

## FOR THE GOOD OF THE HOUSEHOLD

April 4, 2005

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### MAKING LIGHT OF LIFE

Never has the battle between the culture of life and the culture of death (spoken of by our Holy Father) been as evident as it was the weeks preceding Easter. While the Church celebrates the Season of Life, we have been made very much aware of the public debate about whether or not Terri Schiavo should die. Have there ever been so many people in our nation interested in having a particular individual die, - by starvation, no less?

Life has been spoken of as if it were a commodity that can be negotiated. While the majority of Congress was willing to act, the courts objected.

The accusation has been made that this public dialogue was not about Terri Schiavo at all. I agree with them. It was not about any one person. It was about the gift of life with which we have all been entrusted.

I heard someone say that Congress has more important things to do than to be concerned about whether or not Terri Schiavo has her feeding tubes removed or reinserted. That is contrary to one of the most important foundational documents of this nation. The Declaration of Independence, the document that founded our nation, states that life is among certain unalienable rights and that governments are instituted for the purpose of securing those rights. Therefore, it would appear to me that Congress was trying to act in a most noble way and in accord with the purpose for which this nation was founded.

It was claimed that having her feeding tubes removed would have been Terri Schiavo's wish. There are those who dispute that, since there is nothing in writing. However, even if she may have indicated to someone that she would not wish any extraordinary means used to keep her artificially alive (if it came to that), feeding someone is not something extraordinary. It is ordinary and normal to feed someone who cannot feed herself or himself. This is done in extended care facilities and nursing homes all the time. Even prisoners condemned to die are fed. They are not left to die of starvation.

Before you go off to make a living will (as so many have been prompted by this case to do) please remember a couple of basic truths. Nutrition and hydration (eating and drinking) is everyone's right. We may not starve a person to death (that is homicide); including ourselves (that is suicide). Sometimes that means a feeding tube. That is different from so-called life support systems such as an artificial respirator. Patients in a persistent vegetative state, even though seemingly unconscious, are very much alive and do not need life support systems. They do need to be fed.

There are exceptions. In cases of patients whose death is imminent or if the patient is going to endure greater suffering without the hope of recovery, feeding tubes need not be

inserted. This, of course, is not Terri Schiavo's case. She already had a feeding tube, and her suffering resulted from starvation as a result of that tube being deliberately removed.

The Roman Catholic Bishops of Pennsylvania issued a teaching document on this very topic several years ago. In it, we stated that the primary focus should be on the patient. It does not appear to me that such was the case with Terri Schiavo.