



Catholic Diocese of Spokane, Washington

The Bishop Writes

"Everything is grace"

by Bishop William S. Skylstad

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As you are aware, Initiative 1000, on the ballot this November, is about assisted suicide. If it is passed, this law will allow the medical community to assist those who wish to terminate their lives. So it is a change in the present law of protection.

My father died two summers ago at the age of 97. His situation in the last few years of life was marked by a gradual deterioration that afflicted his mind and body. In the last couple of years before he died, I think he recognized me when I tried to visit him at least once a month in Harmony House in Brewster. The drives to and from Brewster were always times of rich reflection for me. Even though my visits were relatively brief, they remain treasured memories. I have a picture of us together, from one of those visits.

My youngest sister, Bertha Jean, died almost eight years ago after a lengthy illness in Bellevue. As her health declined, I admired her inner courage and strength. Like Dad, her last few years were spent in a nursing home. She was very dependent upon others for mobility, including the bathroom. Every day, her husband, my brother-in-law, visited her in the nursing home – something I admired tremendously.

My oldest brother, Mike, of Okanogan, died a year ago last Lent. He too was afflicted with deteriorating health his last few years. He was one of the first in our area to receive a left ventricular assist, which is a special pump to aid a failing heart. For the last two years he was tied to a battery pack that had to be changed every four hours, every day, all day – 24/7. Our conversation was always honest and realistic about what might happen. He needed care and his wife considered it a privilege to be with him in support. That spirit, too, touched me. Mike died at 69.

My youngest brother, Steve, died last January in East Wenatchee following complications from gall bladder surgery. For the last 18 years of life, he was in a motorized wheel chair, which he could also use

as a driver's seat in his specialized van. He loved to travel the countryside, especially in the mountains. His wife all these years was his primary care giver. I also found her spirit generous and totally dedicated to him. He always had a kind of spunky spirit about him, and I never heard him complain once.

In retirement, his last few years of life centered around his family, the telephone, the Internet, and assisting others. Steve was just 61 at the time of his death.

Although there is sadness, these four deaths in my immediate family also have been times of great grace and blessing for me, especially as each of them approached death. Some people have commented recently that it must have been difficult to lose so many close family members in such a short period of time. The physical presence is always missed, of course, but I have to say there is something about these closely related events that strengthens, inspires, and teaches. I consider that reality to be most positive, and is most truly a gift.

Purposely taking one's life to short-circuit the natural process of approaching death is more than the loss of a life: it is lost inspiration and lost grace. We are all interconnected as God's family, brothers and sisters in Christ. In the Gospel, Jesus asks us to take up our cross and follow him. We are to respect the gift of life we have been given in our very selves. Our life's journey is almost always mysterious. Sometimes it is surprising. Sometimes it is hard. But no matter what life might hold, it is God who has given us that life. In the words of St. Paul, we all live in an earthen vessel. We are all terminal. The end of life in this world will come in God's time.

Clearly, life can be challenging, especially when we live with increased limitations, to the point of death. There can be suffering. Sometimes there is need for total dependence upon others. But we are God's, and we accept the journey of life God has given us. Suicide takes from God his rightful role of Divine Providence.

We never know what God has in mind for us. Some years ago, when I visited Archbishop Murphy of Seattle shortly before he died of acute leukemia, he told me he had learned more in his last few months than in all of his previous life.

In the recent conversation about Initiative 1000, the focus of those in support of this measure seems to have changed from alleviating pain (the argument used a few years ago when a similar initiative in Washington was defeated) to personal choice. Yes, we do have rights, but *those rights are not absolute*. I do not have a right to take another person's life, and I don't have the right to take my own life. The full reality of our lives is the Kingdom of God, and we are God's. We must not make *ourselves* "gods"!

Finally, I offer a suggestion. Besides sharing information in the coming months about the evil of this initiative, I hope that every one of us in the Catholic community can take upon ourselves the mission of accompanying those who face a difficult time at the end of their earthly lives. We are all companions on the journey. There is no excuse for allowing any person approaching death to feel lonely and unappreciated. That final companionship should be one of the special missions of our parish communities.

Truly, as St. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans, "Everything is grace" (4:16). It certainly is. May we support one another in living out that reality.

Blessings and peace to all!