

Homily Regarding the Assisted Suicide Initiative

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There are many things in this world that can cause us to be anxious. In the face of our anxieties, there is one thing that God wants for us, and that is peace. We don't know why, but something was causing the Christian Community at Philippi to be anxious. St Paul's letter to the Philippians offers a message of peace. St. Paul tells them that the peace of God "will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

Perhaps there is nothing more that will cause someone to be anxious and afraid than to hear that they have a terminal illness. When Barbara Wagner a resident of Oregon State heard that she had terminal lung cancer, her first reaction was fear. Her doctor encouraged her and prescribed to her a drug called Tarceva, which he said would "put a lid" on her cancer. She went away feeling much encouraged. Then she received a letter from her insurance company stating that: "Treatment for advanced cancer could not be covered" however, prescriptions for "Physicians' Aid in Dying" in accord with Oregon's "Death with Dignity Act" would be covered.

My brothers and sisters, we have a very serious choice to make this fall in Washington when we will decide whether or not to vote in I-1000, the so-called "Death with Dignity" initiative. I want to make clear that I am NOT here to tell you how to vote. It is my role as pastor to help you to inform your conscience as you vote. The Story of Barbara Wagner is a good example of why I-1000, which is modeled after the Oregon Death with Dignity Act, is not good public policy for Washington State.

One reason why laws exist is to protect the weak and vulnerable. There are those who say that we need to change the law so that are able to control their exit, as former Governor Booth Gardner puts it. However, we don't need to change the law for people to do so. People already obtain medications on their own and put an end to their lives without the support of the law. Nothing can stop someone who really wants to end his or her life. Changing the law threatens to put the vulnerable at risk, so that those who **want to live like Barbara Wagner, could very well lose the support to do so.** Others are at risk as well. I-1000 says that only those who have

six months or less to live will be allowed to be given drugs to end their life. Yet, how many of us know people who were at death's door, and now are still alive and functioning well, two three five years later? Doctors' ability to accurately predict when death will come is poor, except at the very the very end. The ones who might feel most pressured to use this option are those who often feel they are a burden: the elderly, those who lack health insurance or who are poor. In other words, the least among us, the ones that society is called to protect. Consider that I-1000 only *suggests* and does not require a mental health evaluation before the lethal prescription would be administered. Last year in Oregon 49 people requested physician assisted suicide. None of those 49 had a mental health evaluation beforehand.

Real "Death with Dignity" comes with providing the proper emotional, spiritual and medical care for those who are in the dying stages of life. Today's medications can control the physical pain in almost all cases with those illnesses would otherwise make the dying experience unbearable. Sometimes those medications have the side effect of hastening death. The intention here is not to kill, but to give comfort and care. Hospice can help overwhelmed families provide the emotional and physical care for loved ones who alone would be overwhelmed by the experience. In most cases, when the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of the dying are met, then their desire for an early demise radically decreases. The answer to the difficult question of how to best treat the dying is not with death, it is with our commitment to their care. Remember that the Washington State Medical Association doesn't support this initiative. A law that radically changes the physician-patient relationship, a law that basically says it is OK for a doctor to put to death those who need our care, a law that slowly chips away at the role of society to care for those who are most vulnerable is not a good one for our state.