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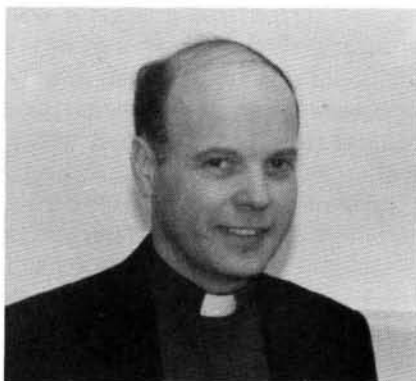
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# The Christian Notion of Person and the Comatose Patient

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The notion of "person" has a distinctly Christian pedigree. As an idea, it has stimulated in Christian tradition deep philosophical and theological reflection which we hope to explore. Today the exigency for such an exploration arises more immediately in the practical order, where certain contemporary ethical issues like killing the unborn or withholding food from the irreversibly comatose are inextricably bound up with determining if the unborn or comatose patient is a person. Such a determination will be beyond reach, however, if, in the theoretical order our notion of person does not exceed the strictures of empirical science. Moralists in the field of bioethics are surely aware of that.<sup>1</sup> It is time now to reclaim the Christian notion of person and put it at the center of ethical reflection.

In proceeding this way, we are not, of course, breaking new ground. Rather we are merely taking our lead from Vatican Council II which, relative to previous Church councils, was the first to give sustained attention in the document, "Gaudium et Spes" to the Christian understanding of the person. That in the wake of the council the person has remained central to Catholic moral reasoning is evidenced, for example, in the 1975 Vatican Declaration on sexual ethics. Though contested by some theologians, the moral methodology of the declaration is unmistakably

that of Vatican II with its concentration on the human person.<sup>2</sup> In a lecture just recently published, Cardinal Ratzinger, of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, spoke to the issue of technology and reproduction and raised the question of the person.<sup>3</sup> Finally, it should be added, too, that in philosophical and religious writing, no Pope has ever addressed the question of the person more systematically and consistently than John Paul II.<sup>4</sup>

Our procedure will be simple. We will explore the notion of person first philosophically and theologically and then conclude by seeing what bearing the Christian understanding of the person has on the issue of withholding nourishment from a comatose patient.

### Metaphysics

From the outset, it should be pointed out that the foundation of the Church's understanding of the person comes from *metaphysics*, a branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and existence of all reality. Called the "science of being", metaphysics deals with all being, whether material or spiritual, and views it in terms of such principles as "essence" and "existence", "act" and "potency", "form" and "matter", "substance" and "accidents". As we explore a particular instance of being, namely, that of the person, we will have a chance to explain these words.<sup>5</sup>

The metaphysical system according to which the Church understands the person, derives from Aristotle and his greatest follower succeeding him by 1,500 years, St. Thomas Aquinas. By enlisting metaphysics, the Church in no way excludes other branches of science which can serve her understanding of those matters relevant to her faith. We may add too that long before the advent of modern science, philosophy and metaphysics accorded the Church her greatest gains in understanding and enunciating the mysteries of her faith. Nowhere is this more evident than in the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation, where the issues concern respectively the being of one God Who is, nevertheless, three persons and the being of one Person, Jesus Christ, Who has, nevertheless, two natures, the human and the divine.

We specifically mention these mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation because they are the precise locus in which the notion of the person arises in Christian tradition. While the word "person," as we shall see, had an ancient lineage, the meaning of the word achieved its clearest definition in Christian revelation. There, once the word had been domesticated, it was, according to St. Thomas, the most fitting of all terms to ascribe to God.

'Person' means that which is most perfect in the whole of nature, namely, what subsists in rational nature. Now since every kind of perfection should be attributed to God, because his nature contains every perfection, it is fitting that the word 'person' should be used of God.<sup>6</sup>

The word "person" seems to be of Etruscan origin and referred to the mask worn by the devotees of the goddess *Phersu*. Later, making its way into the Roman theatre, the mask was fashioned according to the character or role being portrayed. With a play on words, the Romans called the mask the "persona" (from the Latin *per sonare*, to speak through) since it was that through which the actor spoke. While in the beginning the "persona" was a visual, acoustic and dramatic device, by the time of Cicero (1st century, B.C.) the word has assumed the meanings commonly associated with person, namely, a concrete personage, a juridical being with legal rights and duties, and finally, a human individual.<sup>7</sup>

