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# Difficult Moral Questions: May a Husband End All Care of His Permanently Unconscious Wife?

by

Germain Grisez

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The following is one of the questions that I am preparing for *Difficult Moral Questions*, which will be the third volume of *The Way of the Lord Jesus*. The response given here will be revised further before the book is published. So, I will welcome reader's letters with criticisms and suggestions for improvement. I also will be glad to receive other difficult moral questions to which readers have been unable to obtain an answer.

## **Statement of the question:**

Six months ago, my wife was operated on for a brain tumor, and I rejoiced when I heard the doctor say it was not malignant. But ten days later, due to complications from the first operation, she had to undergo brain surgery again. She has not regained consciousness since then, though she did recover, in the sense that after a few weeks her condition stabilized and I was able to have her moved from the hospital to a nursing home. She breathes on her own, is fed through a tube leading directly into her stomach, and goes through a sleeping-waking cycle. At first I was convinced that she sometimes knew when the children and I were with her and that she sometimes smiled when we talked with her, but the doctors, nurses, and chaplain all were convinced that she never was really responsive, and reluctantly, I have come to agree with them. Many people in our parish volunteered to pray for my wife's recovery during particular times each week, so that all these months someone has been praying for her every minute from early morning until late at night. But the doctors now say it would be a miracle if she ever regained consciousness, and I have come to accept that it is not God's will that she recover. I feel that He has been answering all the prayers by helping me and the children and also by blessings on other people who have been involved.

The people at the nursing home take good care of my wife, keeping her clean, regularly turning her from side to side, monitoring her temperature and so on, treating any sign of infection, and dealing with other health problems just as they do with patients who are alert and responsive. The only problem is the cost, which is more than a hundred dollars a day. The insurance ran out early on, and since then I have used more than twelve thousand dollars of our savings. If I continue to spend down, our savings will eventually be exhausted, and then Medicaid will pay most of the bill, but then there will be nothing left from our savings for the children's education or from my pay to save for retirement or anything else.

I love my wife, have always been faithful to her, and always will be. The children love their mother and miss her. We certainly do not want her to die. But I do wonder whether there is not some way out. Some time ago, she signed a sort of living will, saying that in case of terminal illness she did not wish to be kept alive by any means other than those required by Catholic moral teaching. Does that document give me the right to decide, either now or at some point in the future, that the care she is getting should be stopped? And if I do have that right, how should I go about stopping it? The only way I can think of would be have the nurses stop giving the formula which provides a balanced diet and go on giving only water. I know this sounds drastic, but since I now believe that my wife has not regained consciousness and since the doctors say she never will, it seems to me that she no longer has a life worth living.

#### **Analysis:**

Since a person's life never loses its intrinsic goodness, it is not true that a permanently unconscious person no longer has life worth living. Because the unconscious woman in this case is not terminally ill, the document she signed is irrelevant; moreover, the Catholic Church's explicit moral teaching does not clearly indicate what care must be given to such a person. However, even if it is not homicidal, the choice to stop providing all nourishment seems plainly inconsistent with love for a handicapped person. At the same time, the obligation to sustain any person's life is limited by other grave responsibilities. Therefore, it seems that, on the one hand, this husband need not continue to pay for his wife's care in the nursing home and, on the other, he does not have the right simply to stop all care. Rather, the questioner should care for his wife as well as possible while keeping the costs within his means.

#### **A suitable reply might be along the following lines:**

While I cannot imagine the suffering you have experienced during the past six months, I do sympathize with you and desire to help find a way out. Still, I must begin by saying that your last remark is mistaken. Since your wife remains a living person, her life retains the inherent goodness which you yourself implicitly acknowledge when you say you do not want her to die. That goodness is the reason why it would be wrong for anyone to choose to kill her, whether by action or omission. Your wife does still have a life worth living; but, unfortunately, she no



longer can consciously live it. Nevertheless, she has her life, your love and faithfulness, the children's love, the committed care of her nurses, and the good will of others, such as those who pray for her. Some fully conscious people have a good deal less of true human value.

