answer my questions and if he didn't answer in a timely or accurate fashion she would answer for him. I could easily see the love in her eyes and her caring attitude toward her husband. She asked me multiple questions about his medical care and was clearly trying to make sure I remained dedicated to giving him the best of care.

One might ask the question "What is his quality of life?" I have had these discussions with patients as well as family members of my patients multiple times over the years. I am guilty of saying, "His quality of life isn't very good anymore." It did not occur to me until more recent times that there is so much more to consider than the perceived quality of an individual's life.

How about the example of the patient I just presented with dementia? Not too long ago I may have not seen this from his wife's perspective or, for that matter, God's. She has been presented with an opportunity to serve the Lord by serving her husband. While I was being narrow minded by thinking only of my patient with dementia, one really needs to explore the whole picture. His wife's spirituality may very well grow exponentially as she makes sacrifices for her husband and receives the graces sent by the Holy Spirit. Other friends and family members may also grow in faith and spirit because of this man's illness. This man may not really be suffering and he appeared quite happy in his state of dementia. Who are we to judge "quality of life?"

Now on a more personal note, my mother was in a nursing home facility in Cleveland for about 10 years before her death. She developed dementia at about age 72 and by age

74 my siblings and I had to make the difficult decision to place her in a nursing home for her own safety. She didn't know me the last several years of her life and I frequently prayed that God would take her. And yes I was thinking that she had poor quality of life. But as I look back there was more in play here as well. When her dementia progressed to the point that she was no longer able to care for herself at home, I lobbied to move her to Fort Wayne and place her in a nursing home so I could keep a close eye on her. One of my sisters who lives in the Cleveland area wanted her to stay in her home town and promised to visit often and help care for her so that is what we did. My sister kept her word and visited my mom often and began a tradition of visiting her every Saturday with her two young sons. They brought great joy and comfort to my mother and they were the last family members to no longer be recognized by my mother Regina. Only after her death did it occur to me that my mother's progressive illness had helped shape the lives of these two young boys as they grew into young men. They were given a great example by my sister, to visit the sick and honor thy mother. As spiritual writer Henri Nouwen says in his book Can You Drink the Cup, "When we lift the cup of life and share with one another our sufferings and joys in mutual vulnerability, the new covenant can become visible among us. The surprise of it all is that it is often the least among us who reveal to us that our cup is a cup of blessings."

In the future I will be very careful with how I use the phrase "quality of life" and would suggest that the next time you hear this phrase you may want to take a moment and look at the whole picture. As I look back at what my thoughts were during the last years of my mother's life, I realize my thinking was flawed. Rather than praying to God to take her from this earth, I should have prayed that her life would continue to be an instrument used for the glory of God, which it was!

We need to learn how to recognize burdens as opportunities to serve the Lord. As it says in Colossians 3: 23-24, "Whatever you do, work at it with your whole being, Do it for the Lord rather than for men, since you know full well you will receive an inheritance from him as your reward."

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