### **"An individual substance of a rational nature"**

As we said above, it was the adoption by Christianity of the word "person" that prompted its receiving further precision. The 3rd century lawyer and theologian, Tertullian, made in reference to Christ a remarkable statement which went unnoticed at the time, but anticipated what the great ecumenical councils were later to say about the Trinity and Christ. Tertullian called Christ a "person," a word not found in the Scriptures. "We see two states that are not confused but conjoined in one person, Jesus, God and man."<sup>8</sup>

It would take us too far afield to outline the sometimes bloody debates that occurred at the councils of Nicea and Chalcedon where the early Church defined its biblical faith in categories amenable to the Greco-Roman mentality. Suffice it to say that the councils transposed into metaphysical terms the biblical revelation of a God Who, though one, was also in some way three and of a Jesus Who, though one, was also somehow two. Confusing? It would have been impossible for the young Church convincingly to express her faith both in the Triune God and in the God-man, Jesus, had not the notion of person been available to her. According to the conciliar statements,

*Persona* referred to that which is threefold in the Trinity and one in Christ; [while] *natura* or *substantia*, later also *essentia*, designated that which is one in the Trinity and dual in Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Surprisingly, in maintaining that God was three persons with one (divine) nature and that Christ was one person with two natures (human and divine), the early councils had left the word "person" undefined. It was the 6th century philosopher-statesman Boethius who was the first to define the person. According to him a person is "an individual substance of rational nature".

Boethius drew on metaphysics which employed terms that were precise and technical. And herein lies our contemporary difficulty. Steeped in the empirical world of science and technology, our modern mentality balks at metaphysical thinking, especially the categories of the ancients. The word "substance," for example, is a fairly good indicator of how far we have

come from metaphysical thought. Today, substance denotes something material as in the expression "substance abuse" or "controlled substance". Yet to Boethius, following Aristotle, a substance is any being that exists in itself, a self-contained entity, a subject of properties. Where a being, such as color, shape, weight, required another for its existence, this was designated an "accident". An accident, like the crease in one's pants, could exist only by inhering in a substance. Even in speaking of an accident, we can discern how removed we are from Boethius. For us an "accident" occurs on the thruway or when a toilet is not reached.

The metaphysical term "nature" fares a bit better with modern man. Though we often associate it with flora and fauna, as in the expression "mother nature", we do admit an abstract use of the word when, for example, we say that it is in man's nature to laugh or to make tools. Technically speaking, nature is the intrinsic principle of operation by which a being acts in a way proper to its kind. For the record, we may add that the word "essence" is often used as a synonym for nature when viewed in the abstract. When nature is not viewed in the abstract, but as concretely existing, it receives the name "form". In the lexicon of metaphysics, form is not, as the word connotes today, shape or size. Because of its importance for our later discussion, we should look more closely at this idea of form and its correlative idea, "matter".

### **All Natures are Composite Beings**

Since for the most part every kind of being is material, metaphysics concludes that with the exception of God and angels, all natures are composite beings, that is, beings constituted by two principles, "form" and "matter".

In Aristotle's system, matter is not a substance either in the common or metaphysical sense. Rather, matter is a *principle* which connotes indeterminacy and potentiality. Only in conjunction with its correlative principle, form, can matter be actualized and configured into the recognizable stuff we associate with a rock or a tree or a man. While matter is pure potency waiting to become something, form is the activating principle which organizes matter to be a particular something and, as it were, shows through it so that we can recognize a rock as essentially different from a tree and a tree as essentially different from a man. Each of these aforementioned entities has a different nature or essence which, thanks to the form, is concretely realized.

Thus, with the exception of the divine and angelic natures, every nature is a composite of form and matter. Where the nature is living, its form is called "soul". Every living creature possesses a soul. That of a plant differs from that of an animal which differs from that of a man. Since the form gives existence to the nature, the soul of a man, for example, enables him to share a common nature or essence with all men. Within a common essence or nature, what distinguishes one creature from another, however,

is matter. Matter once in-formed is the principle of individuation. In human nature, that matter is usually referred to as a "body". Incidentally, the ancients came to believe that in vegetative and animal natures, soul and matter were extinguished together at death but in human nature, despite the death of the body, the soul remained immortal.