The document your wife signed is irrelevant, since it provides directions only about what to do when she is terminally ill. Nobody is terminally ill unless he or she either is plainly dying, so that death in a very short time can be predicted with certainty, or is suffering from some disease or injury which predictably will be the cause of death. Neither of those conditions is verified in your wife's case. Rather than being terminally ill, she is very severely handicapped, as is, though not quite so severely, a person whose retardation (or mental deterioration) precludes him or her from ever (or ever again) making a choice or even controlling the stream of consciousness. Besides being irrelevant, this document is unhelpful for a more important reason: it merely limits the means to be used in sustaining life to those required by Catholic moral teaching. But your question really is: Precisely what means does Catholic moral teaching require that you use?

Unfortunately, the Church's explicit teaching offers you no clear answer. I have treated this problem to some extent (in *Living a Christian Life*, pages 284-86 and 530-31), and I shall not repeat what I said previously. Rather, I shall develop it in ways that I hope will help you.

You raise questions about stopping the care your wife is now receiving and how that might be done, saying that the only way you think of would be to have the nurses stop feeding her the formula and continue giving her only water. I do not know whether the nurses or the administrators of the nursing home would accept such a directive from you. If not, you might be able to obtain a court order to enforce your decision, though relevant law is not entirely clear and is still developing. In any case, however, it seems to me that morally speaking you do not have the right simply to direct that your wife be given only water.

My reason for saying this is *not* that I think your giving such a directive would amount to killing your wife. I fully believe you mean it when you say that you neither want your wife to die nor would choose to kill her. Your choice in giving the directive would be, not to bring about your wife's death, but to use the money which otherwise would pay for her care to fulfill other responsibilities. In my judgment, you can and should end that care, but should do so in a different way.

To clarify what I have in mind, I shall begin by explaining both the ground and the limits of the obligation to provide life-sustaining care to people who need it.

Since being alive is a condition for participating in other human goods, people ordinarily have very strong reasons to do what is possible to sustain life. Still, the use of any life-sustaining means imposes some burdens, at least its costs in time and energy, and the resources that can be used to sustain one person's life usually also could be used to sustain another's and perhaps for many other good ends. Thus, there inevitably are limits to the means one need use or even can rightly use to sustain any person's life.

When someone is in your wife's condition, most reasons for doing what is possible to sustain his or her life (rather than using the resources for other good purposes) have dropped away, since remaining alive no longer enables the person



to share in those goods that involve or presuppose consciousness. Still, as I said at the beginning of this reply, there does remain one reason to try precisely to sustain such a person's life: its inherent goodness as the concrete reality of the person. Yet this reason cannot be considered decisive in determining moral responsibility, for otherwise everyone always would be obliged to do everything possible to sustain any person's life. The Church does not teach that there is such an obligation; sound principles of morality do not entail it; and in practice nobody acts on it. Therefore, when someone needs potentially life-sustaining resources to meet some other serious responsibility, he or she may use them for that purpose, provided there is not some reason in addition to human life's inherent goodness to use those resources to sustain someone's life.

Applying this conclusion to your problem, I think you need not use all your remaining savings as well as part of your future income to pay for the care your wife now is receiving, but may use most of these resources for the other good purposes that you mention: your children's education and retirement savings. Since your wife almost certainly never will regain consciousness, stopping the care will not cause her to suffer or deprive her of anything which presupposes awareness, though, of course, it probably will shorten her life.

Nevertheless, as I said above, I do not think you have a right simply to terminate life-sustaining nourishment for your wife. Care for any person in need ordinarily manifests solidarity with that person — respect and love for him or her as a person. By the same token, failing to do what one can for those in need manifests alienation from them: lack of respect and love for them as persons. Hence, life-sustaining care for people in your wife's condition and for others who are very severely handicapped ordinarily does have a human significance in addition to the one that it would derive precisely from the inherent goodness of their lives. This additional significance is not symbolic in the sense of being a mere gesture effecting no real benefit. Rather, it is profoundly real, just as is the significance of your faithfulness to your wife, which continues to benefit not only you but her inasmuch as the two of you remain, until death, one flesh.