Let us return finally to Boethius. Besides his use of the words "substance" and "nature", Boethius uses the qualifiers "individual" and "rational". The latter term maintains its self-evidence today as it did when Aristotle used it. "Rational" qualifies a being as intellectual, that is, as possessing the power to know and to choose — spiritual acts that enable the possessor to transcend the material order. "Individual", as Boethius intends the term, means simply singular and apart but not necessarily in virtue of matter.

Thus, in his definition, Boethius has conceived the person as a distinct, self-contained entity which reasons and chooses. Having wound our way through metaphysics, we probably feel a certain disappointment. Whether viewed from the perspective of common sense or metaphysics, Boethius's conception hardly qualifies as earth-shattering. All he has told us is that a person is an individual instance of human nature. But, in fact, Boethius has done something far more important. In the wake of the ecumenical councils concerned with the triune God and the dual-natured Christ, Boethius, with his definition, has claimed for theology the philosophical notion of person. In so doing, he has established in Christian thought an analogical relationship between the person of God and the person of man. Consequently,

The unique trinitarian or christological content that the concept acquires in theology casts its light back upon the general (or philosophical) understanding without the latter having, therefore, to leave the realm of what is generally human. If this is the case, then it can be asserted from the outset . . . that the word *person* in the sense of human being, and in contradistinction to mere individuality, receives its special dignity in history when it is illuminated by the unique theological meaning.<sup>10</sup>

St. Thomas took over Boethius's definition and further reflected on its applicability to those in the Trinity. In acknowledging, like St. Augustine before him, the unique relations enjoyed by the Father, Son and Spirit, Thomas concluded to what he called "incommunicability".<sup>11</sup> In his use of the term, Thomas extrapolated from the notions of substance and rationality further characteristics, namely, that a person is a complete nature, possesses the nature as his own and stands separate from others. For Thomas, incommunicability is not a failure to communicate but rather the very basis for any human intercourse: the realization that the human subject is a distinct "I".

### **Notion of Incommunicability**

Thomas's notion of incommunicability as predicated of the divine Persons has definite ramifications for understanding the human person.

No longer is the human person a faceless individual of the species, a concrete example of an abstraction. In possessing, rather than in being possessed by, a rational nature, the human person as complete and unique, stands master of his own thinking and choosing. This self-possession, albeit as one sharing human nature, earns from Thomas the comment that a person is distinguished from all other natures by his "dignity".<sup>12</sup> In fact, of all the composite natures, nothing exceeds in dignity that of the person.

What then, does the Christian notion of person add to Boethius's mere philosophical definition? The Christian notion adds to the person those qualities bespeaking "the uniqueness, the incomparability and therefore irreplaceability of the individual."<sup>13</sup>

It was because the term person could be used analogously of both God and man that Thomas concluded to the incomparable dignity and uniqueness of each human being. Incidentally, long before Thomas, St. Augustine, without benefit of Boethius's definition, has pressed the analogy to conclude that as God possessed one divine nature within which there existed three independent but mutual relations — Father, Son and Spirit — a man possessed a human nature with the triple powers of memory, understanding and will. Whether like Thomas we view man's personal dignity in terms of God's dignity or like Augustine see man's intellectual powers in terms of God's tri-personal life, the point is that the precise locus for understanding the Catholic notion of the person is the mystery of God.

### God's "Image and Likeness"

For Augustine, Boethius and Thomas, the mystery of God revealed itself in *sacra pagina*, sacred scripture, which was the unquestioned starting point for any speculation. If they maintained in the speculative order an analogical relationship between the person of God and the person of man, it was because the Bible revealed that relationship really existing in the natural order created by God. For Genesis recounts that in creating the world, God made in His own "image and likeness" the man who was called Adam (1:26). Thus, even before Boethius defined person philosophically, the Greek and Latin Fathers found its meaning within the biblical data.<sup>14</sup>

As we know from the first chapter of Genesis, God crowned His creation with man and gave him dominion over the earth. Although in the story of creation, man's composite nature is clearly manifest, the early Fathers emphasized one-sidedly man's intellectual and volitional powers as likening him to God. Viewing man's inner form or soul as imaging God, the Fathers tended to denigrate man's bodily nature. Despite this weakness, they were unanimous in conceiving man as a person who stands in an immediate relation to God.

Man exists in lively exchange with his creator and this destiny is not added to his substantial nature but enters into his very constitution.<sup>15</sup>

That man's very nature or constitution is in itself an exchange with God, stems from the biblical fact that God imparted His own breath into man's nostrils (Gen.2:7). To animate man who was mere dust, God infused into him an immortal soul. The soul's source, therefore, is God.

Through the breathing of God there appears in man a "Thou" who belongs to God and is the "image of God," for this "Thou" is able to say "I" in its own right, and in its own right can also address God as "Thou." Out of nothing God provides Himself with a partner for dialogue . . . .<sup>16</sup>

Every person, therefore, comes from God. In virtue of his God-given soul, man is a "thou" whose spiritual nature images that of God. In metaphysical thought, if we pardon its intrusion here, the imparting of existence to a nature through the form is called "first act". In the case of man, first acting is the imparting of existence to human nature through the soul. Obviously, "first" implies a "second". In metaphysics, "second act" refers to the *operations* of the powers inherent in the nature. In the case of man, second act is the operations of his powers of thinking and willing. In admitting, therefore, the distinction between a nature and its operations, we can say of man that in virtue of his soul, man's first act is to be a "thou," while in the virtue of his operative powers of knowing and choosing, his second act is "to say 'I' [and to] address God as 'Thou.'" If in man, first act images the one God in him, second act involving multiple powers likens him to the Trinity.<sup>17</sup> Be that as it may, man, by his nature and its operations, is equipped for an inter-personal relation with God. In short, the human person is inherently destined for God.

While it can be said that a person's very existence is intended to be his relationship to God,<sup>18</sup> it follows in virtue of a person's material nature that he enjoys another relationship. As a corporeal creature, the person is related to the entire cosmos. But, similar to his relation with God, so with the world, the person has a peculiarly unique relation.

Genesis reveals that after forming man from the earth's dust (2:7), God commissioned him to subdue the earth and to take charge of it (1:26-28). Having made the world for man, God entrusts it to him and places man at its summit. In the created order, therefore, man becomes God's "stand-in" and exercises a certain lordship not unlike that of God Himself.

This likeness makes man similar to God in that man represents God as lord of creation, behaves as his delegate so that creation has a certain subservience to him.<sup>19</sup>

The view that man is God's surrogate in the world adds a new depth of understanding to the notion of man as God's image and likeness. Not only is man an "I" who has a personal relation with God, but vis-a-vis the material world stands with God in a "partnership" as well.<sup>20</sup> In keeping with his dignity as God's representative, man is to exercise in creation the powers bestowed on him, using the world in the service of his dialogue with God. Seen in functional terms then, man has a God-appointed role to care for all creatures over whom he stands as lord.



## 'Far Afield' Approach

It would take us too far afield to explore the biblical account of man's failure in his relation and partnership with God and the disruption that ensued in the created order. Viewing the consequences of man's "fall", the Latin and Greek Fathers regarded man's sin as sullyng, but not removing, from his nature the image of God. Until the coming of Christ Who is "the image of the invisible God" (Col.1:15), man's nature lay wounded, his powers enfeebled. Such was the effect of a sin which St. Athanasius claimed resulted when Adam, turning from God, turned in on himself. Thus, the first sin was "essentially egoism and egocentrism; and by that man lost his true center in God".<sup>21</sup>

Irrespective of man's weakness, the biblical account of man is unparalleled in the dignity it accords him. How revolutionary this idea of the person was can be gauged from the reproach it earned from certain pagan philosophers who viewed man as but an element in a world subject to immutable laws. To these pagans, the epitome of arrogance was the Christian idea of the person since it posited a Creator-God Who made human beings the subject of a unique and special providence. In this post-Darwinian age, some modern evolutionists balk at the idea, too.<sup>22</sup>

We see, therefore, that in acquiring the metaphysical notion of person, Christian theology invested it with a content beyond that of pagan philosophy. No longer a mere individuality possessing a rational nature, the person was as first act a *self* related to God as origin and goal. Man's nature then *is* his destiny since to speak of man as person or self implies an essence meant for God.

If, however, no further explanation were given, this view of the person would be deficient for failing to mention the sovereign freedom man has to accept or reject his nature and destiny. But Christian realism, in light of the "fall", has never ignored human freedom. Consequently, Christian theology has always recognized man as something more than an individual substance endowed by nature with intellective and volitional powers. From the beginning, even without benefit of the term person, theology regarded man as a subject in possession of his nature and its powers the exercise of which showed him to be unique and irreducible. Thus, antecedent to his powers stood the subject which philosophy, as we have already mentioned, distinguished as first and second act. The point is that within his powers as a person a man may accept or reject his nature and destiny to be God's reflection and the steward of creation. Hence it follows that:

He cannot free himself from his responsibility by appealing to a common nature of which he would be only a simple example and which according to the circumstances would move him by its instincts.<sup>22</sup>

St. Thomas was well aware of this when he attributed to the person incommunicability. He accorded the person the unique power to perfect his nature and realize his destiny before God.