Nevertheless, while neither spouse may rightly forgo the other's fidelity, a person can freely and uprightly prefer not to receive care. Moreover, when someone thus chooses to forgo care, abstaining from providing it, far from manifesting alienation, also manifests respect and love for him or her as a person. On this basis, I have previously maintained that a person who foresees the possibility of becoming unconscious with no reasonable hope of recovering consciousness — the condition your wife now is in — could rightly direct that he or she would prefer, if ever in that condition, to forgo all care, including life-sustaining nourishment, in order to save others its costs and burdens. I also have held that the same decision could rightly be made by a suitably authorized agent whom a person appointed to make health care decisions on his or her behalf.

Your wife, however, apparently neither left such a directive nor appointed anyone as her agent for health care decisions. The directive she did leave, as has been explained, is not relevant; even if it were, its reference to Catholic moral teaching would settle nothing, since the Church has not yet spoken clearly on the morality of ending life-sustaining care. So, any attempt to extrapolate from your



wife's directive to the situation you face would be groundless speculation. Lacking solid grounds for judging that your wife chose to forgo all care, simply terminating it would manifest lack of human respect and familial love toward her. So, I do not think you have a moral right, which a suitable authorization would have given you, simply to stop the life-sustaining care your wife is receiving.

In sum, it seems to me that, on the one hand, you need not continue to pay for your wife's care in the nursing home and, on the other, you do not have the right simply to stop all care. What, then, are you to do? The best you can — that is, care for your wife as well as possible while keeping the costs within your means. In order to cut costs, you will have to take her out of the nursing home. Probably you should bring her home, but perhaps you should take her to a relative's, friend's, or neighbor's home, or lodge her elsewhere at reasonable cost.

If you do not bring her home, how can you care for her and what should you do for her? You and your children should do what you can, consistent with other responsibilities, to care for her. Let your relatives, friends, neighbors, and fellow parishioners know about what you are doing; some will offer to help, and you should accept such offers while taking care not to divert anyone from other responsibilities. If physicians, nurses, or other health care personnel volunteer their help and advice, you should accept it, but you need not go to the expense of calling in professionals or use other costly measures that would be appropriate if your resources were ample to sustain your wife's life.

You should establish a budget limiting how much will be spent for your wife to an amount roughly comparable to the average available for meeting the needs of each of the other family members. Unless it can be done within the budget, you need not order special formula to ensure your wife a balanced diet. Rather, you may give her foods that seem appropriate and are readily available, such as baby foods thinned with milk or juice, or a portion of a family meal that can be liquefied in a blender. You should keep your wife warm in winter, cool in summer, and as clean as you can. You should provide restraints so that she does not fall out of bed, turn her regularly from side to side, and so on. Ideally, with the help of relatives, friends, neighbors, and fellow parishioners, you should arrange to have someone with her at all times, but if that is impossible, you need not exceed the budget to hire someone, but may leave her alone. You should go to work, the children to school, everyone to church, and so on.

In short, you should make a genuine effort to care for your wife, just as good Christian families always did for their helpless and debilitated members. But you also should go on with your lives, not slighting other responsibilities, and should limit expenditures to a reasonable level.

With such care, your wife of course will die sooner or later, as she would in the nursing home, but probably sooner than she would have died there. However, if you survive her, you will no more have killed her and no less have loved her than if you had continued to pay for her care in the nursing home at the cost of the children's education and saving for your own retirement.

Your children, of course, may find it stressful and burdensome to have their mother home and to help with her care. However, while there are reasonable limits to what should be asked of children, they should help care for a parent when their

help is needed. Your children may well find doing that a hardship, but fulfilling their responsibility toward their mother also will be a work of love, morally beneficial to them. Moreover, it will be only fair for the children to accept reasonable burdens, since part of the money saved by bringing your wife home will be used for their education.

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