Before drawing out in the bioethical area the practical ramifications of the Christian notion of person, we must add a quick word about its further evolution. In brief, we can say that in consequence of the great historical and cultural changes occurring in the 17th and 18th centuries, the person became an object of reflection less from a metaphysical and more from a *psychological* point of view.

If Luther, in the realm of religion, sought the assurance of personal salvation through faith alone (*sola fides*), Locke and Descartes in the realm of philosophy sought human certitude in human intellectual processes. In both the religious and philosophical realms, therefore, a movement inward occurred attaining "a high degree of *self-consciousness of a certain introverted sort*".<sup>23</sup> Paradoxically, this introversion took place at the very time when Western civilization was moving outward to discover new worlds and new wealth. In the wake of the impact on social and political institutions of what was already being called "the modern age", emancipated man became more sensitive to his "inalienable rights." This sensitivity became the soil of a powerful individualism. When nurtured by an introverted consciousness of self, this individualism forced the traditional notion of person to be recast in terms which psychology and psychoanalysis made explicable. Henceforth, the person becomes his psyche, a private enclosure whose interiority is a function of his consciousness.

### Contribution of Positive Insights

The positive insights which this modern notion contributes to our understanding of the person must be acknowledged. While we rightly acclaim the genius of Freud for discovering the unconscious, we customarily overlook the prior achievement of modern philosophy in conceiving the person as the subject of consciousness. In its attention to man as a knowing subject, modern philosophy has brought to the fore his reflective activity whereby he plumbs the depth of his individuality. Irrespective of the contemporary question whether man can lay hold of the ultimate subject which underlies his reflective acts,<sup>24</sup> modern philosophy has vigorously pursued the elusive and mysterious "I" wherever it appears—in literature, in the social and empirical sciences, and particularly today, in medicine.

Another positive insight we have gained from contemporary reflection on the person is the clearer distinction between person and *personality*. The word "I" identifies the person as the ultimate subject of all his activities like thinking, choosing, desiring, imagining, etc. Beneath those activities, however, there remains a perduring, invariant, stable substratum, Boethius's "individual substance", which grounds all experience, past, present and future and enables the individual to recognize that he is the same self at one month old, 20 years old and 90 years old. In a real sense, therefore, the "I," though immersed in the events of space and time, floats

free of them. While transcending the physical world, the "I" nonetheless reacts to it. In his reaction, each incommunicable person disposes of himself in a manner proper only to him. Herein lies the distinction between person and personality. That special disposition or mode of behaving and reacting unique to each person is what contemporary thought calls "personality."

For the person, personality is an acquisition, an accidental modification, a habitual manner of exchange with the environment. However person be defined, personality is the uniquely characteristic way each person has of being himself. From the welter of experiences which engage the person on all levels, there emerges a unified pattern of responses in large measure freely chosen. Thus,

Personality is constituted by what one *does*; it is the *product* of one's free activity. The basic reality behind personality is *habit*; not this or that habit, but the integrated and harmonized union of all one's consciously acquired habits.<sup>25</sup>

While heredity, education, culture and environment are significant factors in the development of personality, they are ultimately not determinative. Personality is the free decision of the person; he chooses how he wants to be himself.

Finally, on the debit side, we must add that the modern notion of person which holds the field today has, in effect, led to the equation of self with consciousness. Consistent with psychology, such a notion regards the person in function of his reflective acts, actual or potential. The "knowing self" *is* the person. With profound legal and ethical consequences, the modern view, therefore, defines the essence of the person in terms of the interiority of consciousness.<sup>26</sup> Obviously, since neither a fetus nor a comatose patient has that interiority, it is not surprising that physicians inquire as to their ethical obligations in treating such individuals.

### **The Comatose Patient: Withholding Nutrition**

Who realizes better than physicians that in the human organism intelligence and freedom have their physiological bases in the central nervous system and particularly in the frontal lobes of the cerebral cortex? When this small but intricate part of the brain is impaired, the person not only ceases intelligent and free activity but "sinks back into the deterministic reflexes or physiological reactions of the animal or vegetative level of functioning".<sup>27</sup> In the case of a comatose patient, that is, one in a persistent vegetative state (PVS), it is painfully clear how intimate the connection is between proper bodily functioning and the distinctly spiritual acts of thinking and choosing which we associate with a person. Where such acts, according to all indications, can no longer be expected of the PVS patient, there arises in his regard the medical-ethical question of continuing or withdrawing enteral or parenteral nutrition.

In response to this question, moralists have taken one of two avenues of approach: either that founded on the distinction between ordinary and

extraordinary means or that based on judgments concerning "quality of life".<sup>28</sup> We will briefly characterize each approach because of its relevance both to the question at hand and, more importantly, to the aim we stated at the beginning of this paper, namely, to put the Christian notion of person at the center of ethical reflection.

The distinction between ordinary and extraordinary means dates from the 17th century and is a descriptive classification of the procedures or technologies available in health care. On the basis of this distinction, a patient whose life or health is at stake need feel no ethical obligation to have recourse to extraordinary means. However, because today's advances in medical technology have made classification extremely difficult, as we see in the matter of artificial nutrition and hydration, evaluative criteria have become more explicit. Thus, the means, understood to include the type of treatment, its degree of complexity or risk, its cost and availability are weighed against "the result that can be expected".<sup>29</sup> With a benefit-burden ratio, the ordinary/extraordinary distinction considers not only medical techniques but their effects on the patient. As a result, a procedure may be judged, on the one hand, ordinary if its effects on a patient are more beneficial than burdensome; on the other, extraordinary, if the effects are the reverse.<sup>30</sup>

Markedly different from this ethical approach is that based on quality of life judgments. Where in the ordinary/extraordinary distinction, medical means and their effects on the patient are the focus of evaluation, in quality of life judgments the focus of evaluation is the patient's life itself. Such judgments calculate the value of the patient's life either in terms of certain "indicators of humanhood," (e.g., minimal intelligence, self-awareness, self-control, capability to relate to others, etc.),<sup>31</sup> or in terms of a "qualitative relation between [his] overall condition and the pursuit of values",<sup>32</sup> or simply in terms of the standards set by society, the family or the patient himself.

### Jobs Case

Relative to this quality of life ethic, the recent case of Nancy Ellen Jobs and the New Jersey Catholic Conference of Bishops is instructive. Acting as *amicus curiae* in November, 1986, the Conference filed a brief requesting that the state Supreme Court not allow the withdrawal of food and fluids from Mrs. Jobs, a PVS patient. Within its argumentation, the Conference advised the court "carefully to avoid any decision which draws its conclusions from an analysis of the 'quality of life' of the patient". The Conference also reminded the court of its own earlier determination to reject decisions "based on assessments of the personal worth or social utility of another's life, or the value of that life to others".<sup>33</sup> Like the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the New Jersey bishops roundly reject the quality of life approach because it attempts to measure the value of human life. Undoubtedly, the Catholic bishops would concur with the

following assessment,

The characteristic feature of a typical 'quality of life' ethic is that it rejects the principle of the *equality* of human lives and with that rejects the equality of human persons.<sup>34</sup>

Without going into detail, we should pursue, for a moment, the Nancy Jobes case and that more recently of Marcia Gray whose spouse sought the opinion of the Catholic bishop of Rhode Island with regard to the removal of nutrition and hydration.<sup>35</sup> In both cases, the argumentation relied on the distinction between ordinary and extraordinary means and, ironically, drew opposite conclusions. On the surface these opposite conclusions seem to tell against the usefulness of the ordinary/extraordinary distinction. Yet, in reality, the descriptive and evaluative criteria of the distinction were sufficient for both the New Jersey bishops and the bishops of Rhode Island to judge in their respective cases whether the removal of artificial nutrition constituted euthanasia.

In the case of Mrs. Gray, the bishop of Rhode Island concluded that there was no intention to cause her death and that in light of its effects, artificial feeding was futile, devoid of benefit, and a cause both of suffering to her and of economic burden to her family. He, therefore, judged the means extraordinary and non-obligatory. The New Jersey bishops concluded that in the case of Nancy Jobes, the removal of food and water would directly cause death and thus constitute active euthanasia. In light of their premise that the provision of food and water to a patient is basic "normal care" to be distinguished from medical treatment, the bishops, therefore, judged the means ordinary and obligatory.

Since the telling point in both cases is the burden-benefit ratio resultant upon the use of artificial nutrition and hydration, the bishop of Rhode Island could, without contradiction, accept the premise of his colleagues in New Jersey while they in turn, could, without contradiction, accept his conclusion. For though feeding can rightly be classified as ordinary, normal care yet in its effect on a patient, for example, one suffering from stomach and intestinal cancer, it can constitute an insufferable or extraordinary burden.

We underscore the fact that in the arguments advanced on behalf of Gray and Jobes, the bishops, specifically those in New Jersey, made repeated appeal to the dignity of the human person. What is highly significant in their appeal is that the bishops distinguished the religious tradition informing their moral principles from "a common respect for the dignity of the human person." Admitting that their religious principles sharpen their concern for human dignity, the bishops, nevertheless, assert that their teaching is "grounded in respect for the dignity and fundamental rights of the human person and cannot be rejected on grounds of political and religious pluralism". In other words, the bishops are claiming with regard to the person a truth that is objective and inescapable. What is that truth?

Universally recognized, that truth, of course, is the inherent dignity of the human person. For the New Jersey bishops, as we said earlier, that dignity is not adequately articulated in a quality of life approach. We can argue that the fundamental reason for this inadequacy lies in the fact that, at base, all quality of life judgments rest on a *psychological* understanding of the person. In such judgments, the value of the person inheres in the self as a conscious reflective person. The medieval philosophers referred to this activated mode of being as "second act". But clearly there is an actuality prior to this which common sense recognizes when it acknowledges that even in sleep or under an anesthetic, a person still exists. For this reason, people readily accept that a person is more than his conscious acts, is more than his personality, that a person exists despite either a temporary or permanent incapacity for introversion, as in the case, respectively, of a baby or severely retarded individual. In truth, then, the person's dignity which earns our "common respect" inheres primarily, not in his acts and operations, but in his very being.

### **Comatose Patient 'A Distinct Entity'**

On the empirical level, we recognize that the comatose patient is a distinct entity, an "individual substance". When independent of life-support machines, the body of the comatose patient is obviously self-animating, or to put it more precisely, animated from within by an intrinsic principle called the soul. Naturally, without the soul the body would perish. As "first act", the soul is the "form" organizing and suffusing the bodily matter and enabling man's human nature to exist. It is the very "essence" or "nature" of man to be rational, that is, to possess intellectual and volitional powers. Even when these powers are inoperative due to sleep, anesthetic, retardation or brain damage, rational nature continues to exist. Thus, the comatose patient is "an individual substance of a rational nature". On the *metaphysical* level, he *is* a "person".

Although incapacitated with regard to acts of locomotion and, as far as we can tell, of thinking and willing, the PVS patient continues to possess human nature. His very existence testifies to this possession in virtue of which he remains a unique "self". As a separate individual composed of body and soul, he retains "incommunicability", that attribute which distinguishes him as an "I" from every other "thou". According to St. Thomas, this attribute is peculiar to the person and constitutes his dignity. It appears, therefore, that the bishops' appeal to "a common respect for the dignity of the human person" has validity only insofar as people continue to recognize and treat each other as other "selves". The practice of euthanasia seriously threatens that common respect, specifically in the case of comatose patients.

In citing this "common respect", the bishops also made reference to their "Judeo-Christian heritage" and their "religious principles". In their brief to the court, the bishops only alluded to these elements as serving to

“sharpen” concern for human dignity. It would not, of course, have been fitting to argue them in a secular forum, although they surface in the bishops’ allusions to life as “a sacred trust”, or as a matter of “stewardship”. The bishops, therefore, did not propose for the court’s consideration a *theological* view of the human person.

Be that as it may, a theological view of the person is, however, requisite for any Catholic physician who takes Jesus’ words to heart: “Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me” (Mt. 25:40). The comatose patient, though totally incapacitated, remains God’s “image and likeness.” Endowed with a soul, God’s life-giving breath, he stands in an immediate relation to God as his origin and goal. No one is privy, of course, to that mysterious dialogue which transpires between God and the soul of the comatose patient. Where to all appearances, his worldly stewardship has ceased, obviously that of the physician has not. In the service of his comatose patient, the physician must provide the normal care of nutrition and hydration as he would for any patient. The condition of a comatose patient in no way diminishes his human dignity which is the equal of the physician himself. For like the physician, the comatose patient, too, is a person — unique, irreplaceable and destined for God.

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